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## Executive IdeaLink

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### Diamond in the Rough: Leadership In the Components

#### Executive IdeaLink, February 2009

By: *Peggy Hoffman*

Learn what it takes to be a successful local leader from four volunteer leaders at every stage of their careers. Use their tips and ideas to guide your volunteers in the right direction to everyone's benefit.

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To many, volunteers in the field are tomorrow's leaders. Whether you're looking at today or tomorrow, these member-volunteers are important links in the association. How well do you know these individuals? How much are you investing in their development? As an AMC for six local organizations, we spend our time focused on local leaders. In fact, we work closely with about 60 local volunteers each year. This work has given us the opportunity to study what it takes to be a successful local leader.

"A leader must see beyond the world they live in," says Renee Stake, president of International Special Events Society, Greater Washington DC chapter. She was quick to add that it takes strong time management skills and two important traits, neutrality and absence of a personal agenda, to be successful as a local leader. She must be correct, because ISES DC is having a record year.

Two other chapter leaders captured the essence of success as the uncanny ability to keep their eyes open. Across all of our chapters, we've found that the true test of leadership is in being able to answer two questions:

- What's the most important thing we have to do?
- Who's the customer?

[Lindy Dreyer](#), a leader of Young Association Professional (YAP), and [Cynthia D'Amour](#), who has held several volunteer leadership roles, (including the Junior Leagues of Ann Arbor, the National Speakers Association, and serving as chair of ASAE & The Center's Component Relations Section Council) are big picture people, which they say accounts for some of their success.

Another important trait is their ability to appreciate others. "As I got more experience, I realized the importance of focusing on training the team that will follow me. I consciously build for long-term success rather than a year of total glory like I used to do," D'Amour says.

"Good leaders get out of the way. That's the defining moment. When new leaders emerge from within the group, it's both a sign of success and a test of your leadership. After all the hard work, you must accept that you don't own the group. It's not about you," Dreyer explains.

What does it take to find and nurture future leaders? For these women, the process largely included coaching by previous leaders, and a lot of on-the-job training. But this isn't enough, they say. National organizations should provide leadership and management training to their volunteers—*before they need it*. The training should provide resources throughout and lots of opportunity to network with leaders and staff.

To underscore this point, Stake says that a leadership conference for chapter presidents focusing on the operations manual or how to run a board meeting is too late. D'Armour cautions against underestimating the value of bringing volunteers together just to get to know each other. Networking is one of the values of volunteering for the association. "As a council leader, I got the most value by learning what other councils were doing and wished I had more time to actually interact with peers, so we had time to explore collaboration," she says.

We're challenged to remember that volunteers are different. Deyer, a young professional, is not interested in leadership retreats or special training, but does "want access to smart people who can help my group achieve our goals [and] relationships with staff that understand and appreciate what we're trying to accomplish."


[Lynn Morton](#), who leads the virtual community Social Networking for Association Professionals (SNAP), echoed this need to get together face-to-face. However, she believes that helping groups understand metrics is just as important. She confesses to a weakness of being over-analytical, but her need for data has helped her create a vibrant online community. She gauges success by the feedback she gets, the number of hits, the most popular posts, (especially where something is producing engagement/responses) and of course number of members.

Their final message for their association staff and leadership is listen, solicit feedback, and understand the importance of components and the amazing impact they can make for the association.

*[Peggy Hoffman](#) is a managing partner at Mariner Management & Marketing, an association management company specializing in component relations, and past chair of ASAE & The Center's Component Relations Section Council. She blogs regularly on chapter and components leadership at [www.marinermanagement.com/idea-center](http://www.marinermanagement.com/idea-center). Email: [phoffman@marinermanagement.com](mailto:phoffman@marinermanagement.com)*

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