How to Be a Better Boss

Legislative staff managers are vital for staff success. Here are some things great managers have mastered.

1. Manage

Most legislative staff managers got where they are by being really good at a particular skill like bill drafting, budget analysis, political campaigning or some other functional specialty. Most likely they did not get much training on how to be a boss. Great managers acknowledge that they put their management role first, and seek the training and information they need to learn and improve. Too often, poor managers don’t let go of the familiar and comfortable specialist role that got them to where they are. But managers should manage, and that often requires learning a whole new set of skills, as well changing behaviors and making a choice to take on new challenges.

2. Communicate

Everyone has heard the old real estate adage that there are three key factors in assessing the value of land—location, location, location. In management there is a similar mantra: commu-
nication, communication, communication. Great managers make it their top priority to promote robust, open, multidirectional communication in their organizations. The tools are basic, but they work. Here are a few:

- Hold staff meetings that matter.
- Give regular feedback on employees’ work.
- Open your door and wander out of your office often.
- Be a good listener.
- Avoid surprises and secrets by telling everyone (almost) everything.
- Walk the talk by modeling the values and behavior you want to see in your staff.
- Respect differences in work styles and personalities.

Let Go

Effective managers try their best to make everyone on the team the best they can be. But some employees just can’t get there, don’t want to get there or aren’t even headed in the right direction. When their best efforts fail, great managers know when to let go. They know when to move on from time-consuming, energy-zapping problem employees so they can focus on the superstars, potential superstars and workhorses who make positive things happen each day.

Make Plans

Legislative work is often intense, surprising and chaotic, yet fairly predictable. Legislative staff managers often fail to think about their planning responsibilities during the much-needed down times, many of which are in the realm of what we call human resource management. Do you have a pay plan, a job classification plan, a staff training plan, a succession plan or a clear set of personnel policies? If you do, you’re demonstrating to your employees that you care about their careers and you value fairness, equity and performance. With those qualities, your workplace will encourage stronger employee loyalty, productivity and retention.

Respond to Change

State legislatures are steeped in tradition, which serves them well. Institutional momentum generated by long-held traditions and the press of daily business, however, can perpetuate the status quo and bind legislative staff to practices, procedures and attitudes that are out of sync with changing legislator needs and expectations. Great managers know this and monitor trends, test assumptions about their work, and find ways to let go of activities and products that no longer serve their mission.

NCSL Services for Managers

**Legislative Staff Management Institute**—the nation’s premiere intensive executive management program designed exclusively for legislative staff managers.

**Legislative Effectiveness Committee**—a group of staff and legislators who discuss and learn about key issues and management challenges in state legislatures.

**Staff Sections and Networks**—national professional associations of staff who share common roles and expertise in state legislatures and offer annual training opportunities.

**Self-Assessment Tool**—an online survey for legislative staff about workplace effectiveness, designed to foster internal conversations about office management and productivity.

**Consulting Services**—customized, expert assistance on staff management issues and performance.

**Legislative Summit**—the nation’s most comprehensive learning experience for legislative staff with interests in public policy and legislative improvement.

Legislatures (and most of the world) run on trust and crawl without it. Great managers are trust builders—between themselves and their employees and between their work groups and the clients they serve. Trust is earned. It should not be assumed. It is fragile and, once lost, may take enormous effort to restore. Trust is built by routinely expressing fairness, honesty, loyalty and reliability in your actions and interaction. Staff managers who build trust help their employees make the most of what they have to offer legislators and the legislative process. And that is what the job of managing is all about.

To learn more about NCSL services for managers, go to www.ncsl.org/magazine.