

## Juggling as a Small-Staff Exec

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**By:** *Mychelle Blake*

This is no surprise to my fellow small-staff association executives and to most association executives: Running an association requires a lot of juggling, and while at times I would love to have both more staff and more resources, I also think the ability to understand your association from the ground up is invaluable.

Since I started working for the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, I have found myself juggling these duties: full-time communications director, membership director, acting executive director, social media guru, tradeshow coordinator, conference planner, and dog-behavior consultant. To be honest, I would love to develop a system one day where I set aside times and days to work on particular projects; right now feels like a free-for-all. One minute I may be editing an article for our journal and the next I may be developing a plan for next year's board. But working for a small-staff association in a number of roles has taught me many lessons:

**Stay humble and take input from all levels of your staff.** I hated working as an administrative assistant after I graduated from college, but now I look back and see those years as the best training ground for learning how to think on my feet and solve problems quickly. When our association creates new programs and membership benefits, the plans are circulated to our staff at all levels, so we can determine how the program will affect the membership and the association through everyone's eyes and experiences.

For example, we recently launched a new education program a year and half in the making, Canine Life and Social Skills (C.L.A.S.S.). Along the way, every person on the team, from our administrative assistants to senior staff, was involved in its development. This allowed us to address little kinks early on, so we wouldn't be scrambling to address problems after launch.

**Always keep other staff and your members in mind.** Another advantage I discovered in jumping from one role to another is that it gives me and other staff members a stronger grasp of the association's big picture. While we have our own specific duties to focus on, we are not as confined to those areas as staff in larger associations can be. The constant exposure to issues outside our own particular sphere, whether it is membership retention or marketing the annual conference or using social media, creates a culture where staff considers all departments and members when making decisions. This builds a stronger sense of mission for the organization. I've experienced fewer turf battles in my small-staff association than I did in larger organizations and more cohesion among the staff.

**Look outside your organization.** Of course, the constant influx of work and the need to multitask as an executive director can be exhausting, and the lack of resources and points of view can contribute to an insular world view. My staff and volunteers provide helpful insights and ideas about our products and services, but I

also find it beneficial to get insights from my peers. While I'm generally a shy person, I can't tell you how helpful it has been to go out to my ASAE colleagues for advice, whether that's face to face or via tools such as listservers and social media. In the past few months,

I have developed a rich network of association peers who are willing to help me at a moment's notice.

**Stay calm.** One thing I've discovered is that a fire can break out quickly. When it does, I've learned that I should never lose my head. I take a deep breath and remind myself that most situations settle down within a few days and are not as big a crisis as I originally thought. I also try to keep in mind all sides of the situation to make sure I have a clear perspective.

With all these lessons also comes a bigger one: how much I enjoy working for a small-staff organization.

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