

What Makes a High-Performance Secretariat

Ellwood Atfield is specialised in recruiting association leaders and corporate affairs executives. In June 2018, they published a new report on 'High-Performance Secretariats', based on hundreds of face-to-face interviews and an online survey. They talked to global, European and national associations headquartered in London, Brussels, Paris, Berlin and Geneva. Not surprisingly there is consistency across Europe on what constitutes a high-performance secretariat as **Mark Dober**, Managing Director, writes.

Following a literature review, research and practical experience we first published in 'Key Success Factors for European Associations' seven key attributes of a high-performance secretariat. We knew each attribute was a key ingredient in the overall successful recipe for an association secretariat but we did not know how important they were relative to each other. So using a randomised survey methodology hundreds of association leaders gave us the answer represented graphically on the next page.

It is perhaps obvious but important to be very clear that the most important person in any high-performance secretariat is the association leader. Indeed, Ellwood Atfield research confirms that the single most distinguishing factor between a good and underperformance association is its leadership, or simply put the qualities of the person in charge on a daily basis. We also found meeting members' expectations, strategic planning and goal setting are by far the greatest challenges for association leaders.

Hence, associations need strong leaders to set strategy and help find consensus between corporate members who compete with each other for market share, and member associations with very different cultures.

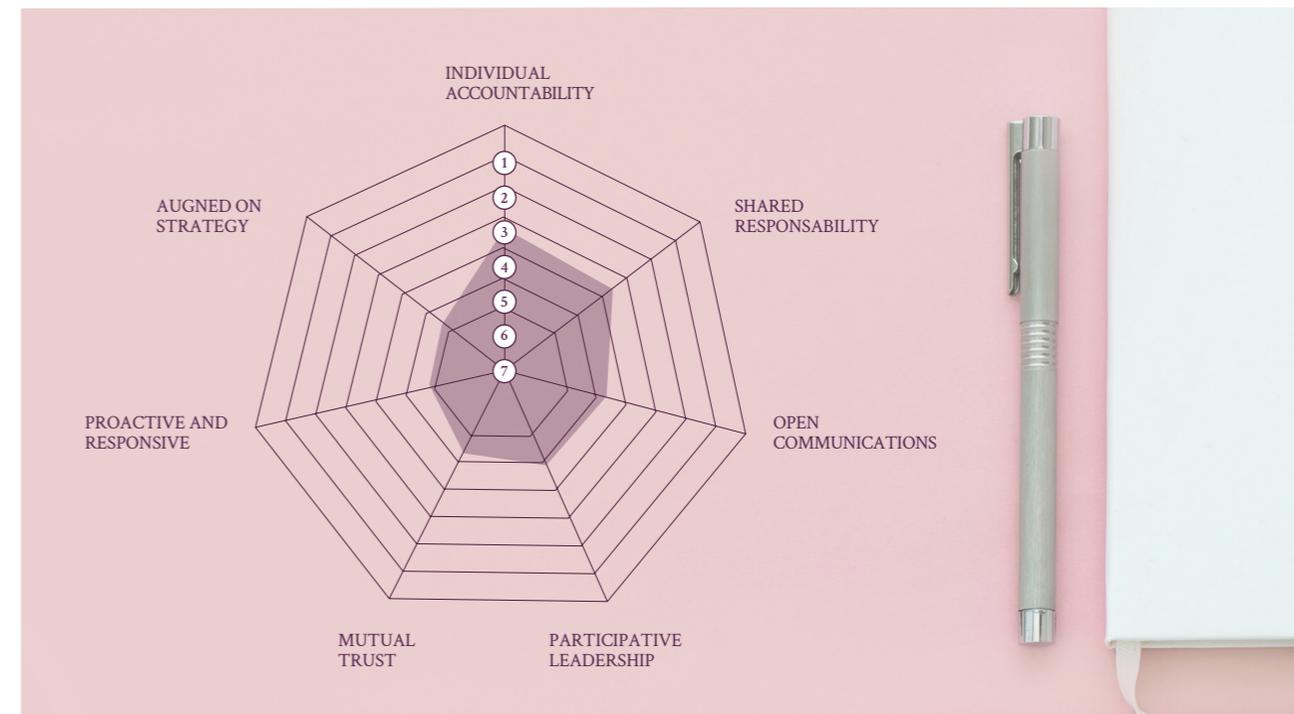
Overall Ellwood Atfield research finds that exceptional association leaders are; strategic; persuasive diplomats; excellent communicators; politically savvy; competent managers; energetic networkers; and sectoral experts. Although it is rare that individuals are highly rated on all of the seven attributes, an analysis of their relative strengths and weaknesses against the needs of the job and the association can be useful to assess performance, and remedial measures.

EVALUATING YOUR SECRETARIAT

As the saying goes, if it's not measured, it's not truly managed. Associations must add measurable value to the sectors they represent or face the consequences. There are many ways to measure the success of a secretariat which is

after all a reflection of the success of the association, and sometimes even of the reputation of the sector itself. However, using text analysis and grouping hundreds of survey responses we see three main measurement methods used by associations; membership satisfaction; policy and communication achievements; and KPIs. The majority (i.e. more than 50% of survey respondents) highlighted membership metrics particularly around membership satisfaction.

By definition, membership associations exist to serve their members – so ensuring members are satisfied and engaged is a key strategic priority for every association. Some experts told us about the importance not just of meeting members' expectations, but going beyond what is expected of the Secretariat. Overall five main areas for measurement were highlighted in our survey: 1) Membership satisfaction surveys and scores; 2) Measuring the value and benefit of membership; 3) Membership retention and growth; 4) Membership participation and engagement; 5) General evaluation by the Board



RECRUITING GREAT PEOPLE

Often the people in the secretariat are the greatest asset of any association, so there are three fundamental responsibilities of a manager or leader in an association: hiring great employees, developing great employees and, last but not least, retaining great employees.

If you don't get number one right, the rest becomes almost impossible. It is an obvious point but the best people do the best work. According to McKinsey superior talent is up to eight times more productive. Conversely the potential damage of a bad hire can be enormous. Different research on the cost of a single bad hire in a company put the cost typically at anywhere from €20,000 to €200,000, however, the cost of a bad hire in an association can be much greater.

Teams need the right mix and number of members, optimally designed tasks and processes, and norms that discourage destructive behaviour and promote positive dynamics. High-performance secretariats include

members with a balance of personalities, skills and knowledge. Every individual doesn't have to possess superlative technical and social skills, but the team overall needs a healthy dose of both. Diversity in knowledge, views, and perspectives, as well as in age, gender, and race, can help teams be more creative and avoid groupthink.

As we have discovered over many years, the key success factor for recruitment is personality fit for any given role. Knowledge and skills can be acquired and strengthened but personality is deep-rooted. Hence, personality assessment is an additional tool alongside interviews, role playing, written exercises and verbal presentations to decide whether a candidate is really suitable for a particular job.

KEY PERSONALITY TRAITS FOR ADVOCACY ROLES

Advocacy is all about influencing decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions. Most associations exist

to achieve specific advocacy goals. Indeed, advocacy is the business and lifeblood of most associations.

When we ask association leaders and members how they measure advocacy success the top three responses are; being consulted on policies before they are drafted; achievements versus planned/agreed actions; and reputation among high-level decision makers. For advocates to secure a place in the room having a trusted conversation with policy-makers requires special personality traits. In our experience people who are able to bring about change at a very high level commonly share three important personality attributes; trustworthiness; proactivity and resilience.

The whole report can be downloaded at www.ellwoodatfield.com/be/event/high-performance-secretariats/