

DEBRA BENTON

Advises Chamber CEOs on Leadership, Image and Collaboration



Debra Benton

Debra Benton, founder of Benton Management Resources, is a powerful speaker, consultant and author. She has helped professionals worldwide design subtle changes in their presentation, attitude, and leadership style that ultimately resulted in an increase in their personal and professional effectiveness. She was interviewed by ACCE's Cathy Lada.



Cathy Lada

Chamber Executive: Today's—and tomorrow's—chamber leader often needs to step out front to lead the community rather than rely on corporate volunteers to take the lead. What skills do these executives need to possess to be successful in community leadership—especially when there is no formal authority delegated to them to do so?

Debra Benton: To my surprise, I learned that a lot of chamber CEOs really do take a back seat when it comes to leading their organization. They often modestly view themselves more as facilitators. In my opinion, they shouldn't feel that way.

First and foremost, I believe that the chamber leader has to have it in his mind that he or she is the CEO of that community of businesses. Even at a round table you teach people how to sit at the head of it. This is the mindset chamber execs must have—they are the head of the table. To realize this, and to truly have influence on the community, a chamber leader requires a good dose of confidence.

CEOs have to run their life, their work, and their office as if they are the leader of a company, and not just the leader of staff. However, in this instance, the company is the chamber's membership with board volunteers serving as the department heads. Business leaders will respond if the CEO has the courage to do this. In many cases, the Board wants a strong chamber CEO who guides them. It really is a very gutsy position to take, but that is the only way a CEO can hold his own with the larger-than-life CEOs who run Fortune 50 companies. Now, some may challenge you along the way, and that's to be expected, but this is the way I view this position in a chamber. Those chamber CEOs who are really effective in their communities—if they admit it—do this.

CE: Where can executives learn these skills?

DB: The way to learn to do this is to parallel what a good CEO of a company that has lots of divisions does. In such a company, the CEO's job is the only generalist job; all the other positions are functions. Now, the CEO can rely on those who carry out the functional jobs, but he still needs to understand all of the functions. The parallel is very similar to the chamber CEO—he's a generalist who must understand education, healthcare, human resources, and myriad other issues. Unfortunately, there's really not a lot of training out there to become the generalist.

However, there are many seminars available about running a good business, and a CEO should take advantage of these learning opportunities. But, I think the best way to learn is by shadowing. Get out there! For instance, once a month, a CEO at a very big hospital in Michigan shadows one of his employees—from the janitor to the cook to the nurse to the accountant. He does this so he truly understands what his people are doing. Once a week or once a month, a chamber CEO should ask one of his members if he can shadow him, as well as one of his employees, for an hour. In doing so, two things happen: the member appreciates the interest the chamber took into his business and then that member can turn around and be more interested and active in the chamber.

CE: How can CEOs mentor their staffs to provide the support the CEO needs to lead in this new way?

DB: If you're going to take on a new way of leadership, I suggest that you practice full disclosure. Bring your team together and let them know that you plan to take on new directions and set new goals. Tell them what you're going to do and why, how you'll do it, how you'll need their help, and what their role will be. ♦

Be upfront about the timeframe and what you will expect. And, just as importantly, leave the door open for discussion, but have them realize that you ultimately have the final say.

The shift will take some time, effort and reinforcement. For instance, if you're going to change the rules, you'll also have to follow them. Just as a new CEO takes over a plant, you must make symbolic changes to signify the new compartment.

CE: Personal image is critical for CEOs who are acting as community spokespersons. What advice can you give to a CEO who wants to improve his image?

DB: Many big company CEOs and presidential candidates go to media trainers, have speech writers and joke writers, they rehearse in front of the camera, and they role play with their staff. They work on their image from speech to dress. I've coached many CEOs on this—I know. And, that's what a chamber CEO should do, too.

At the very least, pick up some cues from your counterparts or a CEO of a member company. You can also get a video camera and when you're giving a staff meeting or formally speaking to the community, tape yourself. Then, watch it and try to improve at least one behavior. Or, get a coach. Every town has a community college with a speech teacher who would love to work with you. Also, watch CNN or go to conventions to see CEOs speak and gain new ideas on how to be effective. You really don't need a massive makeover; just the right mindset.

And if that doesn't work, I suggest you hire Debra Benton.

CE: Sometimes there are considerable barriers to establishing a business relationship with leaders from traditionally competing organizations. How can the CEO begin to break down those barriers?

DB: CEOs shouldn't feel as though they are competing. They just need a better mindset because in the end, we all have a piece of this pie. By being a leader, a chamber CEO should encourage and cultivate collaboration. Invite leaders of competing organizations and propose that together they become a board of directors for the community. Suggest that the group meet once a quarter, and each quarter can place emphasis on each of the participants' organizations.

In a company setting, when everyone sees department heads bickering, it only undermines the success of the company. The same thing happens when CEOs of competing organizations are bickering, but in this case, it undermines the success of the community. ☐

Cathy Lada is the vice president of community advancement at ACCE and is editor-in-chief of Chamber Executive magazine. She can be reached at clada@acce.org or (703) 998-3560.

Debra Benton has agreed to serve as ACCE's executive coach and will answer a question in each issue of Chamber Executive for 2008. Have a question for Debra? Submit your question to editor@acce.org; please put "Debra Benton" in the subject line. Questions will not be attributed to the submitter unless otherwise specified.

It's hard enough to get the attention of employees hooked on digital stimulation — let alone get their commitment.

That's why companies turn to Dale Carnegie Training®.

We create out-of-the-box, not off-the-shelf ways to engage employees in your initiatives.

It's time to break through the digital clutter. It's time to get human again with Dale Carnegie Training®—the original and still the best resource for developing the people side of business.

To find your nearest Dale Carnegie Training® office, please call: **800-231-5800 ext. 202** or visit us online at: **www.dalecarnegie.com**



Copyright © 2007 Dale Carnegie & Associates, Inc. All rights reserved.

