SURVIVING AND THRIVING AS A CAMPAIGN MANAGER

Campaigns are difficult challenges for even the experienced manager. They can be intense experiences, with high levels of activity, stress and public scrutiny. Campaign organizations are imperfect and temporary structures where often very different kinds of people are thrown together and expected to work well as a team. If the campaign has paid staff, they are often young, are experiencing their first job, or are older but inexperienced with the actual work. The presence of volunteers adds its own dynamic to the mix. They are passionate about the candidate and causes, may work extremely hard filling important jobs, but are not really accountable in the way a paid staffer is. This unique nature of campaign organizations make them susceptible to conflict and dysfunction.

The campaign manager has a challenging job: keep everyone from the candidate to the campaign team motivated and focused; manage down to the staff and key volunteers and up to the candidate and candidates spouse; manage the campaign’s consultants if it has them; make sure income and expenses stay aligned; and see that the plan is implemented and that the campaign is making progress towards victory.

We do not equip people very well for the important and difficult job of helping good candidates run the kinds of campaigns they need to win. But there are some behaviors and best practices--some art and some science, some management and some leadership--that campaign managers should consider to help them do their job.

- **Listen.** A number one skill of any skilled manager is the ability to listen well to the people you manage and the candidates and consultants you work with. When dealing with people that you are seeking strong work performance from, if you truly hear what they say, you can address potential problems before they even surface, find out how people respond to different forms of management, and understand the strengths of an individual. You get the added benefit of good feelings from the other person when they feel they’ve been heard. You want to be open to hearing the comments about the campaign, about the work, about how Listen well isn’t just tantamount to agreeing with the person. Instead, it better informs your ability to manage and get the most out of them.

- **Plan the work, and work the plan.** Using the campaign plan that everyone knows well and has agreed to as your primary management and accountability tool. The best plans are ones written with lots of detail down to quantifiable goals on specific timelines. The plan then becomes the basis of people’s daily work plans and then management of an individual becomes about direct accountability through numerical goals (nightly numbers!) established in the plan.

- **Establish office norms.** Set down office and work norms right off the bat. Get clarity early on about the expectations of staff and key volunteers around work hours, standing meetings, ways to deal with problems, and other basic office rules. Then it is your job to make sure that you and everyone else sticks to them. Getting everyone to agree up front to norms then becomes a tool to hold people accountable if the norms break down.
• **Model behavior.** As campaign manager, you are an important model for other staff and volunteers about work habits and the office culture. Remember that you set the tone in a powerful way for the campaign and the office.

• **Share information.** Don’t be afraid to share information with people and allow for input. This is important as a way of eliciting important feedback, of generating creative ideas and of keeping people feeling a full part of the campaign. We’re not suggesting you share all the state secrets far and wide, but information can be shared in staff meetings when there is an understanding that things don’t leave the room. You can do little things like give people an advance peak at ads, literature pieces and other campaign material. Volunteers should hear the general components of the plan and strategy to win so they know how they fit in and why they are doing certain things. The importance of a campaign having a clear, efficient decision making structure does not mean that your campaign can’t also be open and inclusive of large numbers of people.

• **Don’t take it personally.** A good campaign manager is someone who does not take the ups and downs of the campaign and the candidate personally. Campaigns are emotional roller coaster, particularly for candidates. The campaign manager often is the one person the candidate can blow off steam with. Campaign stress will often make candidates overreact to little things that go wrong. The best thing a campaign manager can do in these cases is understand your role as a shoulder for the candidate, and not try not to take to seriously when the candidate over-reacts to little mistakes. Instead, put these interactions into the context of the overall stress a candidate is probably feeling.

• **Problem solve.** Encourage all staff and volunteers to be in constant problem-solving mode. When issues, problems or conflicts emerge, don’t let them fester. Instead, figure out how you get this problem solved so you can move on to the work at hand. That means providing people the opportunity to surface things so they can get fixed. It is also important to forecast for people that problems and conflicts will arise, and that it’s everyone’s job to work quickly to solve them. Use evaluation of staff (working off the plan) to head off future problems. When in problem solving mode, use one on one conversations and the original work plan to get people back on track. The Obama campaign and their management mantra of “No Drama Obama” is a great example of how to establish this culture in a campaign.

• **Know what you know – ask when you don’t.** Be comfortable not knowing everything—not having to have all the answers. Know what you don’t know and go out and surround yourself with those who do know. Behind every good campaign manager is a skilled team of specialists. Often the manager’s job is to make sure everyone else is working at their best. Also behind every manager are a set of mentors who give counsel and advice when a manager faces a difficult problem.

• **Strive for “passionate participants, not just volunteers.** You want to create a culture and plan that maximizes involvement by volunteers. That means creating a healthy volunteer culture from the start. Pay attention to building a relationship with your volunteers. The stronger the relationship, the more passionate the volunteer will be about the campaign. A healthy culture means avoiding the paid staff versus volunteer culture split. Key Volunteers should be part of the team just as paid staff. Too often volunteers, even those who are critical to the campaign’s success are kept in the dark.
about the larger goals, plans and decisions of the campaign. Volunteers are gold and are one of the campaigns most valuable resources – they should be treated as such. In many campaigns super-volunteers fulfill roles that are tantamount to being an unpaid staffer, and in those cases they should be treated as though they were paid staff.

- **Don’t Forget About the Spouse and/or Family.** Spouses (and/or the family) often play a critical role in a campaign and a good manager takes the time to keep them in the loop. They are the candidate’s confidant, they keep the non-campaign schedule, they take care of the home front so the candidate doesn’t have to worry, and they can be the best salesperson for the candidate as well.