

Moving the Food Dish

Being an officer in an ever-changing known world

Simple advice from the Swiftrunner

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"There is probably nothing more difficult in the world than leading a group of volunteers, excepting of course leading volunteers you cannot see or hear..."
Alexi of Novogorod, commander of the Novogorod militia ca 1147AD

Let us look for a few moments at how the above principle can lurk beneath the immense difficulties seneschals -- or anyone who leads in the SCA -- must face. It does not matter whether you are a king, a knight, officer, guild mistress, or a general of an army -- no people skills can equal NO people. By people skills, I mean the ability to communicate what you mean, mean what you communicate, make your staff and customers feel good about what's happening, and move the organisation towards the desired end without seven-foot trenches where all the heels have dug in...

Volunteers are there because they want to be, and can just as easily go away if they feel mistrusted or mistreated, whether they actually have been used and abused or not. If communication fails during the progress of a leader's duties, then they will soon face unrest, lost effort and, eventually, failure.

This principle is thrice true in the SCA, where a global playing community makes it difficult to reach everyone you might be leading. You often fight a losing battle in trying to communicate change before the critics of the change can get their skew of it on the local email list -- or even worse a society-wide email list. The mix of people attracted to the society are generally bright, creative, passionate, enthusiastic, and often possessed of a powerful ego. These can make a Kingdom, Shire or Barony shine if channelled well. They can also leave a smouldering ruin that would make the Vandals' sack of Rome look like amateur hour, if managed poorly. I would like to offer a few concepts of avoiding the pitfalls of managing invisible volunteers.

Say it, write it, repeat it, reward it.

Tell people explicitly what you wish to occur and why. Even if compliance is essential, our members like to feel as though they have a choice on when and how to participate. Post a summary of important meetings on relevant boards. Repeat these summaries with emailed copies to participants who could not be there. Get comments in advance from key people who cannot attend a meeting.

People who feel they are a part of the decision will take ownership for carrying out the drudge work to make the good result happen. People who feel ignored will sit on the sidelines questioning the intelligence of those who are doing the work.

Catch people doing something right.

Make a big fuss over people who work hard. It is always a good thing to catch people doing something right. A tiny token from a new baronial seneschal once transformed a suspicious opponent into my most trusted ally.

ALWAYS praise in public and criticise in private!!!

If someone does well, give them public credit loudly and often. Don't take the credit -- give it to the person who actually did the work. This pays off in a big way over the long term. When you need to correct a problem, always take it to the back room. This removes a ton of pressure from the person that you are working with and allows for a better resolution without advanced ego bruising, and prevents people from being offended by how you treated Master Thus'n'such at that event.

Nothing is harder than being a modern administrator in a medieval game. This is because you really do not have at your disposal most of the 'prods' a real City/Shire/Baronial leader would have had. You cannot effectively treat a trouble-maker to a few minutes with a hot poker. People should know that you as a leader *can* become concerned and take drastic steps, but if you do it often, it loses impact and you lose authority.

Change is hard.

If you move your dog's dish from one end of the house to the other, it will be most unhappy and tell you about it. Try it with the cat's litter box if you do not believe me. Move it a few feet at a time, or lead it and them slowly to the desired goal, and your chances of genial success are much higher.

Any sentence that include the word "but" is not an apology.

Nuff said really...

Sentences that begin "In my old [branch] we did it this way..." are fraught with peril and to be used as rarely as sharp spice in a palate-cleansing sorbet. In other words...DON'T EVER THINK ABOUT DOING IT!!! It will not go well...

Everyone has good ideas some of the time.

That's why listening is the most useful skill I have ever developed as a Seneschal.

Everyone has bad ideas some of the time.

That's why a pleasant deafness is perhaps the second-most useful skill I developed as a Seneschal.

Maybe, perhaps, please, thanks are words of victory to a Seneschal....

There are many more, but I am sure you get the drift.

Just because you did not get an answer does not mean you were not heard...and just because you gave advice does not mean it will be heeded...and just because it was not heeded does not mean the person to whom you spoke was not listening. Nor does it mean they think you are an evil idiot. Decision-makers have to make decisions based upon the best information they can get. And it is not always the one we want to hear.

The Magic Word is Restraint.

Let the occasions in which you avail yourself of the harsher measure open to you be rare indeed. A stick rarely used, and visible on the tavern wall, is seen by more people than the one waved about by someone ignored.

Never let them see you sweat.

No-one under your leadership should ever see you have a tantrum. Ever. Your leadership is ended once that happens, even if it takes you ages to figure it out.

Management by Snit does not work.

Ever.

Use email lists with care.

The written word is very two-dimensional, and comes off as far more harsh than you will ever mean it. People getting even a minor criticism can tend to see the worst in everything written to them. Overkill is not a good thing. As my Deputy for Media is fond of saying "Don't put it in an email unless you are willing to read it on the front page of the New York Times with accompanying op-ed pieces."

Do not be afraid to admit error.

Nothing gained me as much respect as when I told a shire I had made an error in judgement, and that we must work together to fix it. I was never so proud of how hard those folks busted tail to get us back into good graces with the Kingdom Seneschal.

Learn!

After anything remotely major, do a debrief. Look for what went right and what went wrong. Send out award recommendations to your Crown for what people did right, be sympathetic with and include the wisdom from those that had things go wrong. Try to figure out how you could have done it better or avoided it going wrong, and write it down somewhere useful. The only *stupid* mistake is one you are making for a second time.

Do formal things with formality.

If you are appointing advisors etc, get the whole group together and do it with a flourish. Things done with seriousness and ceremony are treated with deference by all who observe it.

When the backstabbers come lurking....

Draw them out of hiding by cheerfully discussing their concerns with them at a large meeting. Having a rational discussion with an obvious political opponent increases your credibility by an order of magnitude.

Subtlety should not be a lost art.

Let your people have enough information to draw the correct conclusion and then reward them for their brilliant plan. If your people look great and feel great, you are great.

Humble in victory, magnanimous in defeat.

If your point of view is taken, praise those who held the other viewpoint for what they did well, and thank your supporters for all their hard work. When you do not get your way, praise your opponent for what they did well or bring to the table, and quietly move forward.

There is no one way.

Be open to suggestion from your people of all ranks. Giving ground gracefully on matters of little and minor impact to you paves the way to gaining compliance on those critical measures you need them all to support.

When you have lost the army, you have lost.

Pay attention to your people! When you have lost them, it is pretty obvious. Arrange a change of office before a few folks with pitchforks and torches arrange it for you.

Where there is a grievance...

Help folks understand the basic grievance procedure. No matter how respected the person bringing up the complaint...when its first step is a nuclear letter to the Board of Directors, they have created a mud-pit hard to climb out of.

Never, ever, EVER click Send on an email when you are angry. Yes that means you!

In 15-20 years of SCA and electronic email being prevalent, I have not yet heard of a brilliant and happy result that ensued after a flamer was shipped off without due consideration and calming down. See previous New York Times comment...believe it or not, someone is going to forward that email to your mother/sister/boss/teacher/confessor/third cousin twice removed....

If you heard that someone heard that someone believes that someone saw [insert horrific thing here], by all means take it at face value. Incidentally that value is zero.

You *really* do not want the King to solve a dispute between households. You do not want Corporate to manage your Shire's event. If you make something a problem for a Corporate Officer, their solution may only be to make it not a problem for them. That's rarely fortunate or amusing.