

Managing Staff and Offices for Better Results and Fewer Headaches

Well into her second term, an MP who prided herself on her constituency work, learned that complaints to her office were increasing. The complaints involved missed weekend functions, unanswered e-mail queries, and immigration inquiries that had been ignored, among other things. The situation surprised the Member because both her Ottawa and riding offices had run smoothly in her first term, and she had established a good relationship with her constituents. Occasionally during her first term, the MP had been asked to intervene in more complex or sensitive situations, but normally her staff handled cases quickly and competently.

Disturbed by the increase in complaints, the MP investigated and quickly discovered the cause.

Following the second election, the MP's experienced office manager in Ottawa had retired for personal reasons. Having just won a hotly contested race, the Member turned to Richard, her campaign manager. Impressed by Richard's performance during the campaign, the Member did not hesitate to offer him the position of office manager in Ottawa. On assuming office, Richard recommended that an administrative assistant in the constituency office be replaced, advice that the MP accepted without question.

The source of the poor office performance became apparent to the Member when she checked how the casework was being handled, and examined more closely how Richard worked. While he was competent in marketing and generating new ideas, he lacked the administrative experience needed in an MP's office. Management of on-going operations and disciplined follow-up, crucial to providing constituents with quality service, did not interest him. In addition, the assistant he had recommended for the riding office was much less able than her predecessor.

So, Who's the Boss?

Managing a small, highly challenged staff is now an inescapable part of an MP's job. People management is an area where practices and approaches have undergone major shifts. "Boss" does not have quite the same ring it used to have. The employee-employer relationship is no longer characterized by the familiar top-down culture of not so long ago.

The lines between supervisor and employee are much less clear than they once were. More co-operative modes are now the norm, which means teamwork, participation, consultation, and consideration for the individual employee. The effect? Managing people is more complicated or, at a minimum, radically different.

What Went Wrong?

The immediate conclusion to the scenario described above would be to say the Member misjudged Richard's ability and made a bad choice. This is undeniable, but replacing Richard was really only part of the solution. The Member had been fortunate during her first term in

finding a skilled office manager who needed no supervision. She had not learned the importance of monitoring the standard of service provided by doing regular follow-up, maintaining communication with riding staff and using other management tools to detect and address problems.

The multitude of demands on MPs requires making maximum and efficient use of all resources at their disposal. Experienced MPs readily acknowledge that on a day-to-day basis, their personnel is central to their good performance. Yet, many newly elected MPs have not in their previous work acquired the management skills required for the new job. After an election, the whirlwind of political and parliamentary activities quickly takes over their lives, making it hard to find time to hire competent and congenial staff to establish a smooth-running and constituent-friendly office operation.

The object of solid staff management is to establish, maintain, and improve the delivery of service to constituents, and to support the performance of the

MP in all facets of the job. This brief overview of practical and proven ideas and practices could help newly elected MPs to set up and maintain effective office support, and to help them evaluate their performance as people managers.

MPs have an exceptional advantage in recruiting staff for their offices and in building the support and service team that suits them. In today's work world it is a rare manager who can pick her or his staff, even when they only number five or six. Hiring individuals is your very best chance to put your imprint on the way the office will operate, on which services will have priority and on the results you want. That alone should be argument enough for Members to give time, effort and care to build the team that satisfies their own criteria. Managers rarely regret investing effort and attention to bring the right people on board. The opposite is not true.

You may get advice from your party secretariat, colleagues, personal acquaintances and others on specific candidates. But never forget that the final

A well-intentioned staffer, seeking to accelerate the response to information requests or casework from government departments would regularly punctuate his request for help with departmental officials by alleging that his first-term MP was irritated at the slowness of the response. He would assert that his MP was quite "upset at the lack of co-operation shown" by the government contacts, and would "personally bring this lack of co-operation to the attention of the Minister." This approach did not fit the Member's style and was not in fact directed by him. Rather than impressing departmental workers, the impact of the tactic was to generate increasing irritation that weakened the Member's ability to help constituents cut through red tape. As a consequence, casework suffered and the MP developed a reputation for being ineffective in helping constituents. The staffer's high-handed and ill-advised approach negatively influenced the departmental response to all requests emanating from the office of this Member.

When first organizing their offices, Members will receive the publication *Organizing Your Ottawa and Constituency Offices*, which focuses on the administrative considerations of setting up those offices. This article focuses not on those aspects but, more importantly, on the individuals who will actually deliver the goods.

Members of Parliament will want to find employees who understand and have the capacity to represent a parliamentarian's views and priorities convincingly. Professional or job-specific competence is but a part of the skills-set needed to be effective and productive in working for an MP.

decision to offer someone a job on your personal staff is yours to make, and that the choice will affect your performance on the new job.

Here's What This Job's About: Do You Understand?

Finding competent and productive employees is a challenge for all managers. What is special in the case of MPs is the inherently personal relationship between employee and boss. In the public service or in private enterprise, employees report to a boss or supervisor who is in fact also an employee in the vast majority of instances. In a Member's environment there is no such distinction. Employer and "boss" are synonymous. In addition, an MP's staff does not reflect on a department, company or product, but on the very person of the parliamentarian. In our opening scenario, Richard's mediocre performance had a direct impact on the MP and seriously jeopardized her reputation, influence and, potentially, even votes in the next election.

Consider another scenario:

Bear in mind that the selection process, from establishing the positions required, identifying good potential candidates through to the selection of staff, has a direct and major impact on how well you will do your job or even be seen to be doing it. The process demands a lot of a new Member's time and concentration. Making the time available is equally crucial when filling a vacant post, because of the effect a new team member can have on an established work team. Even when an excellent employee leaves, in spite of the extra work and the added administrative burden, filling a vacant position always presents an ideal opportunity to re-evaluate how the office team is performing.

An MP was discouraged at losing an extremely capable office manager. To fill the vacancy he pressed his legislative assistant, who very competently handled research and advisory tasks as well as working on computer problems, to accept the position of office manager. The legislative assistant resisted the pressure and insisted on doing a detailed review of office operations. The result was the hiring of a new manager who was both computer-knowledgeable and a first-class administrator. As a result, the legislative assistant had more time to do in-depth projects for the Member and the overall performance of the office even improved.

The recruitment stage usually has a dominant effect on the ultimate performance of a Member's personal support team. The importance of doing it right cannot be over-emphasized. Recruitment efforts should go beyond just finding a competent person to accomplish a series of tasks, but should also involve consideration of how the candidate will help to create a coherent unit working collectively to promote the Member's goals. BOX A summarizes important elements to keep in mind when looking for staff.

Members have a number of options in the types of employment they can offer their personal staff. They

can, for example, choose to offer full-time and long-term employment, casual work or short-term contracts. Thinking through the type of employment is crucial because of possible implications. Some Members have been known to resort to a "probationary arrangement" as a sort of test period on the assumption that the Member is free to end the employee's contract for any reason during the probationary period. This approach and others of a similar ilk may be tempting, but they can be hazardous if the employee is not treated fairly and given sufficient opportunity to improve. Before adopting such an approach, Members should consult Legal Counsel to obtain a clear understanding of the implications.

BOX A: When Looking for New Staff...

- Consider important recommendations and references, but make the choice yours. Ensure that the candidate satisfies your requirements, not anyone else's.
- Take the time to determine both the qualifications and the qualities of the individual you wish to hire. The two cannot be separated in a Member's office environment.
- Decide whether you are seeking political affiliation or competence. If a position is vacant, ask your staff what type of individual and skills they consider are needed. Do some comparison-shopping no matter how strongly a candidate is recommended. Check references and consult former employers rigorously.
- Resumés give you the information the candidate wants to profile. Take the necessary measures to gather the information you want.
- Do serious selection interviews that deal with job-related matters, not peripheral ones.
- Invite a second person experienced in staffing and the work of an MP's office to conduct the interview with you.
- At the interview, commit to nothing that is not essential. Give yourself time and flexibility to reflect and adjust. If you have any doubt whatsoever about a candidate, do not hire.
- Before deciding on the full-time, casual, short-term or other option, make sure you understand exactly the obligations related to the considered option.

Where Do I Start?

Assuming that the employees on staff have been carefully selected and have the combination of talent, know-how and drive to go a good job, the challenge is to maintain their interest or, better still, to improve their skills and increase their productivity. What factors

influence an employee's ability and willingness to perform well? It can vary widely from the physical surroundings, the availability of adequate office material and technical equipment, the human or social atmosphere of the workplace, and the reputation and image of the "boss" Member.

An MP's most reliable tool for obtaining strong employee performance is the capacity to motivate. A motivated individual will often surprise with unexpected superior results, as ambitious and energetic Members' employees have shown on many occasions.

Managers generally recognize the importance of motivation for employees, but taking concrete steps to

motivate personnel requires time and effort. In the dynamic environment of the political and parliamentary world in which MPs work, employees can be stimulated by encouragement and by genuine interest in how the office team or individuals accomplish their tasks and make tangible contributions.

An MP of long standing recalls a case that should have been handled quite differently. A junior staff person enjoyed looking after the Member's schedule. But this responsibility was jealously guarded by a more senior administrative staffer who believed it conferred on him a certain status. As it turned out, the many detailed steps involved in organizing the Member's activities actually frustrated the senior staffer and interfered with other responsibilities more important to the MP. As a result, project work was not up to expectations, while the scheduling side suffered from too little attention to detail. In this case, the junior staffer was never asked to look after the travel, meeting and appointment arrangements. The Member accepted the status quo, which was a lesser quality of assistance. A great opportunity to benefit from an employee's special skills was lost and the employee remained frustrated at not being able to use a proven skill. Result: a lose-lose situation.

What Is It Exactly We Agreed To?

It is to the advantage of both an MP and his/her staff that duties be well explained and understood. A written job description is the basic tool for this purpose. The aim is not to list exhaustively every aspect of the work required, but rather to circumscribe the main, non-negotiable elements of what has to be done by the incumbent, while leaving room for complementary duties or different methods of work. Of course, responsibilities specifically attached to a designated position cannot be optional. For example, office correspondence, whether by e-mail or paper, must be tracked and rigorously followed up. Yet, no matter how constraining a job where repetitive or routine tasks dominate, there are creative ways to make it more interesting, e.g., by allowing different work methods. The challenge in considering ways to enrich a position is to respect the boundaries of the main tasks and the spirit of the position description. In some unfortunate instances, MPs – as other managers – have been known to stretch the assigned duties more than marginally and beyond a reasonable interpretation of “related” tasks or responsibilities, only to land themselves into proverbial hot water.

The difference between related duties not spelled out in the job description, but nevertheless bearing a relation to the responsibilities assigned to an employee, and substantial changes in the assigned responsibilities can be borderline in some cases. The objective is to have a fair, mutually understood agreement. A job description should be a comfortable jacket, not a straitjacket, reasonably fitting the functions and the individual. This is a situation where a Member should not hesitate to consult colleagues or human-resources experts. Most often, the common test of reasonableness for a given set of duties is the salary paid to do them.

When the question of motivation is addressed, the first item of discussion is likely to be one of remuneration. In this regard, MPs have considerable latitude in setting the salaries of individual employees. The limits are essentially the position guidelines outlined in the *Manual Allowances and Services* and the maximum salary allowed for each of those categories. The MP has far more latitude than do managers in the public or private sectors. In the latter case, a panoply of administrative rules or collective agreement clauses leave the manager limited room to manoeuvre.

An MP not satisfied with how casework was being tracked in the Ottawa office, began to add further duties to a constituency office employee whose job was general reception and information at a very modest salary. Over a fairly lengthy period of time, the Member asked the riding employee to do more: Would she “mind following up on immigration cases?” Could she “help those constituents with income tax problems?” and then on to handling passport

requests and doing budget reports for the riding office. The employee did not object to doing these tasks per se; they added to the interest of her job and she found it satisfying. However, at the end of an especially busy and taxing week, the constituency employee took a hard look, not just at the heavier workload, but also at how the kind of work assigned to her had evolved. Even though she was gaining precious experience and enjoying the work, she was in fact carrying out substantially more important tasks that had less and less to do with the original job description, by now 14 months old. Her question to the Member was straightforward: "Is this situation really fair and does it still correspond to our initial agreement?"

Is There more to it Than the Money?

The consensus of human-resources experts in both business and the public service is that, once the salary rate and benefits are established at a level considered fair, money is far from the top motivator for employees. The mistake, however, is to take this conclusion to the other extreme. Let's face it: words of congratulations, expressions of confidence and thanks do count, but pay

increases reinforce these gestures and present a tangible demonstration of appreciation for an employee's efforts and performance. Employees want to feel they are satisfactorily paid. Dissatisfaction with the paycheque most often stems from a real or perceived absence of relativity. Feelings of the type – "I am working way longer hours than Mary and my work is more important than hers. Why am I paid almost the same salary as she is?" – are regularly at the root of staff discontent.

An MP who was particularly satisfied with the quality of work and the efficiency of an hourly-paid part-time constituency worker, decided to give her a substantial increase. The Member ignored that he had given overall staff responsibility to a senior employee in the Hill office and directly instructed the pay office to process the increase. Other than the communication faux pas in not, at least, informing or explaining to the office manager why he wanted to grant this rather exceptional pay raise, the Member did not consider the effect on other staff. The raise was not overly generous in dollar terms and remained well within the financial envelope of the Member's Office Budget, but the percentage increase to the part-timer's pay rate happened to be twice the increase allowed full-time staff, who were putting in extra hours most of the time without remuneration. Although individual pay levels are technically confidential, the intensity of communication and exchange of formal and informal information in a small, closely integrated office make confidentiality difficult. The regular staff was understandably upset by this situation, and the MP then felt pressured to adjust their pay scales. The salary budget flexibility planned by the office manager disappeared. More seriously, rightly or wrongly, full-time staff did not forget the way the Member acted in the circumstances, with the predictable dampening effect on staff morale. The Member ultimately recognized the hard lesson learned in this case. The flexibility accorded him regarding pay levels was double-edged and needed to be deftly managed.

Some Members choose not to give individual salary adjustments and incentives and prefer to simply give everyone on staff a similar percentage raise across the board. From a management viewpoint, this represents a refusal to reward individual performance and to assume managerial responsibility. Especially to be resisted is rolling back pay levels because the Member's Office Budget is running short. In the first instance, the action confirms that the Member is not willing or able to judge employees' contributions. In the second instance, the MP is making staff pay for budgetary mismanagement that is not their fault.

A good mutual understanding of the job, fair working conditions and attention to pay levels are all basic ingredients to create a positive and productive atmosphere for staff. However, they will not suffice to maintain or stimulate energy and enthusiasm of employees. These ingredients need to be strengthened and complemented continuously. When was the last time you took deliberate action to motivate your team members? Do the quick mirror check in BOX B.

BOX B: What Makes A Good Motivator? In The Last Year How Often Have You...

- Challenged an employee with an important and more complex task?
- Praised your team or an individual employee in a special way?
- Promoted an employee for special or exceptional performance and shared that employee's profile beyond the office?
- Helped your staff to complete a task by working with them, or assisted an individual by giving attentive direction to him or her when engaged in a special assignment?
- Delegated real decision power to your staff?
- Consulted the team on organizational issues and created the opportunity for staff in Ottawa and the constituency to review and evaluate how the office is operating?
- Written a congratulatory letter to one of your team members?
- Requested their views and recommendations on issues that concern you?
- Provided a substantial training opportunity?
- Taken the time to get to know a staffer better?

What Do You Mean: You Were Not Aware?

Motivating staff and trying as much as possible to treat employees equitably will go a long way in leading staff to put out personal effort and improve the performance of the team as a whole. The next major requirement in a well-run MP's office is establishing good communication. The sharing of relevant information is frequently assumed to happen naturally. Given the small number of personnel and the technological tools available (e-mail, fax, phones, frequent contact with the boss), how can there be communication problems? Yet, staff members have indicated many times that the pace of day-to-day activities, the respective and separate areas of responsibility of each employee, the demanding schedule of the MP and the different concerns of the constituency and Ottawa offices stand in the way of

good communication. The communication function is the platform for building a team approach and reinforcing the support provided to the MP. For organizational effectiveness, communication requires conscious effort and consistency.

Management consultants most often hear complaints about too little information-sharing or the need to improve communication when examining staff issues in big or small organizations. It is not different in MPs' offices.

Why? It seems that never enough relevant communication takes place even in so-called well managed shops. Building a dedicated and productive team is not possible without solid intra-office communication. Some communication improvement tips for MPs' offices appear in BOX C.

BOX C: Communicate A Lot, Then... Communicate Some More!

An MP's level of communication with staff is a sign of trust. Do you trust your staff? To prove it:

- Listen. Listen a lot. It is probably the best form of communication.
- Let staff know what is important to you in the short and long terms. Staff can then align with your direction and with your priorities.
- Information is power. Empower your staff.
- Give all the information you can...and then some. Staff members are astute at selecting what counts. Encourage (insist even!) employees to share information and ideas. This reinforces the message that each staff member is a key contributor to the effectiveness of the office.

BOX C: Communicate A Lot, Then... Communicate Some More! (Cont'd)

- Practise communicating on an on-going basis. Intermittent communications are a sign of crisis or uneven management. Practice will improve the quality of communication.
- Back up verbal communication with written texts on more significant issues. It underscores the importance and the crucial points of the message.
- If communication with staff really is important, show it. As much as possible, do it yourself rather than through an intermediary. The most convincing form of communication is example.

Do I Deserve All This?

Despite their best efforts and extensive experience, there is one law that parliamentarians can expect not to amend substantially: the law of averages. Somewhere and at some time, a Member will encounter problems of some kind with an employee, notwithstanding the lessons learned, the thoroughness of the work contract and excellent personnel management skills.

On meeting a candidate to offer him an administrative position in the constituency office, a Member cautiously proposes a reasonable starting salary. However, he adds that “this is just a starting salary” and that “it is for a steady job”. He continues that there is “plenty of flexibility” and he would be surprised if “within a short while” the new employee does not qualify “for a better pay rate and even a promotion” based on the quality of his work. In the course of the employee’s first three months this message is reiterated occasionally.

By acting in this manner the Member is for all intents and purposes making a formal commitment conditional on the performance of the employee. It would be quite understandable if the employee interpreted these remarks as firm commitments to increase her pay level or give him a promotion down the road. Members must be prudent not to make such offers unless they are very certain they can and are prepared to deliver. In this case, if the employee can demonstrate that his performance has not been criticized or if he has been told that the

The tracking and allocation of annual leave and overtime is a sensitive issue as one Member learned when a staffer, who did not request any compensatory time off despite working many 10-hour days, discovered that a colleague was routinely being compensated with time off for extra hours worked. When this practice was questioned, an explanation was given that related to the colleague’s years of experience, personal commitments and previous campaign work – all subjective reasons with no reasonable link to fair compensation for extra work. The reasons did not pass the test of equitable treatment.

Is “Because I Say So” Not Good Enough?

The large degree of discretion enjoyed by MPs in managing the operation of their offices gives them the opportunity to influence and shape how effective and helpful their staff can be. This management flexibility can, however, also represent an occupational hazard if

For this reason, the best way to address people problems is prevention and preparedness: learning and developing defensive human-resources managing skills. Compared to solving problems, avoiding problems is much underrated.

In hindsight, the Member involved in the situation that follows might have acted differently.

quality of his work is good, the remarks cited, although verbal only, could become a factor in a contract dispute.

In somewhat similar situations, MPs have been known to make promises to potential candidates relating to employment security in an effort to attract individuals who already hold secure employment. If an employee hired in such circumstances is terminated before the stated end date of a contract, the severance amounts could be significantly increased because of this type of commitment.

discretionary and arbitrary latitude are confused. Indiscriminate use of managerial discretion can make you vulnerable.

The practice amounted to a form of favouritism that may have been involuntary or attributable to a lack of

attention as to how terms and conditions were applied in the office. Such incidents spur discontent that go beyond the case in question and inevitably undermine staff morale.

In the majority of situations, personnel management problems can be avoided. However, establishing a solid administrative and contractual platform does involve time, effort and paper or bureaucratic processes. And it is not an unconditional guarantee against people problems. However, good administrative housework does minimize the risk of costly misunderstandings or complications. MPs are much less likely to encounter staff management difficulties if the main elements of fair employment arrangements, obligations and rights on both the employer's and employee's parts are clearly understood, written down and lived by. Cases reported in the news media have shown all too clearly that personnel

An energetic administrative assistant in a Member's office understood that his work schedule had been fixed so that he could start early and leave work earlier in order to pick up his son at school. Unexpectedly the party assigned the Member to a special task force, in effect upsetting the Member's own office hours. As a consequence, he required the assistant to stay later to review correspondence. The employee protested that he had accepted the job strictly on condition that the original work schedule was observed. The Member quickly responded it was an MP's prerogative to set hours of work, despite the short notice and his previous assurance to the contrary at the staffing interview. What had been heretofore a productive relationship began to escalate into a serious confrontation to neither party's advantage. Since the employee's contract made no mention of working hours, the Member insisted that the employee change his work schedule. Fortunately a close fellow MP, on hearing of the problem, suggested that his friend reconsider. An understanding satisfactory to both parties was reached through further intervention by the Member's colleague, and the positive working relationship was eventually restored. Had the fellow Member's intervention not occurred, both the employee and the Member would have lost.

This difficult situation could have been entirely avoided or, at least, addressed differently had the terms and conditions of employment been set out in clear, unequivocal language. This experience strongly underscores, however, the advantage of leaving room for reasonable adjustments. Inserting a clause in the employment contract allowing for renegotiation or adjustment of conditions of work (such as the work schedule or specific tasks) is a simple approach, which leaves you some options as well as clearly informing the employee of these possibilities and your right to proceed with such modifications.

It seldom, if ever, will be a good idea to unilaterally impose changes or exercise your employer rights without consulting the person affected. Setting out the parameters should difficulties surface will be to your advantage and the employee cannot claim to be surprised. In the event your decision risks inconveniencing or displeasing an employee, anything

problems not correctly or professionally managed can cause an MP serious personal embarrassment.

You Think We Have A Problem?

Experience indicates that the more damaging problems that arise between MPs and their staff usually stem from the interpretation and application of legal or administrative rules set out in the employment framework applying to Members' staff: clauses of a contract are not clear or are too limiting; basic employee rights are not respected; the employee is not meeting expectations; an employee believes terms and conditions are not applied properly; workload and responsibilities are unfairly distributed or remunerated. Similar problems can be encountered when employees misunderstand or misinterpret clauses in a contract or their obligations as set out in the job description.

you can do to attenuate the regrettable impact, such as providing advance notice, explaining the rationale of your decision, or letting the employee propose a mutually satisfactory solution, may lessen the problem or even lead to suitable arrangements. Unilateral changes imposed by an MP or a representative are impractical and harmful from the perspective of the effective operation of the office as a whole and the Member's interests in particular.

In a word, people problems can be largely pre-empted by doing basic homework when it comes to staff management. It must be understood that people problems are common in an MP's office where stress, level and scope of activity, personal commitment and responsive service are the order of the day.

Without pressing the panic button when a people problem does appear or is suspected, the fail-safe advice is: "do not be dismissive". These types of difficulties

seldom solve themselves, but prompt attention will stop them from being exacerbated. The predictable outcome

of avoidance or delay is that the problem is compounded and becomes even messier.

A Member feels an employee in his riding office is performing substantially under expectations and decides the employee “has to go”. The Member wants to avoid firing the middle-aged employee without cause, but has kept poor records relating to the employee’s deficiencies. Other than making a comment on the need to verify outgoing correspondence more attentively or that filing does not seem up to date, the MP has not had a serious discussion about the employee’s performance. The Member wants the employee to leave voluntarily. In an effort to achieve this goal, he assigns duties the employee does not like, makes more and more unfavourable remarks on her work and telephone manners in front of other staff or visitors. He also adds comments like “I am thinking about putting a younger, more energetic face in the constituency office.”

Well, I Did Something About It, Didn’t I?

Addressing a people problem unprofessionally is begging for trouble.

The scenario above encapsulates an approach frequently taken to deal with staff whose conduct or quality of work does not meet an MP’s standards. Sometimes the cause may just be a plain conflict of personality. Rather than dealing with the problem itself,

a roundabout way is sought to make the problem go away. What are the odds of a satisfactory denouement in this case? From a legal aspect, such tactics can amount to constructive dismissal, a form of harassment or discrimination. They certainly are not fair employment practices and, if termination eventually enters the picture, monetary costs would be increased significantly as compensation for what the employee was made to experience.

A Member decides “this is too much” after an employee’s mistakes in organizing a meeting with an important advocacy group from his riding cause him embarrassment. Problems included an incomplete list of participants, inaccurate titles, confusion as to time and an inadequately prepared meeting room. The employee, who is clearly responsible, is known to be defensive, impatient and easily angered when the quality of his work is questioned. On returning to his office, the Member insists that two security guards accompany him to serve “as witnesses”. He calls the employee into his office, along with the two guards, whom he instructs “to just sit down and listen”. Assuming that the employee is entirely at fault, he then loudly describes what he terms “the total mess”, sarcastically thanks the staffer “for the great help”, and asks him to gather all his personal effects and leave for good, accompanied by the security staff.

Could I Have a Word With You?

Meetings with individual employees on a matter relating to performance or behaviour will often determine whether a situation can be corrected or solved. Such meetings demand all the skill and concentration the manager can muster. They are

equally difficult for the employee who usually realizes that things are not right. Consider the tips in BOX D to make “one-on-ones” as productive and helpful as possible for both the Member and the individual employee. Based on those tips, how do you rate the Member’s actions in the situation just described?

BOX D: A Checklist for Your ‘One-on-One’ Meeting...

- Prepare what you want to say to the employee ahead of time
- If you are angry, better to wait and cool down.
- Insist on the problem, not the person.
- Remember you may have it wrong.
- Keep your perspective. How serious is the problem?
- Avoid pettiness or vengeful measures. Take the high road.
- Ask the employee how she or he would solve the problem.
- Respect the individual at all times.
- Do not revert to direct or indirect threats.
- Document your interventions and meetings with the employee, especially the employee’s commitment to “change”.

How Do I Deal With All This?

In spite of significant differences in each and every case, there are general rules or proven approaches for managing people problems. Key steps in handling substandard performance or unacceptable behaviour are suggested in BOX E. However, the most important lesson learned from experience is that a

Member has to acknowledge the problem and act on it. Do not be dismissive. Ask for help, or at the very least, for advice from a Human Resources staff-relations officer or, the House of Commons Legal Counsel, especially when you sense or wish to gauge potential legal implications.

BOX E: Oh Oh! What Do I Do Now?

When faced with a people problem, use the following questions as a quick checklist to help you move towards a solution:

- What is potentially the best way to approach the problem? Do I have the full picture? What is the best way to get it?
- Who could help me through this? A Human Resources staff-relations officer or Legal Counsel?
- How can I or someone else help the employee?
- What exactly is the problem? Discipline, behaviour, performance, illness?
- Has the employee had a chance to explain her or his point of view or difficulty?
- Does the employee understand my point of view, expectations, conditions and consequences relating to the situation?
- Is the employee willing to contribute to a solution?
- Will the measures I am considering lead to a solution?

Small or major differences with employees have the potential of undermining a Member's success in building a solid team and in motivating employees to peak performance. Common sense dictates that the efforts made in maintaining positive staff relations and in preventing, lessening or solving problems pay a high return.

So What's Really in it For Me?

Would any MP doubt that there is a marked positive correlation between the quality of staff work and his or her ability to deliver the goods as a representative, a parliamentarian and a party member? Likely not. Conversely, the quality and productivity of an MP's team depends on how seriously he or she invests in managing personal staff. People management in any employment

environment today is a formidable challenge and no article can aspire to cover adequately the essential principles and practices of effective people management.

These few lines are meant to focus on key points and lessons drawn from actual experience that might help Members who are setting up their offices or who want to re-evaluate, re-adjust or improve personal staff management. Whether Members agree, totally, partly, or not at all with the suggested approaches is secondary. The objective is to encourage you to think about how best to handle your employees so they can support you in the effective discharge of your duties as a parliamentarian and constituency representative – and probably to lower your level of stress.