

Michael Citrak's Chairman 101 Notes

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The following are miscellaneous notes and rambling of things that I have learned about being a chair of a 2500 member science fiction convention.

Enjoy

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NOTE: Sorry, this isn't in any particular order, I just dumped my thoughts and this is how it came out. I originally created this document a couple years ago for new chairs of various cons around...and I didn't have time to put these into any 'headings'. But the more I think about this, the better I like this not being in any order...I believe the new chairs that requested this document will get more out of it.

Learn how to speak in front of an audience, with and without a microphone. Write up your notes or even entire speeches for such things as opening ceremonies, closing ceremonies, banquets. Do this several days in advance, or at least the night before. Practice speech.

When giving out Lifetime Achievement Awards (or equivalent) have a nun handy to hit your wrists with a ruler so you have pain to focus in on rather than the love, friendship and camaraderie for the recipients...you will cry and blubber less and thus make less of a fool of yourself in front of 200 people at the banquet.

Learn how to run meetings. You may want to take a class in effective meetings management. (Hopefully you can do so at your regular job.)

Read management books.

Ask other chairmen for advice.

Have an administrative assistant. If you are lucky your spouse can do this (but ask first). Several years ago my brother had this function, I bounced ideas off of him, ran problems past him and had him proof read for me. (I always knew how much correcting I would need to do by the amount of laughter my documents produced from him.)

Have a discretionary fund in the chairman budget. Use it only if you need to, not because you have it.

Get organized. Learn how to.

Have breaks in your meetings. Tell people what time to come back rather than telling them to be back in ten minutes. You'll waste less time. Give a one or two minute warning before you start up again.

Try not to socialize during the meetings. Do that before and at breaks. Best yet socialize afterwards by inviting the gang to go dancing, out to dinner, out to a movie, or out to roll some drunks. Whatever. It's best to keep the meetings as much business as possible, but not to the point that the meetings are sterile. There must be a balance. Your committee will have ways of letting you know that you have talked for too long.

Also, socialize with your different teams, if possible. Dinner meetings tend not to be productive for an entire committee meeting, but invite one, two, three, people over for dinner (bar-b-que). This is a great time to chat about goals, desires, wants, needs about fandom and your convention.

Sometimes you will need to log contents of a phone conversation, maybe even a conversation in person. Do this soon, quickly and privately. I have even had to transcribe voice mail messages and e-mail them to someone else for action. Sometimes a little pocket tape recorder is nice to dictate notes afterwards. I have done many times while driving the 60 miles home after a meeting. (I live in Olympia).

During the con, it is wise to visit the various parts of the con a couple of times, (hospitality, gaming, office, child care, green room, rest rooms, etc.) If you can't, assign someone to officially do this, fore example the vice chair or your PR person. Also, if you have room parties, you or this person should make the rounds of the parties and introduce themselves to the host and ask how things are going.

In advertising your convention at other conventions you can have club tables, help at other convention's hospitality (host a couple of hours) or put on a room party. With the hospitality and room party methods, the most important thing is to 'glad-hand!' And I mean greet people at the door, make them smile, make people feel welcomed, be a host, and have fun. (Who knows, the next person you meet may become the PR person, or hospitality director or be the owner of a great house to host the post convention party!) Wearing silly hats and or giving out stickers or other trinkets makes this job easier. If you don't have any trinkets to give out, then point out where the food and drinks are and of course always introduce yourself, identify your group and try to call them by there name (some times you can't pronounce their fan name. This in itself can become an ice breaker.) NOTE: Traditionally, bid conventions are the room parties that give out stickers, but other cons are doing this too. Figure out what you want to do. Maybe all the room party and volunteers manning the club table can wear Hawaiian shirts or silly vests that you all made.

As you schmooze your way though fandom, be prepared for that immature individual that hates you because of a conflict with your predecessor, or your predecessor's predecessor. This is often based on a silly misunderstanding. I would love to just slap these people with a rubber chicken, but I usually just nod my head and moo as I take down notes to do research. Sometimes I discover that we have indeed 'wronged' someone. Then with this info, I am can apologize for the con, and past and future committees (again, since my predecessor did that too.) Often, the problem is between the individuals, (a personal conflict between convention attendee and the prior convention volunteer). There is little you can do to fix these.

Send out silly greeting cards to cheer up committee members.

Be on time for meetings. No, really try hard. I am on time for more meetings then I am for work.

Acknowledge that you can't please everyone. Sometimes you can sooth the feathers, sometimes

another team member will have to do it. And sometimes it just can't be done by anyone.

Read and answer your mail and e-mail and voice mail in a timely fashion.

HERE'S A BIGGY: You may want to warn your real boss that you have this new source of stress. (You'll have to decide if you can tell him/her.) If you have a good boss (like I do) his answer will be: "Great, you'll get management experience."

Have ears out there. I realize that this sounds like spying, but sometimes people won't tell you to your face about a problem that they have with you or your convention. They would rather just stew, and I hate that.

Know everyone's phone numbers, when you can call, if you can call them at work and how late at home, and if you can leave 10 minute voice mail messages on their work phones. Can you FAX to them? Can they FAX to you? Will their boss charge them 75 cents for each incoming FAX page? ECK!

Get on e-mail and check two to five times a week.

Get voice mail or an answering machine.

Add greeting cards to your budget.

Sometimes you just have to say no.

Have a loving spouse (significant other) that enjoys giving you back rubs. If no significant other, then a confidante, a life long friend or maybe even a shrink (but that costs and you can't put that in the budget.) I have all of these.

Have friends that aren't in fandom that you can dump on. I have one at my office that doesn't mind listening to me. I think he thinks that as long as I am sane, his workload at the office won't increase. He has reached the point now that when I chat about fandom he just laughs at me and says that it is nice that I have a "hobby".

People will cry on your shoulder. Sometimes I feel like the ship's councilor. The chairman doesn't have to be the one, but your organization will need one. You may have to appoint one or at least let someone become that. It needs to be someone you trust.

Be able to take criticism. This can be difficult for me, and sometimes people have to yell at me, and no I don't like that, but sometimes it helps.

You get to mediate disputes sometimes. Learn a few things about dispute resolution.

Remember, you are not alone. Delegate.

You ought to attend other cons and schmooze. If you don't schmooze well you may need to have a PR dude that does.

You ought to attend other convention committee meetings and learn how they run their meetings. Sometime you'll learn you are doing a better job than they are. This is a nice feeling.

Know the by-laws, goals and objective of your convention. You will be able to stay focused better. Verify whether your convention is still registered with the Secretary of State. (This is for those conventions in the State Of Washington. If your event is in another state or province, check with your appropriate governmental entity.)

Always pack an extra roll of duct tape. Keep a couple of plastic forks and a few of moisten towellets in your glove compartment of your car.

As chairman you get to learn all sorts of things about your con that you never knew about. If you haven't been around the con for all of its life, you will want to brush up on its history, polices, old staff that is gone, etc. You inherit the past whether it's the good, the bad, or the ugly. Most often it's all three.

Attend or have a rep attend Convention League meetings. Attend ConComCon. Once in a while attend a Dealers association meeting. (If they even exist anymore.) Check into the AOV (Association of Operations Volunteers). You may want to attend one of their training sessions.

You may have to serve on lots of sub committees. This may be OK.

Brush up on your writing skills. You will need to write up articles for progress reports, etc.

Have someone proof read your letters, agendas, etc.

Always have an agenda for your concom meetings, exec meetings, etc. Share it with your executive team ahead of time, and be ready for the meeting. Make copies

You may find yourself being a coordinator for a pledge drive for a public TV station. Your co-workers will get to see you on TV.

You will get complaints from pros and general attendees. You need to get all the facts first (from them and your volunteers) prior to acting.

The chairman needs a copy of the registration database (data) (of at least the last convention). There are others on your committee that need this information and that varies from con to con. BUT treat this information confidentially.

Sometimes, the chairman just needs to kick butt.

Try to set up a 'home office' with your computer, phone, files, etc. One thing that I have is a small scale to weigh outgoing mail and I have a few different denominations of stamps. This saves some time.

If possible choose a boss in your mundane (real) job that has done volunteering as well. They don't need to be in fandom, but he/she understands you better for the volunteering when they have done it too. Mine also likes science fiction and used to be a printer. I showed him the program book and he was quite impressed. The downside to your boss knowing you volunteer for conventions, is that you

may end up on the committee for the annual office professional conference. Since that's 300 to 600 people, that's easy, but don't let your boss know that!

Come to terms with the fact that your garage will never see a car. My is full of convention stuff that won't fit into the storage unit.

Make sure that at least two people have the keys to the storage unit.

Send out thank you cards after the con. Also, you may need to send out team building and/or notes of encouragement through out the year to a few of your team members. Silly awards at con com meetings are good too.

Wear a suit to the meetings with the hotel. We need to be as professional to them as possible.

Realize that different people think differently. This is a source of strengths and of weakness too. Some studies suggests that there are four basic thinking patterns. Some suggest that there are eight. We can put people in simple categories: Salesman, Accountants, Engineers, Absent-minded Professors, etc. Some people and flex from one type to another. These are often the better communicators. But if you are tiring to communicate with someone who thinks just the opposite of the way you do, you **both** must do this flexing to communicate affectivity. There are classes, workshops and books on this subject. If you find yourself really getting deep into fandom and not being able to communicate with some people, you may want to look into leaning about the different thinking patterns and how to communicate with them.

Some suggested reading material in regards to management and interpersonal skills:

"An American Original, Walt Disney" by Bob Thomas

"The Art Of War" by Sun Tzu

"How To Win Friends & Influence People" by Dale Carnegie¹

"Leadership Secrets Of Attila The Hun" by Wess Roberts, Ph.D.

"The Macintosh Way, The Art Of Guerrilla Management" by Guy Kawasaki

¹ This is suggested by a friend, I haven't read it yet.

