"The Future of the Office: A Human First Mentality"

In response to an ongoing discussion between Association Executives regarding the future of remote work and in-office environments, **Adam Levy, Executive Director of the Chapel Hill-based American Cleft Palate-Craniofacial Association**, shared his thoughts on "human-first" mentality:

As a new(ish) Executive Director who onboarded at my organization within the past year during the pandemic, I have surprisingly strong thoughts on the state of how our offices operate, and how we treat each other. Particularly, the fierce debate over where people work and *why.* Why do certain companies need employees in the office at all? Why do certain associations feel more pressure from their Boards to institute personnel policies which are operational in nature, and not a strategic board-level? Most importantly, why are we as decision makers weighing so heavily what others are doing, and shaping our decisions around that, versus thinking critically about our own organization and what is best for our specific people? I intend not to proselytize one way or another, but I do believe that this is a disruption that most of us as professionals haven't witnessed before, and it's important to resist the urge to, well… resist.

1) Coming in with a fresh set of eyes, particularly during this state of disruption, is enormous fun. Everything is being examined, and there is endless opportunity to change everything that should be changed, including the board's perception of what an association office "looks like". The very definition of "progress" is to move forward in space or time (thanks, google).

2) "Leadership requires the use of power, the capacity to influence, but use of power does not make you a leader." This is one of my favorite quotes, which I overuse. We as Chief Staff Executives or other senior leadership should use our power to influence. We watched for years as associations and corporations sat back on DEI and social justice, and only when things became overbearingly terrible did we take action. We're witnessing another disruption - another people-centered disruption - and we're watching as there is a debate over what is best for humans vs. companies? The writing is on the wall: if we maintain a people-first mindset, we'll be successful not only as an organization, but as leaders, humans, and a population. I consider myself lucky to have worked at associations where I was treated well.

3) Instead of discussing what "employers" might do... aren't we the employers as Executive Directors, CEOs or senior management? Don't boards put their trust in us to make the decisions which are best for our organization? We should be influencing each other in the best possible way. Why aren't we discussing equity issues in remote work and who will thrive remotely vs. who can't? Why aren't we talking about disparities in the reduction of working mothers? Why aren't we talking about equal pay for men and women or pay disparities in varying races and ethnicities? Why aren't we talking about reduction in workplace violence and depression? Those are the items I encourage us to have conversations about, whether that means remote, hybrid, or in-office policies. I want to use whatever influence I have, to influence not only my board and staff team, but colleagues as well, no different than how I've been so positively influenced by other CSE's. It is possible and exciting to run a thriving association, and have happy, fulfilled employees – whether we work in an office, remotely, or a hybrid model.

4) Marsha Linehen, a psychologist, discussed the idea of "radical acceptance". She said, "One of the four options you have for any problem is "radical acceptance". Radical acceptance is about accepting life on life's terms and not resisting what you cannot or choose not to change. Radical acceptance is about saying yes to life, just as it is." Therapeutically, the idea is to stop taking painful situations and elongating

them into ongoing suffering. I've always been an in-office employee until recently. I mostly loved it, and I miss seeing people. Again, whether or not my organization stays fully remote or goes back in some capacity, my priority is my team, and always will be - it isn't about me. I'm accepting this disruption and not waiting to be on the wrong end of it. My team makes our train move and I expect awesome results. In return, I want them to be placed in the best environment in which they can perform that awesome work. It's more work for me to be flexible and spend time crafting new policies, but isn't that what I signed up for?

Using our power as Executives to control an outcome which works well only for ourselves, or our organization, leaves out the most critical item: people. Results-oriented styles of management, including "manage projects - not people", and making advancements with our influence will create meaningful change and happier, more productive humans, and employees. As John Lewis said, "You have to say something; you have to do something." That's where I'm at: time to put people first, fair pay first, equity and equality first, empathy and compassion first, and find a way to get people into a position where they can build and strengthen our organizations while living their best, most fulfilled lives.

Cheers to using power and influence in the best way possible.