

What in the Heck Am I Doing?

The question has surely passed your lips, quite possibly in regard to some choice you have made in pursuit of your AEA livelihood or perhaps in regard to your choice to pursue this livelihood at all. For me, this question arose recently when I was telling someone that the AEA Presidency took up as much time as I permitted it to and my interlocutor quite naturally asked what I did. In the moment, I was hard put to come up with much of anything.

Upon reflection (and having asked myself the titular question) I have cobbled together a list of my activities and duties, which I proffer to you as both a reassurance that I am well worth the zero dollars per year you pay me and also as an enticement (or caveat) to those who might seek to succeed me in this office.

The AEA Constitution says that I preside at all meetings of the National Council and that I have "general supervision of [the Association's] affairs and property." Pretty vague, huh? I chair the meetings of the 93-member Council and the much smaller (eight officers plus eight alternates) PPC (President's Planning Committee.). While I can put in my two cents at the PPC, in Council I do not "enter into debate," but rather focus on moving the debate along while allowing for full discussion.

My "general supervision," as I see it, is one of the two most important things I do. I mull. I plan. I think. I consider how we -- the elected leaders and staff -- can be most useful to the members. I consider how the Association can be more effective, more nimble, more efficient. I consider how we can make best use of your dues money. I consider how we can make best use of our relationships with our bargaining partners, with other unions, with labor organizations, with the government. I think about how "the business" is changing and how it is likely to change in the future; and I consider how we can position ourselves to be more powerful and effective in that future. I bring all these considerations to top-level meetings with the Council and the PPC.

My chief presidential functions are those of figurehead and ombudsman. As figurehead, I am the representative of the union at various award ceremonies, industry functions, and labor gatherings. This year alone I am attending dozens of board meetings of the Equity-League P&H Funds, the Actors' Fund, BC/EFA, and FIA (Federation Internationale des Acteurs,) the national conventions of IATSE and the AFL-CIO as well as 30 separate centennial celebrations in our three main office cities and every liaison city. I represent you and, despite my gibe about animatronics, I take this duty seriously, if not solemnly. When I represent you, I wear a suit and tie: it is my way of saying, "This is a business, and we stage managers and actors are people of substance."

I am also the Association's ombudsman. Just as staff bring their issues and problems to our Executive Director Mary McColl, our elected leaders can bring their issues and problems to me. Members at large can bring just about any concern to me. My e-mail inboxes have a steady flow of requests, complaints, suggestions and ideas. I try to reply to all of them. I frequently pass the e-mails on to the appropriate staff member. I sometimes bring the issue or idea to the PPC. Sometimes my limited powers and skill set are sufficient to handle the issue.

I have recently dealt with thank you notes, condolence notes, invitations to openings, endorsement requests, health coverage enquiries, meeting scheduling (and re-scheduling,) liaison party speakers and schedules, re-join requests, questions on benefit performances, the flu shot program, a forum with South Florida producers, an onerous holiday show schedule, requests for a copy of a speech, and a meeting with a Chinese cultural delegation. That's this past week.

I also regularly meet with members in person in my office. (My office, the corner penthouse overlooking Times Square, is cool: it alone is worth thinking about becoming AEA Preident.) Sometimes I listen to ideas and suggestions, complaints and problems. Sometimes I offer my own suggestions. I offer hope and encouragement, fatherly advice and mentoring on how to run one's life and career -- much as I frequently attempt to do in these columns.

At the end of the day, that is the other most important thing I do. I am not Wyman the Great and Powerful; I am the character man behind the curtain. I cannot give you a job or guarantee you a living just as I cannot give you courage, heart or brains. Instead the aid I dole out is the assurance that you are okay, that you are enough, that you have what you need inside you, and that your choice to pursue this livelihood was indeed not a mistake. I consider it my job to provide you "with aid" -- the acronym of this column's title.