

Stuff I learned the Hard Way

This appears, in somewhat more polished form, in the *Calontir Seneschal's Handbook*, 5th edition, c. 1999. While I did not write the entire handbook, I wrote this part; it's my fault therefore. The intended audience was, of course, Calontir local branch seneschals. If anyone finds any of this valuable, they can pass it on in whole or part, as long as the individual point(s) quoted remains intact and I'm listed as the author.

-Elasait ingen Diarmata, ex-kingdom seneschal

(In compliance with the above request this article was copied in whole from the original post to the Calontir mailing list).

Stuff I learned the hard way

*The 72-hour rule: If someone contacts you and describes a major problem, particularly one that's clearly interpersonal in nature, you don't have to act right away. Take time to mull it over before you do anything. Half the time, the crisis will blow over in a few days. (This doesn't mean it won't resurface later, under a different form.)

*Distinguish between calls for action and a desire to vent. Lots of people who contact you just want to vent at someone. Vents don't necessarily need action on your part, beyond listening.

*Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity. Never attribute to stupidity that which can be adequately explained by poor communication. Always assume communication failure, even if it looks unlikely. (Elasait's corollary to Hanlon's razor)

*Never let your boss be surprised. If you think it might come to the attention of the Kingdom Seneschal, *you* be the first to contact them--or, at the very least, contact your regional reporting deputy and let them contact the kingdom seneschal!

*Burnout can be insidious. I didn't realize how badly I wanted out of the local seneschal's office until I found myself, immediately after turning over the office, skipping out of the feast hall shouting, "I'm free, I'm free, I'm free!"

*Kingdom and regional officers are resources; use them. They don't bite, and they're there to help.

*It's more important to fix problems than blame. Or, to use the "dead fish" analogy created by Mistress Hilary of Serendip, long-time Steward (now called Seneschal) of the Society: When you have a dead fish lying on the carpet, if you spend all your time trying to find out who left it there, it will only grow more and more smelly. Your first order of business is to appropriately dispose of the fish.

*Don't reinvent the wheel. It's likely someone else has had the same problem you're having. This is also why you shouldn't hesitate to consult your superior officers.

*Some people just live to complain. There will be a small minority of folks who won't be happy no matter what course of action is decided upon. They won't offer suggestions (constructive or otherwise) or express their opinions *when given the opportunity*, but will wait until a decision has been made and then complain about how they weren't consulted, or they could have told you it wouldn't work, or the "powers that be" have to have everything their way.

*Anytime anyone begins a statement with the phrase, "People are saying..." it usually means that's what *that person* is saying. Take it with as much salt as needed.

*Beware the prophet who preaches the One True Way. The SCA is a broad organization, and there are

many, many ways to play the game. This doesn't mean you have to tolerate Elf-ears Vampiresson showing up in a spandex Civil War outfit; but as long as someone's version of the game isn't in contradiction with the governing documents or kingdom law and policy, it's to be permitted. Other people will either flock to that version of the game, or they won't.

*It's worth trying to regard "problem entities" as people with misdirected energy. Sometimes your "problem child" is actually someone who cares passionately about some aspect of the organization, or really wants to make a contribution, but doesn't know how or feels ignored. Cast about and see if you can come up with a project for your problem child. This won't always work, but it's worth a try.

*Don't assume. Anything. A close look at the word tells you what it can make out of all of us.

*Perceptions, even erroneous ones, look like reality to some people; and left unchecked, they have a way, over time, of *becoming* reality. They are more important than you think--unfortunate, but true. Don't ignore them.

*If you must use an iron fist, put a velvet glove on it if at all possible. You really will get farther by being pleasant and agreeable, and demonstrating interest in people's concerns.

*While it may be gratifying, in the short term, to give in to the impulse to tell someone exactly what you think of their intelligence, personality, parentage, etc., or to indulge in backbiting and innuendo when those around you are doing so, it's rarely worth the cost. Ultimately, this game is won on what, for lack of a better term, I call "graciousness points." This is doubly true of officers, and quadruply true of seneschals.

*Never suppose you're too unimportant for somebody to take what you say as an Official Pronouncement--and always at the worst possible moment.

*If you're not (mostly) enjoying what you're doing, then you're not doing the right thing. Yes, this is true even of officers. Holding office is a big responsibility, and can be a burden, but it can also be a delight. If doing what you're doing causes you no joy, arrange to stop doing it.

*Being able to make soothing noises over the phone is an invaluable skill.

*When (not if) you make a mistake, the best approach is to swallow your pride and own up to it readily. Apologize where appropriate, take whatever beating you've got coming with as much grace as you can muster, do what you can to make things right, and file whatever you've learned for future reference.

*If someone comes up with a really stupid idea, assign *them* to carry it out. Nine times out of ten you will never hear from them or the idea again. (Thanks to Master Stephen Ironhand, first seneschal of the then-shire of Three Rivers, for this valuable and time-tested rule!)