

Computer Corner: Forum Building 101 - The Dangers of the Staff Only Forum

- Bob Hubbard

When setting up your forums, it is often recommended that you also setup a section that only your staff can access. The reasons for this are many. A staff-only area allows your staff to discuss important policy issues, problem users, and the board itself in private, without worry that the average member will stumble across something they shouldn't.

The challenges with having a private staff area lie in your staff gradually "moving in" and reducing or outright stopping their public forum participation. Administrators must pay careful attention that they also do not fall into the "manage from the back" trap.

To protect against this danger, active administrators must pay careful attention to who is active in their staff forums. Spot check them to be certain they haven't moved in full time. As most of us hire our staffs based on their prior performance in the areas they now moderate, we want to keep them active there, where their contributions can build content and draw in new members. Posts made in private may help guide things, but rarely translate into new content or new members.

Administrators in particular need to pay attention to their own posting patterns. A successful admin will guide and steer their board while avoiding the dictator role. This requires professional interaction with your board staff. It is up to you to set the tone and the pace. If they see you "hiding" in the back, they will often emulate you and also hide back. This runs the major risk of the board having previously active sections wither and die as the heavy posters had all been hired and resorted to lurking in the back. Lead by example. Additionally, when you as an admin aren't publicly visible, you run the risk of being seen as the despot in the tower, only appearing to punish rule breakers. You run the risk of being seen as out of touch or worse by your members.

Encourage your staff to continue their past activity in their sections, and be certain to visit them regularly by posting yourself. Each post that staff makes in public both reminds the members that you are there, but also serves to further the conversation, build content and entice lurkers to register and post.

This also helps keep your staff as active members, and can serve to prevent the feeling that they are a special "elitist" group which happens from time to time on forums.

Remember:

- Encourage staff to remain active in public
- Check staff activity regularly
- Lead by example and be an active public poster.

I hope this has been of some help and welcome questions.

Thank you.

Bob

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Bob Hubbard operates several forums online. A former Commodore 64 BBS sysop from the '80's, he now operates MartialTalk.com, a leading martial arts forum, KenpoTalk.com, an community for the kenpo karate community, BuffaloIT.com, a technical forum, and Nephrites Citadel (rustaz.com/forum), a community for sci-fi, anime and more. He is also technical admin at FMATalk.com, a forum for the Filipino martial arts community. Copies of this article is free to distribute, provided all text is retained intact. It and other articles can be found at rustaz.net.