THE ASSOCIATION OF THE FUTURE IS IN THE ROOM TODAY

BY BOB C. HARRIS, CAE

At a recent meeting of associations representing similar business sectors, the executives described their organizations. I asked them to use quantifiable aspects in their descriptions. For example, size of the board, number of members, annual budget or size of the staff. Introductions of this type allow colleagues to compare and contrast performance.

My role was to lead discussions on governance, strategy and smart practices.

Toward the end of the day, an executive asked the million-dollar question: “What do you see as the association of the future?”

“Based on the introductions, I believe the association of the future is in this room. But it is not any one association,” I answered.

Every association has achievements for which they are proud. While every executive described association strengths, a few stood out because of their restructuring, technology investment, governance enhancements, empowerment of the CEO and high-level outcomes.

“The answer is at the table today,” I said, “let me explain.”

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Associations founded decades ago often create silos. Their bylaws, mission and culture define a space in which they seldom cross boundaries. One executive described how his organization had integrated several associations.

A strategic board may form an umbrella organization to unite several associations. By unifying as an alliance, they improve advocacy, influence and education. For instance, the umbrella “construction materials association” was created through an alliance or melding of many subsets of the industry.

There are varied models and processes to reorganize. A “parent” organization could be formed — let’s call it an alliance — and the related business sectors brought together to share resources. The parent can be positioned as the organizer, while the separate associations retain their own boards and finances.

Another model might simply begin with collaborative efforts leading to a memorandum of understanding. The boards

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would agree it is more efficient to have a single staff, board and office. The outcome is nearly always a more effective organization with increased relevance and influence.

PUBLIC BENEFIT
“Focus on the big picture,” one executive said. “We promote the fact that our association impacts our state’s infrastructure, economy and employment.”

However, when one asks a board member to describe what the association does, the answer usually sounds like, “We offer benefits, plan an annual expo and publish a newsletter.” The answer can be characterized as tactical thinking.

Association volunteers and staff are so busy doing things they can’t see the forest through the trees. Take a step back to consider the real value of the association — more jobs, higher standards, improved economy. Nearly every association has significant outcomes benefiting their sector and the public.

TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS
One executive described developing technology platforms to improve association functions, member service and efficiency. A platform is a group of technologies that is used as a base upon which other applications, processes or technologies are developed.

The association was less interested in new computers, but more focused on creating platforms supporting members’ needs. Now dues are automated to alleviate staff calls and dunning letters. Payment of dues is tied to access to benefits and the membership directory. When dues expire, access ceases automatically.

Platforms were developed for bill paying (accounts receivable) with full transparency for the officers; eliminating the need to circulate checks for signatures. Continuing education was tied to tracking mechanisms so members knew how many hours they had taken or needed for certification.

They recognized today’s busy members use their smartphones — not for calling staff but to access association information, register for education and to connect to other members. This association identified why members called the office and transformed the functions to technology platforms.

RESPECT FOR THE CEO
One association shared how they transitioned to a model where the board no longer micromanaged the paid executive. Volunteers now respect the executive for who he/she is — the CEO of a corporation.

The board understood its role as setting a direction to advance the business sector. Directors allocated the resources, set the policies and delegated responsibility to staff to advance the strategic plan. There was no need to oversee the CEO. Tactical decisions such as approval of a conference speaker, adjustments to the website, or buying office equipment were of minor concern to the board.

Promote a model where the board genuinely governs and lets the staff manage.

COMMITTEE ALIGNMENT
An executive described a reduction in the number of committees to only five; each aligned with the association’s five priorities. They eliminated unproductive committees. Task forces and microtasks were used for short-term projects.
Committees should be considered assets — supplementing the board’s efforts. They should fit within the needs of the strategic plan, not the other way around where they think up ideas for the staff to do.

Keep in mind that committees can drive off members. Asking members to volunteer and then ignoring their offer is disheartening.

Another problem is the volunteer who makes time to attend a meeting only to find out there was no good reason to meet, no agenda or the chair was unprepared. The association of the future makes good use of the volunteer workforce.

**RIGHT-SIZED GOVERNANCE**

An executive explained that her board was reduced from 23 to nine persons, and there was no longer a need for an executive committee.

“Now we are more nimble,” she said. “Costs associated with a larger board have been eliminated, and we get the excellent results.”

They phased out directors as their terms ended. The membership approved bylaws for a board size of from nine to 13 directors. Now they meet only quarterly.

To respect the volunteers and past presidents who might feel upset about losing board seats, she created an advisory council of leaders to which the smaller board could turn. They eliminated the tradition of all past presidents having an ex-officio seat on the board.

In summary, finding one association of the future was not so easy. Rather, each association represented models of excellence that when combined create more effective organizations. ◆

Bob has 25+ years (oops “30+ years!”) experience with associations, chambers and other nonprofits. His seminars are interactive, focused on core-knowledge and organizational (realistic) capacity. He utilizes case studies, trends and headlines for board orientation, training, strategic planning, staff training and consulting. He is the author of Association Management 101 Online®, creator of the Association Self-Auditing Process® and co-author of “Building an Association Management Company.”