The Association’s DNA

DNA is the building blocks of the body. Deoxyribonucleic acid is a nucleic acid that contains the genetic instructions for the development and function of living things. Unless you’ve invested in a DNA kit to check your family tree or health prospects, you don’t give it much thought.

Theoretically it could apply to organizations. DNA lies below the surface

We focus on delivering value for members. The volunteer focus on the governance and committee responsibilities. Staff get their jobs done each day.

As my friend Sheila Birnbach professes, what we see in an organization is the tip of the iceberg. Eighty percent lies below the surface, out of sight to most parties in the organization. That is where the organization’s DNA rests.

Consider the DNA

I look below the surface in checking the health of an association. Here are five areas that make up the DNA. Use it to map out strengths and weaknesses.

Structure – No two organizations are identical. Each has a unique structure or DNA. Some have established a foundation, PAC, trust and/or for-profit corporation to advance the mission. They may have a “parent” organization and/or local chapters. Some are simply a single 501c6 organization.

Structure is usually apparent in an organizational chart. It depicts the relationship of components, hierarchy and lines of appropriate communications. For instance the committees and task forces get their authority and answer to the board. Studying the structure will yield insights into effectiveness and dysfunctions. Be sure you rely on legal and accounting counsel when making changes to structure.

Strategy – A board must act strategically --- not tactically. Some directors are unaware of the distinction. A well-crafted multi-year strategic plan should guide board, committees and staff. Do members and stakeholders know of the board’s work and priorities? The plan should always be on the board table.

Some organizations convene a planning retreat only to file the final report on a shelf to collect dust.
The AIA Las Vegas Chapter relies on a strategic plan developed every 5 years to guide the leadership, committees and staff. Having strategy in place supports a healthier more vital organization, said Randy Lavigne, Hon. AIA, Executive Director.

ASAE’s new book offers ideas to make best use of a strategic plan: *Strategic Integration: Tips, Tools, and Techniques to Move Beyond Strategic Planning and Transform Your Organization.*

**Sustainability** – Sustainability most often refers to the strength of revenue streams. An organization relying on only one or two sources of income may not be sustainable if one of the sources fails. Does the board seek to develop new reliable income streams? What is the proportion of dues to non-dues income?

Sustainability also applies to the succession of leaders and professional staff. Be sure efforts are in place to develop future leaders. Committees, chapters and emerging professionals are training grounds for future leaders.

**Relevance** – This refers to the value of the organization. Are perceptions that it is a club run by good-old-boys or a lean mean education machine? Do unique programs exist available only from the organization? Customer service should be a priority.

Today’s members expect return on investment for dues paid. A golden handcuff is a benefit of such value that retention stays high and new members are asking for access. The book, *Race for Relevance*, may be a wakeup call for organizations that do not evolve. At the Optometric Physicians of Washington a board stated, “Our association must adapt to member preferences, not expect members to adapt to our dated communication, meeting and governance styles.”

**Performance** – Performance has to do with people. Staff and volunteers have to be competent and accountable. The opposite is the oft heard phrase, “I’m just a volunteer, don’t expect much from me.” Progress will not be made without performance.

Metrics should be set to track the performance of nearly every program and effort. From attendance to membership, lobbying wins to public relations, everything can be measured.

Association DNA includes the structure, strategy, sustainability, relevance and performance that seemingly lies below the surface. Check it periodically to ensure the organization is positioned for success.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at [www.nonprofitcenter.com](http://www.nonprofitcenter.com).