Don’t let the Association Burn Down
Bob Harris, CAE

For more than a month, executives have been in crisis mode. They respond to urgent calls from members, media and government while trying to manage and govern an association.

One executive said it feels like our house has been on fire. Now it’s time to put out the fire. Spring and summer will be time to address association operations for survival and sustainability.

The intent is to be the indispensable resource for members.

1. **Be Indispensable** – Be the trusted resource. Promote the value of belonging. A few associations have seen an increase in membership during the pandemic because they have become essential. Respond to member needs by creating new services and communicating value. Help supplier members by offering new opportunities and enhancing relationships.

2. **Be Proactive** – Don’t wait. There is competition for messaging. Make a plan and act. Tell members what you are doing for them. “More than ever, the ability to take action and be ‘first to message’ is critical. Don’t let it get away from your association. Control the message, guide the message, and own the message long-term,” said Bill Pawlucy, CAE, of AssociationOptions.com.

3. **Communicate** – Avoid regurgitating what members can find elsewhere. Package information in directly applicable small bites. Avoid virus fatigue. Appoint an official spokesman, usually the chief elected or paid officer, to control the messaging.

4. **Forecast Finances** – Create a contingency budget, forecasting pandemic impact and means of association survival. Find new resources and grants through government stimulus programs. Leverage existing assets and make best use of your reserves.

5. **Pause** – Keep the existing strategic plan as a framework but pause the long-term projects. Create a 2020 recovery plan of action. Expect the topic of “pandemic and economic recovery” to be included in nearly all future planning.

6. **Ease** – Relax the governing documents. If you missed a deadline, document it and ask for forgiveness. Don’t break any laws. Parliamentary procedures should not hinder progress.

7. **Empower** – The full board of directors may not be available for meetings as they fight for their own survival. Empower the executive committee. Clarify the authority of the executive director to make urgent decisions, keeping the board informed.
8. **Govern** – A pandemic is not a license for the board to micromanage. The CEO/executive director remains responsible for administration. The board should focus on future, setting an adjusted vision, and advancing the organization’s core competencies to remain relevant. The opposite problem may be a board that is absent because they are fighting for survival of their jobs and businesses.

9. **Prioritize** – Focus on immediate needs. Now is not the time for a bylaws review, for instance. Address members’ urgent needs, in addition to survival of the association. Communicate the work of the association as a value statement to members.

10. **Abandon** - The crisis may be reason to abandon underperforming programs. Set aside inconsequential activities and lackluster committees. Be efficient and effective. This may be the right time to eliminate a quarterly magazine in favor of a bi-weekly executive bulletin.

11. **Celebrate** - Pace yourself and celebrate the achievements of staff, volunteers and board. Promote positive messages. Assure employees of their value to the association, realizing their may be changes in structure and responsibilities.

12. **Share** – Catalog good deeds. Share how the association and members are contributing during the crisis. Provide a way to recognize and share the inspiring efforts by members.

13. **Repurpose** – Gatherings and events have cancelled or postponed. Repurpose signature events using technology platforms and webinars to connect people and deliver education. Revise the foundation’s mission to include economic and pandemic recovery.

14. **Advocate** – The association knows best the members’ needs. There is competition for lawmakers’ time and money. Be innovative about how government can help members. When making the ask, offer solutions, not just the problems.

15. **Connect** – Associations are about community. Social distancing and uncertainty are isolating. Collaborate with other organizations. Connect members through webchats, listservs and town hall meetings.

This isn’t our first pandemic, that was probably the Spanish Flu in 1918. Associations are resilient, with skillsets unlike nearly any other organization. They are positioned to be strategic, resourceful, collaborative, leaders, inform, connect, advocate, educate and to serve as the trusted source to members and community.

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