

FIVE DIMENSIONS OF ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT

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Associations have an important impact on our world in all its dimensions: economic, legal, political, social, cultural, technological, as well as the natural physical environment. This influence is produced by:

- (1) Creating a legislative voice for public policy to reflect the knowledge and commitments of its constituents,
- (2) Building networks of experts, and
- (3) Strengthening a field of endeavor through research, publications, and communication.

To accomplish all this, Associations provide programs, products, services, and events – and manage member participation. Association Executives are deeply involved in their member communities and the larger civic community as well. No wonder, then, that much has been written about how Association Executives manage it all. These pages summarize the five dimensions of Association management.

1. MISSION

Mission comes first - even before leadership. A statement of mission is more than a statement of purpose (which is usually about viability and success), and more than a statement of vision (which is usually about the future that is desired). A **mission** – coming from the same root as missile or missive – is a statement about **what is sent, or provided**, to the community of members. Your mission statement is a statement of the value you intend to **deliver** to your members. In these changing times, it is important to revisit this mission statement every 3-5 years to see if it needs to be revised or refocused. You'll want to articulate a clear service mission, specifying *what* benefits will be provided, *who* will receive those benefits, and what *value* the benefits are expected to deliver to those recipients.

2. PERFORMANCE

Association Executives work with their Boards to define a long-term future for the Association as a whole. Think **results**. What kind of outcomes do you want to see in the member community, and for all the constituencies you intend to impact? This constitutes the performance of an Association. Your Association's performance will be observable – and measurable – in five different areas.

Mission Performance: These are the results that demonstrate your mission in action. All the products, services, and communications can be “trued up” to reflect this highest purpose.

Constituency Performance: All your programs, services, and activities should show your strong commitment to your constituencies. Establish and maintain a permanent, ongoing process of feedback-listening to learn what is important to your members and other customers. This goes beyond asking them if they like what you already give them. You need to know some of the daily challenges they face in their world. What result-performance do *they* want, independent of what you currently provide?

Marketing Performance: Most Associations have barely skimmed the surface of all the actual and potential markets and customers they might have. You can use your mission to formulate a fresh marketing strategy, increasing the usefulness of the feedback you get about prospective customers and their interests. This feeds innovative thinking and helps implement new results desired by the marketplace: programs, promotions, and prices.

Financial Performance: Financial results need to be an integral part of all staff and volunteer jobs. By studying the real-world value of all your programs, products, and services, you can see where to make improvements, where you can start new things, and where to stop those that have outlived their usefulness.

Manager and Staff Performance: Your people are the heart of the difference your Association makes in your member community and beyond. You can define that difference in terms of the results they produce in each of the other four areas of 'performance', listed above. Specify those results so everyone can celebrate the accomplishment of improved performance for mission, constituency, markets, and finance.

3. ALLIANCES

Your Community of Impact = All the people you intend to serve

+ All the *other* people who are *already* serving those people

in a way that is consistent or aligned with your mission.

Formal or informal alliances are a major pathway to strengthening or expanding an Association's 'Community of Impact'. The Association Executive and Board members can forge powerful working relationships with businesses, universities, government agencies, and other non-profit organizations. These relationships can extend your reach into the community that is vital to the success your members.

The people who are doing similar work are your natural relationships. At first blush, they may seem to be competitors, but the wise Association leader will steadily expand these relationships to create a valuable network of member-relevant organizations. Your network of allies can focus on short-term objectives, long-term commitments, or simply remain potential resources for creating a desired future. Formal and informal alliances, partnerships,

and collaborative efforts can be developed for specific issues or long-term coalitions around visions, missions, or services.

Alliances can strengthen lobbying effectiveness by increasing visibility and influence. Inter-organizational alliances are powerful political tools, increasing leverage and knowledge bases. Compatible organizations also support each other's work through respect, awareness, and project sharing.

Finally, formal or informal alliances will increase the size of your supportive community, and will educate and inform people about your impact and their opportunities for taking action that is beneficial for your members. Some of these relationships can be extended to develop new high-value products, services, or events for your members. Alliances can increase benefit to your members, expand *your* market, and create new relationships for the fulfillment of your mission.

4. STRATEGY

A good strategic plan can carry an Association forward for 3-5 years, provided it has 'Action Plans' associated with every key strategy decision. Annual updates to the strategic plan will build a future for your Association's vital mission performance and for its long-term financial viability. This cyclical planning process will also help develop better internal structures, processes, and communications to produce and manage mission performance.

The Action Plans that accompany every annual update to your strategic plan are critically important to support good Association management. There are seven aspects of good strategic Action Planning:

- (1) **Goals:** Concentrate on a few mission-critical goals. Be sure that all managers, staff, and volunteers have goals that are aligned with these high-level goals. This keeps everyone's work 'mission-relevant'.
- (2) **Accountability:** Have your executive and staff responsibilities clearly spelled out for the kinds of results they will produce. Support your staff to 'keep score' on their mission-relevant performance, so they can build the 'results history' for the Association.
- (3) **Work plans:** Have managers and staff map out ways they plan to reach their mission-relevant goals. Include time frames, communications required, and responsibilities or agreements for final results. You can use the same work plan format for all staff and volunteers to continuously clarify jobs, assignments, and evaluation feedback.
- (4) **Tools:** Use a common scheduling system, and standardize certain types of communications as much as possible. Have staff members and volunteers who are experts in their jobs create standard communication forms or checklists to spell out the best ways to do recurring tasks. This improves internal communication, and also helps train new people in doing jobs properly.
- (5) **Evaluation:** Evaluate all five kinds of performance regularly: mission, constituency, market, financial, and manager-staff results. You can even evaluate the planning and evaluation process itself. One job of the Association Executive

is to make sure the performance results for the Association as a whole are visible to everyone – so go ahead and hang that chart in the lunchroom.

- (6) **Resource development:** Work with your members and other funding sources to improve *their* performance or their standing in their community. As you expand your Community of Impact, you take the message of your mission out beyond its traditional boundaries.
- (7) **New product/service development:** Review your non-dues revenue products and programs annually as you review constituent feedback. Re-think the needs of your constituencies and your actual and potential market. Your financial future is vitally important – if you aren't financially viable, you have no capacity to give value to your members.

5. RESOURCES

Every Association has four primary resources, and each needs to be managed to obtain real leverage in creating a successful future.

- **Budget:** Multi-year budgets are organized by project or function, with cost and profit centers. Budgets are monitored and amended monthly – start with wish lists, then reduce it to priorities. Cash flow is monitored too. Keep *everyone* informed about what's happening financially – find a way to present the basic numbers in a simple and easy-to-understand format. This can serve as a compass for making sound financial and mission-relevant decisions.
- **Training:** Train your staff and key volunteers in the jobs and tasks that are important, as well as in expanding their capacities for leadership, productivity, strategic thinking, communication, and service. These are the people who are your Association's future leaders, and they will ultimately be building long-term productive relationships with new members, allies, and customers.
- **Organization:** Evaluate all Association functions and activities annually to identify what systems or practices should be improved or abandoned. Review your mission-critical jobs to see what clarification or support is needed to get better results and improved communications.
- **People:** Put in place enough routine communications to support key players (Board, Staff, and Volunteers) in getting – and staying – aligned for mission results, strategy, and work plans. Simplify meetings, memos, newsletters, and other communication devices to make it easy for everyone to do the right thing. Keep expanding your community to go beyond members: other organizations and individuals offer fresh opportunities for growth and development.

Associations are valuable systems of relationship and progress in our society. Their management is too important to be left to chance. Good Association management is a body of practices that improves over time. It's worth the effort and investment to operate more soundly as you bring increased value to Members, Board, and Staff.