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Building a **‘Foresight First’ Board of Directors**

Editor’s Note: Association CEOs with 5+ years in the executive role can experience foresight in action at CalSAE’s Insights Executive Conference on February 16-17, 2017.

Association boards in every industry and profession continue to grapple with the increasingly complicated, sometimes complex and frequently difficult decisions required to build their organizations to thrive in the years ahead. The unforgiving nature of this emerging context makes this an appropriate time to reflect on the most generative governing orientation association boards can adopt to prepare their organizations for the future. This process will require all association decision-makers to reexamine their most cherished assumptions and reshape their long-standing mindsets about what it means to govern.

The continued proliferation of smartphones (six billion expected to be in use worldwide by 2020), as well as tablets and wearable devices, has created significant momentum for a “mobile first” approach to web design, i.e., a specific choice to place primary emphasis on the interface of growing importance. Similarly, in a time of profound, intense and accelerating societal transformation, association boards must seriously consider embracing a “foresight first” approach to governing to maximize their ability to anticipate and prepare their organizations and stakeholders for a full range of plausible futures, including the most unfavorable and even unthinkable possibilities.

Why Foresight Matters

Why should association boards adopt a foresight first orientation? To answer that question, we need to explore three fundamental reasons why foresight matters to associations and must be handled as both a strategic responsibility of board service and a moral obligation to the stakeholders that boards serve.

• **Foresight is an essential practice for building stakeholder trust:** According to a Gallup poll published in June 2016, the American people have a very low level of confidence in several national institutions, including the

government, media and big business. Associations cannot afford to join their ranks, which is a genuine concern if their primary focus is on addressing internal organizational challenges instead of working on stakeholders’ problems, needs and outcomes. After all, association stakeholders invest themselves and their limited resources in associations largely on a discretionary basis, and most have abundant access to good enough and even superior solutions, services and support through their own network connections. Associations must make a more empathic case for why their stakeholders should enter into relationships with them in the first place.

The work of foresight can help redefine the way associations build lasting relationships with their stakeholders through a focus on trusted and mutually beneficial co-creation. By prioritizing the effort to understand and prepare for a number of plausible futures, association decision-makers can develop actionable insights for creating distinctive value and, in collaboration with stakeholders and their networks, they can develop strategies and design business models that are both resilient against the forces of transformation and adaptive to shifting conditions.

• **Foresight is a fundamental act of stewardship:** At a time when many observers place a premium on shaping the actions of individual leaders, effective governing in The Age of Transformation requires association boards to adopt a truly collective approach to building thriving organizations that is grounded in a shared sense of responsibility for stewardship. As stewards, boards must be able to set aside political concerns and personal considerations so they can work together to leave their organizations better than how they found them. This kind of cooperation is critical to building a strong team dynamic within association boards, and will help inspire other stakeholders to make their own unique contributions to stewardship.

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and data-driven approach to governing can deprive senior decision-makers of the more holistic perspective they will need to make genuinely wise choices to help both their organizations and their stakeholders thrive. Association boards operating as stewards, however, benefit from taking the long view, and gathering and situating valuable data in that more expansive context, so they can develop a much richer understanding of the environment in which their organizations will operate in the years ahead.

• **Foresight is an intentional process of learning with the future:** Whether association boards realize it or not, their decision-making processes are significantly influenced by largely invisible and often counterproductive assumptions about their organizations and stakeholders, as well as the world around them. In some cases, these orthodox beliefs have been in use for years or decades and are still deeply felt by many stakeholders even though they are no longer true or helpful. Orthodoxies are significant obstacles to the serious, on-going learning that all association decision-makers must pursue in a time of societal transformation, and need to be carefully examined and questioned at every opportunity.

Association boards can develop a consistent practice of foresight through which they pursue a cycle of learning defined by the three connected practices of 1) sense-making, i.e., building an intellectual understanding of plausible futures through thoughtful exploration, inquiry and dialogue, 2) meaning-making, i.e., probing the specific positive and negative implications of plausible futures for their associations, stakeholders and fields of work, including their impact on orthodox beliefs and 3) decision-making, i.e. bringing both intellectual understanding and real-world meaning to bear on present-day decision-making with the intention of anticipating and preparing for a full range of plausible futures. Decision-making is not the end of learning, but the beginning of the next

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and all subsequent learning cycles that boards will pursue as they continue to guide their organizations through societal transformation today and in the years ahead.

Governing Foresight First

From the beginning of the effort to build “foresight first” boards, association board chairs and other officers, directors and CEOs must internalize and unite behind three critical commitments. This transition from a more traditional governing orientation will require considerable care, prudence and focus to ensure it is fully implemented and sustainable over time.

• **Commit to identifying, selecting and developing foresight first directors:** While traditional board selection criteria typically emphasize director skill sets, governing foresight first is mostly about identifying directors with the right mindsets. This approach to governing requires directors who are comfortable with complexity and uncertainty, and who bring insatiable curiosity, a high degree of humility and a willingness to express personal vulnerability. In short, association boards need people who are demonstrably

more enthusiastic and capable learners sitting in every seat. Governing foresight first is also another admonition to association boards that they must work harder to become truly diverse and inclusive along every conceivable dimension to maximize their ability to learn with the future.

Selecting potential foresight first directors must be a rigorous process that fully reveals their fitness for board service. Societal transformation has raised the stakes for all associations, and those making a voluntary choice to serve also must make the crucial choice to bring all of their capabilities to the board table at all times. Once foresight first directors are selected, all directors must participate together in challenging board development experiences that build their capacity and fully prepare them to pursue the work of foresight.

• **Commit to adopting a foresight first governing intent:** The usual outcome of strategy as an exercise in planning is a strategic plan, customarily a rather long, detailed document that is much less useful in a world experiencing accelerating transformation than perhaps it was in the far more stable and predictable environment of strategic planning’s heyday more than 50 years ago. In contrast, the outcome of strategy

as a process of learning is strategic intent, which is best expressed as a shared organizational understanding of the outcomes that strategy intends to achieve, with necessary adjustments, adaptations and pivots made based on learning with both association stakeholders and the still unfolding future.

To make clear what outcomes they are trying to achieve through their stewardship, foresight first boards can express their “governing intent” through a stewardship statement. As I described it in my article in the January/February 2016 issue of *Associations Now*, the stewardship statement is a useful way for boards to “crystallize the deeper significance of their work for themselves, as well as for staff and other volunteers, and...communicate clearly about the critical role that foresight plays in achieving the full impact of effective stewardship.” Making a strong link between governing intent and strategic intent will help unlock the full potential of the foresight first approach to governing.

• **Commit to designing a foresight first governing process:** As long as they observe the necessary legal and administrative constraints created by governments at all levels, watchdog groups and other interested players in the association/non-profit sector, governing is a compelling design opportunity for associations. The foresight first approach offers association boards and CEOs a learning-focused platform from which to rethink every aspect of the board governing process and workflow to minimize wasted resources and maximize the impact of the time, energy and attention that all contributors devote to the work.

Of particular importance in designing a foresight first governing process is ensuring a disciplined focus on the future, which means key decision-makers will need to consider the most appropriate methods for handling board work that is more retrospective in its content, such as financial updates and documents, with the highest standards of oversight integrity and quality while not distracting from governing intent. In addition, board chairs, other officers and CEOs will want to think with their boards about effective ways to organize for foresight first work, especially the presentation of board learning and information resources in more visually appealing, understandable and actionable forms.

In the words of the late Barbara Jordan, a former United States Representative from Texas, “for all of its uncertainty, we cannot flee the future,” and associations and their boards are no exception. The Age of Transformation is upon us and it is long overdue for both staff and voluntary participants in the work of governing to fully understand and accept this vital fact. Right now is the time for all associations to begin building foresight first boards that can help navigate their organizations, stakeholders and fields through the powerful uncertainties and exciting possibilities of the arriving future. Is your association’s board ready to take it to the next level?

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