CalSAE
ADVANCING TOGETHER

the Executive

Thinking and Acting Beyond Orthodoxy

Preparing your association to move past tradition

As they continue to grapple with the disruptive impact wrought by the powerful forces of societal transformation, association decision-makers can build their capacity for effective stewardship and increase organizational resilience by actively questioning orthodox beliefs. Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions that boards, CEOs and other contributors hold that define what their associations are supposed to be and what they are supposed to do. While all organizations operate on the basis of some enduring and largely unchallenged orthodoxies, associations are legacy organizations with an unusually deep reverence for tradition. In this context, orthodoxy becomes an even more significant barrier to the meaningful learning, generative conversation and confident decision-making that is essential to preparing associations for a dynamic and uncertain future.

To minimize the impact of this threat, association decision-makers must collaborate to nurture a shared and on-going awareness of orthodoxy in all organizational conversations. This article explains a straightforward process decision-makers can use to identify, examine and question their most cherished assumptions with the desired outcome of thinking and acting beyond orthodoxy for the long-term benefit of their organizations and their stakeholders.

Thinking and Acting Beyond Orthodoxy

By Jeff De Cagna, FASAE

Identifying Orthodoxy

The integral first step in identifying orthodox beliefs is accepting that they are present in every conversation whether we realize it or not. This notion is expressed well by the quote, sometimes attributed to the 1960s Canadian intellectual Marshall McLuhan, "I don't know who invented water, but it probably wasn't a fish."

Just like fish in water, association decision-makers and their organizations are fully immersed in orthodoxy mostly without realizing it. This is one of the characteristics of orthodoxy that makes it so dangerous: it hides in plain sight since decision-makers tend to think of both personal and organizational assumptions not as "orthodox beliefs," but simply as the accepted wisdom of "how we do things around here." Moreover, in most organizations, the fact that orthodox beliefs are never talked about is also never discussed, rendering the entire conversation as an "undiscussable undiscussable." This is not a responsible approach to organizational stewardship. It undermines the strategic legitimacy of the governing group and can create lasting damage in the association's relationship with its stakeholders

Becoming truly vigilant in identifying orthodoxy begins with a willingness to ask two critical yet deceptively difficult questions: 1) is what I just said orthodoxy? and 2) is what I just heard orthodoxy? The first question is hard for some decision-makers to ask because they may interpret it as a criticism of their interest (or lack thereof) in new thinking. In truth, holding orthodox beliefs is an unavoidable part of the human condition, and the choice to actively challenge those beliefs is a strong indicator of both personal self-awareness and a genuine openness to alternative perspectives.

Posing the second question can be even harder for decision-makers because they may see it as impolite or worry that it will offend a boss or valued colleague. The desire to remain included in the group can overwhelm the imperative for honest dialogue. By starting the conversation with their own orthodox beliefs, however, board members, CEOs and senior executives can demonstrate that the necessary work of surfacing orthodoxy is not about casting doubts on the integrity or motivations of other contributors. Instead, it is an effort wholly focused on identifying the deep-seated assumptions that are no longer helpful to or may prevent the organization from thriving in the years ahead.

Examining Orthodoxy

Once decision-makers identify the orthodoxies of greatest concern, the process of examining each belief involves a more focused and, hopefully, highly productive conversational process around a different set of questions: 1) why do we hold this belief?, 2) is this belief still true? and 3) if it is still true, is it helpful to us? The first question invites decision-makers to trace back each belief to its original source and reflect on its evolution over time. This part of the process can be challenging since most organizational orthodoxies are built up over many decades, and current decision-makers

> Orthodoxy becomes an even more significant barrier to the meaningful learning, generative conversation and confident decision-making that is essential to preparing associations for a dynamic and uncertain future.

may not have a complete understanding of that history. Nevertheless, it is a worthwhile endeavor to pursue if it leads to valuable insights on how a long-standing assumption can come to exert significant influence over internal decision-making without most decision-makers even realizing it.

The second and third questions are about more directly testing whether an orthodox belief may prevent the organization from thriving in the future. All orthodoxies are not created equal, i.e., not every orthodoxy is wrong or bad by definition. Indeed, some orthodox beliefs may still be true even years after they were first articulated. (The orthodox belief that we need to breathe to survive, for example, remains absolutely true, helpful and worth following.) At the same time, some senior decision-makers may take for granted the essential truth and utility of other orthodox beliefs, such as an organizational focus on becoming relevant or growing membership, even when there are good reasons to challenge them on both counts. The fundamental purpose of this conversational process, then, is to push decision-makers beyond a mere awareness and acknowledgement of the existence of orthodoxy to a sustained and energetic exploration of orthodoxy's long-term impact on decision-makers themselves, the association and its stakeholders.

Questioning Orthodoxy

The provocative work of closely examining an association's orthodox beliefs flows quite naturally into the process of vigorously questioning them at all times. After determining whether an organization's deep-seated assumptions are still true and helpful, the remaining core question for decision-makers to consider is how the association will continue to think and act beyond orthodoxy in the years ahead. Even true and helpful orthodox beliefs can be further questioned, refined or flipped to arrive at more compelling ways of doing business that resonate better with the future. For example, questioning the orthodox belief that innovation is primarily a cultural intervention may inspire senior decision-makers to shift their thinking and embrace business model innovation as a more effective approach for integrating a commitment to purposeful action with the need for a responsible level of profitability. In the end, no orthodox beliefs can be held so sacrosanct that neither decision-makers nor stakeholders are permitted to raise questions about them.

Questioning orthodoxy also must be an explicit and consistent part of the decision-making process for boards, CEOs and senior executives. The presence of unquestioned orthodoxy creates a form of unconscious bias that is sure to have an adverse impact on an association's decision-making outcomes. For example, boards frequently make decisions about issues related to membership without giving much consideration to their own orthodox beliefs on this issue. Since association board members tend to have very positive membership experiences that lead them to greater and more sustained involvement over time, these decision-makers may be less inclined to entertain fresh strategic options that will shift their organizations' focus away from membership-centric business models, even when those new directions have the potential to create much thicker value for stakeholders. In a world in flux, then, ensuring their organizations are not held captive to orthodoxy as they prepare for the future is among the most important stewardship responsibilities for association decision-makers in the years ahead.

For most associations today, orthodoxy is the persistent and distracting noise of a past that is never coming back. For association decision-makers, personal and organizational orthodox beliefs are a subtle yet powerful form of internal resistance to the full embrace of the myriad opportunities created by relentless societal transformation. As boards, CEOs and other decision-makers consider what's next for their associations, they must pay very close attention to the insidious influence of orthodoxy in organizational learning, conversation and decision-making. To prepare their organizations and stakeholders to thrive going forward, association decision-makers must make the work of nurturing a deep capacity for thinking and acting beyond orthodoxy an immediate and ongoing priority.

Jeff De Cagna, FASAE, is chief strategist and founder of Principled Innovation LLC, located in Reston, Virginia. He can be reached at jeff@principledinnovation.com or on Twitter @pinnovation.