

# Reinventing the Work of Governing for The Age of Transformation

“We grow in time to trust the future for our answers.”  
—Ruth Benedict

In an article published in the August 2007 issue of *Associations Now*, I argued that associations need an approach to governing better suited to the novel and dynamic 21st century context in which they operate. Here is a brief excerpt of what I wrote at the time:

*Far too many CEOs report that governance remains the chief obstacle to moving ahead with the business of creating what's next for their organizations. Yet association leaders continue to fine-tune the mechanisms of their existing governance systems, when the top priority should be provoking radically different mindsets among those who govern. In short, a successful future for associations will not suddenly materialize from the ongoing struggle to perfect governance as we know it.*

Nearly 10 years later, most associations continue to perform maintenance on their legacy governing mechanics through bylaws amendments, process adjustments and other structural revisions. While these measures often are needed to repair or remove obsolete internal routines, they do little to infuse antiquated governing systems with the resilience required to withstand the deep and intense impact of societal transformation. Instead, fulfilling the imperative to build organizations capable of thriving in the face of increased complexity, uncertainty and volatility demands

the fundamental reinvention of how association boards think about and undertake the work of governing. The desired endgame of this reinvention is a tight and energetic focus by association boards of directors on the work of anticipating, understanding and preparing for a full range of plausible futures for their organizations, stakeholders and the fields they serve.

As is frequently the case, however, bringing about this kind of comprehensive reinvention is easier said than done. To unleash and realize the full potential of a more dynamic approach to governing, association boards must choose to fully internalize three core shifts:

#### **Foresight First**

In an article published in the November/December 2016 issue of this magazine, *CalSAE's The Executive*, I explored the importance of foresight and the “foresight first” governing orientation, including its multiple functions as 1) a guiding belief for the identification and selection of directors, 2) the substantive

connection between the outcomes that boards intend to accomplish through stewardship (governing intent) and the stakeholder value that associations will strive to create and deliver through strategic intent and 3) a learning-centric approach for streamlining the work of governing to keep boards' focused on whatever may come next.

Adopting a foresight first approach to governing is a natural and necessary extension of the board's duty of foresight. The far-reaching implications of societal transformation will continue to raise the stakes for all organizations, compelling a much higher and more reliable level of vigilance than most associations currently exercise. Only boards of directors bring the requisite combination of stewardship responsibility, continuing opportunities for learning and decision-making authority to sustain a consistent practice of foresight as the primary focus of their work.

#### **Networked Interdependence**

Most associations today are fully independent only in the legal sense, i.e., they are separately incorporated or organized under some other standalone legal structure. In every other respect, including program delivery, public



BY JEFF DE CAGNA,  
FRSA, FASAE

*Editor's Note: Jeff will share additional insight as a content leader at ELEVATE 2017 April 3-5 in Newport Beach*  
**Details online at [calsae.org](http://calsae.org).**

policy efforts, strategy and business model and the use of technology, most associations are connected to other organizations through partnership arrangements, formal or informal networks and/or professional/industry ecosystems. These interdependent relationships are often deeply embedded in the way associations conduct day-to-day operations, yet their broader implications for value creation, financial performance and the work of foresight may not always be fully appreciated as part of the board's governing work.

Acting on a mindset of networked interdependence challenges association boards of directors to recognize the ripple effects and unintended consequences of their governing work for the entire continuum of stakeholders to which their organizations are connected through both emerging and enduring relationships. On the one hand, boards are expected to prioritize their well-understood fiduciary responsibilities to their own organizations and their most important stakeholders. On the other hand, their organizations have many critical commitments and strategic priorities around thriving that can be achieved only through interdependent learning, resource sharing, financial investments and decision-making. Boards must work to balance these competing (and

sometimes conflicting) concerns, and drafting shared principles that keep networked interdependence at top of mind is a useful practice to adopt.

#### **Augmented Stewardship**

As part of their work, association boards are expected to review considerable amounts of information, often on subjects with which they have limited familiarity. In addition, board information is frequently presented in formats that are not conducive to building the necessary confidence for making prudent decisions. While boards certainly can seek guidance from their advisors and staff partners, such recommendations will come with some measure of human bias, unintentional or otherwise. To overcome these concerns, associations must begin experimenting with applying new technologies to the work of governing with the aim of strengthening their boards' decision-making capabilities.

In a 2015 report on technology tipping points, the World Economic Forum posited that an artificial intelligence (A.I.) machine would serve on a corporate board of directors by 2026. Whether or not this specific prediction comes to fruition, the growing impact of smart technologies is a crucial development in the long-term evolution of association boards toward "augmented stewardship," i.e.,

*continued on page 26*

continued from page 17

the enhancement of human judgment through the use technology platforms (what I refer to as “governtech”) that can relieve decision-makers of unnecessary cognitive burdens, such as the review of dense and complicated financial documents. Far from replacing human beings, augmented stewardship is all about nurturing the growth of directors as capable stewards by bringing greater simplicity and focus to the governing process through the full integration of technology.

In addition to the three core shifts described above, there is one additional barrier that must be surmounted in order to reinvent governing for the future: the continued fragmentation of human attention. We live in a world in which nearly all association decision-makers are experiencing some level of distraction in their personal and professional lives, an intolerable condition that puts both the work of foresight and organizational thriving in serious jeopardy. To counter this threat, boards must collaborate with their staff partners to limit fragmentation by focusing on the quality and content of the “director experience” (DX).

Across the world of organizations today, there is considerable discussion of the importance of designing high impact experiences for users, customers, members and even employees. Directors serving on association boards deserve no less consideration. Board presiding officers and CEOs, in particular, need to show respect for the generous choice all directors make to devote their attention by thinking deeply about the DX that will maximize the beneficial impact of that attention on their organizations, as well as inspire the board. It certainly will require boards to let go of administrivia, micromanagement and any work that can be handled more efficiently and effectively by other means, including through the application of technology. It will require boards to adopt approaches, mindsets and tools that enable their focus on the future, as well as the sustained investment of time, energy and attention (and perhaps other resources) to practice using them well. We must transform governing from a time-pressured, disjointed and often mind-numbing process into a form of deep work that is consistently consequential in its orientation, stimulating in its content and performed at the highest

possible level by voluntary contributors with the support of staff, all of whom are committed to achieving individual and collective mastery.

Over the last 10 years, we have been witnesses to considerable societal transformation, and there is still much more to come. Why has the work of governing not kept pace? To paraphrase the words of cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict quoted at the beginning of this article, it may be because we have not yet grown to trust the future for our answers. Starting now, we need to harness the forces of transformation for the benefit of our organizations and stakeholders, and reinventing the work of governing is one of the most essential and exciting opportunities we can pursue. Through our shared commitment to this critical work, we will not only come to trust the future for our answers, we help to create them.

---

**Jeff De Cagna, FRSA, FASAE**, is executive advisor for Foresight First LLC, located in Reston, Virginia. He can be reached online at <http://foresightfirst.io>, on chat <http://chat.center/foresightfirst> and on Twitter @dutyofforesight.

Uncomplicated. Uncongested. Unspoiled.

Situated between San Francisco and Sacramento, Fairfield is just minutes from wine country.

**Book your next meeting, conference, tradeshow or social event in Fairfield, CA.**

Contact Christian at [christian@VisitFairfieldCA.com](mailto:christian@VisitFairfieldCA.com)

**California Fairfield**  
Conferences & Visitors Bureaus

[/VisitFairfieldCA](https://www.facebook.com/VisitFairfieldCA) [@fairfield4fun](https://twitter.com/fairfield4fun) [/VisitFairfieldCA](https://www.instagram.com/VisitFairfieldCA)

## INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

### ASSOCIATION SOLUTIONS

Naylor Association Solutions ..... Inside Front Cover  
[www.naylor.com](http://www.naylor.com)

### CASINO/RESORTS

Atlantis Casino Resort ..... 15  
[www.atlantiscasino.com](http://www.atlantiscasino.com)

### CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAUS

Fairfield Conference & Visitors Bureau ..... 26  
[www.visitfairfieldca.com](http://www.visitfairfieldca.com)

Sacramento CVB ..... Inside Back Cover  
[www.visitsacramento.com](http://www.visitsacramento.com)

Sonoma County Tourism ..... Outside Back Cover  
[www.sonomacounty.com/meetings](http://www.sonomacounty.com/meetings)

Walnut Creek Convention & Visitors Bureau ..... 24  
[www.visitwalnutcreek.org](http://www.visitwalnutcreek.org)

### EDUCATION & CERTIFICATION

Naylor Association Solutions ..... 11  
[www.naylor.com](http://www.naylor.com)

### MEETING FACILITIES & CONFERENCE CENTERS

The Redwoods In Yosemite ..... 10  
[www.redwoodsinyosemite.com](http://www.redwoodsinyosemite.com)