

How Association Leaders Can Think Differently About the Future- Forces Beyond Our Control Will Reshape the Human Experience of Associating

By Jeff De Cagna

The year 2030 is little more than a decade and a half away, and as association leaders begin to look toward this future milestone, they must prepare for an accelerating and intensifying surge of serious challenges to their long-standing beliefs about what it will take for their organizations to thrive. Associations now operate in what I call The Age of Transformation, a long-term phase of profound societal renewal and reinvention during which powerful forces far beyond our control will disrupt and reshape nearly every aspect of human endeavor, including the human experience of associating.

To build their organizations to thrive under these novel and unforgiving conditions, association leaders need to adopt different mindsets to inform judgment, guide decision-making and take action as they strive to create business models that are both adaptive and resilient. These six ways of thinking will help association boards, Chief Staff Officers (CSOs) and C-Suite executives have more productive conversations about the strategic and operational implications of The Age of Transformation, as well as develop more generative perspectives on how their organizations can capitalize on the myriad possibilities it will continue to create.

Strategic legitimacy—In my e-book, *Associations Unorthodox: Six Really Radical Shifts Toward the Future*, I argued that association boards must act to reassert their legitimacy in the eyes of future stakeholders by demonstrating that they understand how the forces of transformation create both new options and new difficulties for those stakeholders. Strategic legitimacy also requires a shared commitment within the governing group to accelerate the association's internal rate of progress relative to the pace of transformation outside the organization.

A critical element for establishing strategic legitimacy is the embrace of strategy as a process of learning. For decades, association leaders have found greater comfort in pursuing the work of strategy as an exercise in planning, based on assumptions about knowledge (we know everything we need to know to plan) and control (we need a plan so we can have control over what happens next) that are no longer valid in a volatile and uncertain environment. To build a deep understanding of transformation, and by extension demonstrate strategic legitimacy, leaders must be willing to concede that they know less than they think, and must act to capitalize on the beneficial effects of control flowing away from institutions and toward individuals.

Situated stewardship—Association boards have significant legal and fiduciary responsibilities to which they must devote their attention. While these oversight and risk mitigation functions are necessary and will remain in place as long as third parties wish to scrutinize association activities, they do not exist in a vacuum. Governing groups need to situate the work of stewardship within the dynamic context of transformation, and constantly balance the risks of inertia in preparing for the future with the specific risks of any particular course of action.

Situated stewardship challenges governing groups to support sustained capacity building for innovation and expanded investment in targeted opportunity spaces. Instead of narrowing strategic options based on reflexive concerns about financial or other forms of short-term risk, situated stewardship places greater emphasis on how associations can provide meaningful long-term support to their stakeholders as they pursue their most important personal and professional outcomes.

Digital ubiquity—The growing power and impact of new communications and computing technologies is the most disruptive force animating The Age of Transformation. With billions of smartphone and tablet devices (and counting) in use worldwide, more and more people are able to associate by participating in an always-on flow of online conversations and social interactions available anywhere and at any time. Our continued immersion in these technology-mediated experiences has made digital a ubiquitous and game-changing phenomenon for our society.

Despite the advent of digital ubiquity, however, most association boards have been slow to embrace social, mobile and cloud technologies as essential elements of the next platform for creating radical new value. The vast majority of senior association leaders remain more comfortable interacting face-to-face than in digital space. Nevertheless, governing groups have a responsibility to cultivate a shared point of view on how digital ubiquity is transforming the professions, industries and fields their associations represent, and to identify the best approaches for using digital tools to serve their stakeholders in fresh and compelling ways.

Informed empathy—One of the valuable by-products of digital ubiquity is the massive growth in the data generated by our interactions with devices and with one another when using those platforms. The arrival of Big Data, including the exponential increases in computing power required to comprehend their meaning, is leading some associations to consider so-called “data driven” strategies. While it is wise to bring more data into strategic decision-making, association leaders need more than data to develop the imaginative strategies their organizations will need to thrive in The Age of Transformation.

Creative strategic decisions are grounded in “informed empathy,” a thoughtful infusion of insights developed from data combined with divergent perspectives cultivated from an empathic understanding of stakeholder problems, needs and outcomes. Association leaders can use empathic insights to identify and create meaning around new opportunity spaces, while data help with making sense of and quantifying the potential of those spaces. Governing groups need to adopt informed empathy as an integrative mindset for original thinking about what is possible for their associations in the years ahead.

Network thinking—Still another outgrowth of increased digital interaction in our daily lives is greater involvement in personal and professional networks. In a highly connected world, association stakeholders do not stand by themselves. They belong to many different networks, and their preferences and choices are shaped by the complex influences of diverse network connections. Association leaders need to develop a more expansive understanding of the meaning and impact of these network relationships, including the distinctive forms of value they create.

Moreover, association leaders should treat the network as the fundamental structure enabling innovation in the 21st century. This principle demands more intentional and strategic outreach beyond the association’s traditional boundaries to expand organizational networks and build new collaborative relationships. For decades, strategy as an exercise in planning has encouraged governing groups to focus first on the constraints created competitive concerns, among other factors. In contrast, network thinking invites leaders to organize for collaborative advantage as an inventive and sustainable approach for creating radical new value by expanding the universe of potential contributors.

Design orientation—While a design orientation is often linked with aesthetics and new product development, it has broader implications. Design thinking is a holistic method for tackling business challenges that integrates analysis (breaking problems down into their parts) with synthesis (pulling ideas together into a new whole). Instead of being limited only to options that already exist, a design orientation helps leaders generate new possibilities, often by recombining specific elements taken from existing options with new ideas.

There is no better way for governing groups to create a more vibrant future for their organizations than to design it. By embracing a design orientation, leaders can create new and better alternatives for conducting every aspect of association work, including the work of governing. A unique opportunity for association leaders to pursue is designing business models and systems for creating new value that capitalize on the loss of control and can increase their organizations' influence with stakeholders and their networks as prospective partners for meaningful collaboration.

As association leaders begin to look ahead to the year 2030, it is simply imperative that they view the new world emerging right before their eyes in a genuinely new way. The past must be left where it belongs, and devotion to legacy must no longer be erected as an insurmountable obstacle to real and necessary progress. ***At long last, it is now time for association leaders to think differently about the future.*** The six mindsets presented here will make that more possible, so leaders can make The Age of Transformation the beginning of what's next for their organizations, and not just the end of what was.