

Embracing the Duty of Foresight: Part III

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By Jeff De Cagna • April 27, 2018

This is my third Duty of Foresight column for Association Adviser, and the third in a three-part series I began posting in February to explain the duty of foresight for association boards and create a context for future columns. You can find [Part I here](#) and [Part II here](#).

In Part III, I will examine how orthodox beliefs about association governing make it more difficult for boards to shift their work toward embracing the duty of foresight.

The Hidden Influence of Orthodoxy

Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works. Over many decades, these unexamined assumptions have been inculcated into our associations, as well as the people who are a part of them. Orthodoxies are mostly invisible and yet exert a formidable hidden influence over the direction of organizational conversation and decision-making. While all organizations operate based on some set of enduring and largely unchallenged orthodox beliefs, associations are legacy groups that feel an unusually deep reverence for tradition. In this context, orthodoxy functions as an even more significant barrier to the generative process of learning with the future.

Orthodoxy knows no boundaries and touches every aspect of association work, including the work of governing. The current governing approaches pursued by most associations are based on numerous orthodox beliefs that are profoundly detrimental to the effort to embrace the duty of foresight and strengthen board performance. Let's consider three of the most common and counterproductive orthodox beliefs:

- **Time is the board's most precious resource:** The widespread notion that association board meetings should be as short as possible, even if that means conducting more than a few meetings each year, is based on the orthodox belief that time is the board's most important and precious commodity and should not be wasted. No one questions that most directors are busy people or that their time is limited. Nevertheless, it is the board's collective attention on the work of governing that is the inherently scarcer and more valuable resource. For most directors, their attention, i.e., the capacity to provide sustained concentration, is highly fragmented due to their many personal, professional and other commitments, a condition often exacerbated by the constant use of mobile devices and other technology tools. To develop and pursue a consistent practice of foresight, however, boards of directors must bring more of their attention (and their time) to learning with the future.
- **Short-term concerns matter more than long-term thinking:** The orthodox beliefs of corporate governance shape the way association boards function as well, especially

when it comes to prioritizing short-term issues over long-term considerations. Public company boards place outsized emphasis on daily stock prices, quarterly earnings reports and maximizing shareholder value. Similarly, many association boards become apprehensive about monthly or quarterly membership recruitment and retention efforts and use the rise and fall in those numbers as a proxy metric for overall organizational health. While intuitively understandable, the choice to focus primarily on the short term compromises the board's ability to understand the long-term implications of societal transformation and undermines the board's duty of foresight.

- **Board presiding officers (BPOs) are more important than other directors:** On most association boards, the president or chair is accorded significant responsibilities, often including direct oversight of the chief staff executive, the opportunity to represent the organization to external audiences and the ability to shape both board and organizational activities based on personal priorities. The privileged status accorded to the individuals who occupy these roles can convey the impression that board presiding officers (my umbrella term for all titles) are the first among equals on their boards, and other directors should defer to their wishes. Following this orthodox belief is anathema to pursuing the duty of foresight, however, since that duty belongs to entire boards and not just their presiding officers. Indeed, as part of their unique roles, BPOs should function as a primary champion for the duty of foresight and challenge their boards to embrace the shared responsibility for learning with the future on behalf of the organization and its stakeholders.

Thinking and Acting Beyond Orthodoxy

The board's duty of foresight must not be held captive to the inertia created by the orthodox beliefs of association governing as we have known it. Instead, it is critical that we direct the new energy created by the commitment to foresight toward inspiring a fundamental shift in board thinking about what it means to govern 21st century associations. Today and in the years ahead, as the powerful forces of relentless societal transformation continue to accelerate in pace and intensify in impact, association boards will need to act decisively to make foresight the future of governing.