

Questioning the Orthodox

Beliefs of Association Governing

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IT HAS NEVER been more vital for association decision-makers to think deeply about the future. Powerful forces of transformation are reshaping the world, creating profound shifts that will irrevocably alter, for both better and worse, the trajectories of their organizations, their fields and their stakeholders' lives. To anticipate and prepare for how these forces may unfold in the years ahead, association boards need to focus their attention on learning with the future as much as possible through the consistent practice of foresight.

By embracing this duty of foresight, association boards can capitalize on the opportunity to build governing mindsets and mechanics better suited to the challenging work of making sense, making meaning and making decisions around the increasingly complicated issues they will confront in the years ahead. Standing in the way of making this essential transition, however, is the wide range of orthodox beliefs that underpin association governing. In this context, orthodox beliefs are deep-seated assumptions about how governing is *supposed to work* that can interfere with designing and experimenting with next practices and fresh approaches. Let's examine a few of these orthodox beliefs.

Association Governing Should be Based on a Government or Political Model

Many associations have built their governing structures with inspiration from the example of the U.S. government: a president (or chair) at the top, with other officers in the line of succession, and overall board composition determined by the representation of local, state or regional constituencies. Larger boards often have what amounts to a "cabinet" of senior officers who hold specific functional portfolios, such as meetings or membership. Some associations operate with a separate "legislative branch" in the form of a house of delegates or general assembly. These models also tend to include competitive elections, featuring active campaigning, endorsements from key association influencers and candidate forums.

Despite its pervasiveness, this orthodox belief suffers from an obvious and inescapable flaw: *associations are not governments*. The U.S. government is a complex entity that must manage extensive economic, diplomatic, military and other interests around the world, as well as serious ideological disagreements between two major political parties at home. Associations could not be more different in terms of their reasons

for being, as well as the scope and scale of their activities. To become adaptive and resilient in the years ahead, associations must move beyond their past preference for more bureaucratic and insular government-style structures that encourage risk aversion in favor of open, inclusive and flexible governing systems that enable collaboration, learning and innovation.

Board Presiding Officers (BPOs) are More Important than Other Directors

Consistent with the choice to build the work of governing around a political metaphor, most association boards place special emphasis on the role of the president or chair. The "chief elected officer" enjoys outsized influence within the association, usually including direct oversight of the chief staff executive, and the ability to shape both board and organizational activities based on personal priorities. In addition, chief elected officers represent their organizations at local, national and international association events, industry or professional conferences, government hearings and with the media. The unique status and privileges accorded to the individuals who occupy this role can convey the impression that chief elected officers are the first among equals on their boards,

and other directors should defer to their wishes.

On the one hand, the effectiveness of the board presiding officer (an umbrella term I use to cover all possible titles), is a critical element in the effort to nurture strong boards and thriving organizations, but not for any of the reasons listed above. As the term implies, the BPO's principal roles must be to guide the board's work in partnership with the chief staff executive, build overall board capacity and ensure high performance among all directors. On the other hand, no matter how significant these responsibilities are, board presiding officers have no greater claim to determine the substance or direction of the board's work than any other director, and certainly not a simple majority of the board. Each director is a steward in his/her own right, and while respect for the challenge of serving as the board presiding officer is appropriate, deference is neither necessary nor in the best interests of the organization and its stakeholders.

Boards Need to Drive the Work of Strategy

For many decades, association chief staff executives have worked with their boards to pursue strategic planning exercises, despite their uncertain value and the tendency in some organizations to set aside the documents they produce in favor of doing "real work." The association world's commitment to strategic planning endures, however, at least in part due to the powerful orthodox belief that argues associations *need* to have strategic plans. Why? Because that's what associations are *supposed to do*. And as the most senior decision-makers in their organizations, it makes intuitive sense for boards to drive the strategic planning effort, either through the board's presiding officer or a strategic planning committee appointed by

and operating with the delegated authority of the board.

In today's fast-moving environment, however, the primary purpose of strategy for associations is building mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders to learn how to co-create value that can help them address short-term problems, intermediate-term needs and long-term outcomes. For the most part, board members are neither the primary beneficiaries of strategy, nor well-equipped to contribute in meaningful ways to value creation for current "digital first" stakeholders. Instead of boards driving strategy, associations should invite the actual stakeholders with whom they wish to build relationships to take the lead on strategy development and business model design, while boards focus their attention on building a consistent practice of foresight. These conversations must inform each other, and they can make more sustained and substantive progress by moving forward on separate yet interdependent pathways.

Short-Term Concerns are More Important than Long-Term Thinking

The orthodox beliefs of corporate governance exert substantial influence in the way association boards function as well. Chief among these assumptions is the corporate sector's focus on short-term concerns, including daily stock prices, quarterly earnings reports and maximizing shareholder value. While associations are not publicly traded enterprises, their boards are no less anxious about short-term matters, particularly the performance of membership recruitment and retention efforts. Many, if not most, association boards use the monthly rise and fall of membership numbers as a proxy metric for overall organizational health, yet another orthodox belief worthy of closer scrutiny.

It is difficult to blame association boards for their short-termism, and not just because of the

considerable sway of corporate governance practices. Prioritizing what is happening today over what feels like a distant and unknown future is an understandable human reaction, and a reasonable choice for individuals to make for themselves. When it comes to the work of stewardship, however, association boards have a fundamental responsibility to their stakeholders that must supersede personal interests. Devoting board attention to exploring the long-term implications of societal transformation for their associations, stakeholders and the fields they serve is a function of governing that is at least as, if not more, important as any short-term item on the board agenda.

In the words of Ruth Benedict, a pioneering 20th century cultural anthropologist, "We grow in time to trust the future for our answers." Unfortunately, associations, like most nonprofit organizations, tend to look to the past for their answers, and the continued commitment to orthodox beliefs is evidence of that inclination. Relentless societal transformation demands that association boards, board presiding officers and chief staff executives collaborate to free themselves and their organizations of these counterproductive constraints and the devastating inertia they can combine to create. By designing the future of governing around the duty of foresight, association boards can anticipate what comes next, unleash their stakeholders' full potential and build their organizations to thrive in the years ahead. ◀



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