

# Embracing the Duty of Foresight: Part II

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By Jeff De Cagna • March 27, 2018

*This is my second Duty of Foresight column for Association Adviser, and the second in a three-part series I will post in the coming months to explain the duty of foresight for association boards and create a context for future columns. [You can find Part I here.](#)*

*In Part II, I will explain the elements of a foresight learning process, as well as how it integrates with the work of governing, and explore how association boards can pursue it with intention to embrace the duty of foresight.*

## Learning with The Future

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In Part I, I offered a new definition of governing that better serves the long-term thrivability of both associations and their stakeholders. The choice to pursue governing as an intentional and dynamic process for enabling the coherence, capability and continuity of the system also demands that participants in the process — including boards, staff and other contributors who support and shape the work of governing — strengthen their performance through sustained and intentional learning with the future.

Unfortunately, learning with the powerful and relentless forces of societal transformation is not as simple as checking out a few blog posts, reading some books and watching several TED talks. These steps can be a useful way to start, but they are not sufficient. Learning with the future must be a much more focused and disciplined effort that association boards and their partners pursue repeatedly and with a level of dedication and impact commensurate with their critical stewardship responsibilities. The learning cycle I recommend to association boards includes the three connected practices of

- 1) sense-making,
- 2) meaning-making and
- 3) decision-making.

Each practice is explained in greater detail below.

- **Sense-making:** Learning with the future begins with sense-making, a practice that focuses on building an intellectual understanding of plausible futures through thoughtful exploration, inquiry and dialogue. When it comes to the work of foresight, every issue with which association boards will need to grapple is complicated, and these issues often relate to each other in ways that create additional complexity. The sense-making process is about boards going beyond the surface-level fundamentals of any given issue

to develop deeper and more nuanced perspectives on how these issues could plausibly unfold in the years ahead. To ensure the integrity of the sense-making process, boards must consider both the upsides and downsides of all issues for their organizations.

- **Meaning-making:** Building on the richer views developed through sense-making, boards must next undertake the practice of meaning-making. Meaning-making involves the closer examination of specific positive and negative implications created by plausible futures for their associations, stakeholders and fields of work, including their impact on the association's orthodox beliefs. The meaning-making process requires boards to connect their intellectual understanding of future issues with a human understanding grounded in empathy for those the association serves. Once again, as part of this process, boards must recognize the full range of plausible outcomes, including those that are unfavorable or unthinkable for their organizations and stakeholders.
- **Decision-making:** The practice of decision-making brings the board's integrated intellectual and empathic understanding of the future to bear on present-day decision-making with the intention of anticipating and preparing for a full range of plausible futures. This is the essence of foresight, i.e., projecting forward to learn with the future and bringing that learning back to today to shape decision-making. The practice of decision-making also is a critical element of the board's ongoing learning cycle, as the choices that boards make today will lead to new information and insights that, in turn, will influence their future sense-making, meaning-making and decision-making activities.

## Foresight is The Future of Governing

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Many (if not most) association boards have an unhelpful preference for involvement in the minutiae of association operations. Even our efforts to move boards toward so-called "strategic conversations" have largely failed to bring a consistently long-term orientation to their work. The growing intensity of societal transformation, however, now demands that association boards refocus and devote as much of their attention as possible to the work of foresight. In other words, we must look upon the work of foresight as the future of governing.

To advance this way of thinking about governing, it is essential that we redesign board agendas around the foresight learning cycle described above, re-imagine how boards receive foresight learning resources and capitalize on the periods in between face-to-face board meetings to continue learning with the future.

By making the choice to concentrate on the work of foresight, association boards can realize the full potential of their stewardship. Pursuing sustained and intentional learning with the future helps boards build their own capacity as stewards, enhances their ability to guide their organizations into the future and provides support to their stakeholders as they seek to thrive under the increasingly difficult conditions of societal transformation.

## Next Month

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Despite the continuing impact of societal transformation on associations and their stakeholders, most boards are not doing enough to anticipate and prepare for the future. Next month, in Part III of this series, 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.

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