

# Embracing the Duty of Foresight: Part I

---

 [naylor.com/associationadviser/embracing-duty-foresight-part-one](https://naylor.com/associationadviser/embracing-duty-foresight-part-one)

By Jeff De Cagna • February 22, 2018

*This is my first Duty of Foresight column for Association Adviser, and the first 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.*

*In Part I, I will explain why the duty of foresight is just as important as the legally-recognized duties of care, loyalty and obedience (if not more important), and why the duty of foresight is an essential part of building a high-performing board through the integration of the work of governing and the work of foresight.*

## Looking at Governing in a New Way

---

For more than two decades now, powerful and relentless forces of societal transformation have been reshaping the world around us. These forces include profound and irrevocable cultural, demographic, economic, political, scientific, social and technological shifts, and there is no evidence to suggest they will abate anytime soon. If anything, they are accelerating and intensifying, and every industry, profession and field of human endeavor, as well as the associations that serve them, are feeling the weight of their growing impact.

The need to navigate the volatility created by transformation makes the nurturing of high-performing boards an immediate priority for all associations. This capacity-building process, in turn, demands a fundamental reconsideration of what it means to govern in this unforgiving context. Instead of trying to sustain orthodox approaches to governing that are increasingly antiquated and ill-suited to a world in flux, association boards will benefit from adopting a fresh way of understanding the importance their work: ***governing is an intentional and dynamic process for enabling the coherence, capability and continuity of the system.*** Embracing this forward-looking definition represents a vital shift in both thinking and practice for those who participate in the work of governing in this complex and uncertain environment.

Governing is an intentional and dynamic process for enabling the coherence, capability and continuity of the system.

This new definition challenges association boards to collaborate with their staff partners and other contributors, such as committees and task forces, to govern in ways that ensure the systems\* for which they are responsible

1. understand their reasons for being and the outcomes they intend to achieve (coherence),
2. can take effective action to make progress toward achieving those outcomes (capability)

and

3. can thrive even as they confront the disruptive impact of societal transformation (continuity).

By making an explicit commitment to building adaptive and thrivable systems through the work of governing, association boards can bring greater energy and deeper meaning to their stewardship.

*\*A system is defined as a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole. In this new definition of governing, the use of the word “system” is intentional to be inclusive of all types of association structures.*

## **The Duty of Foresight**

---

Exercising the board’s duty of foresight is essential to putting this new way of thinking about governing into practice. Put simply, the duty of foresight is a shared commitment to learn with the future to understand, anticipate and prepare for a full range of plausible futures. For 21<sup>st</sup> century association boards, there is no more critical responsibility. While the board’s fiduciary duties of care, loyalty and obedience continue to matter both financially and legally, these responsibilities are oriented mostly to the past and present. They do not inspire association boards to put their systems’ and stakeholders’ future thrivability first at the precise moment in human history when that is what boards must do as a matter of moral obligation to those they serve.

The duty of foresight creates the impetus for boards to build a consistent practice of foresight that helps nurture their ability to govern more effectively. Through the practice of foresight, boards can cultivate stakeholder trust and increase the resilience required to steward their systems with coherence. Foresight enables boards to act as responsible investors and champions by making it easier to anticipate the evolving mix of capabilities their systems will require to thrive in the future. Finally, the work of foresight helps ensure the continuity of systems by sharpening board readiness for learning and acting even under challenging conditions. By fully integrating each of these connections between governing and foresight, and putting them into practice, a greater number of association boards will be able to reach high performance over time.

## **Next Month**

---

Societal transformation demands that learning animate both governing and foresight in the years ahead. Next month, in Part II of this series, 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.