

June 4, 2020

Retooling Your Association to Succeed During the Pandemic

Coronavirus Playbook



In 2008 when America's housing bubble burst it triggered a global financial crisis and recession. By end December of that year some of the darkest storm clouds were brewing here in the US. At the time I was working with Royal Dutch Shell, helping them to lead the change to build a worldwide monitoring system of their oil and gas fields. All internal chatter was about the looming global recession. But not all conversation was as dark as the storm heading our way. There were many who were acutely aware that a reshuffling of the global economy meant positions would rise as well as fall and they were planning how they would rise.

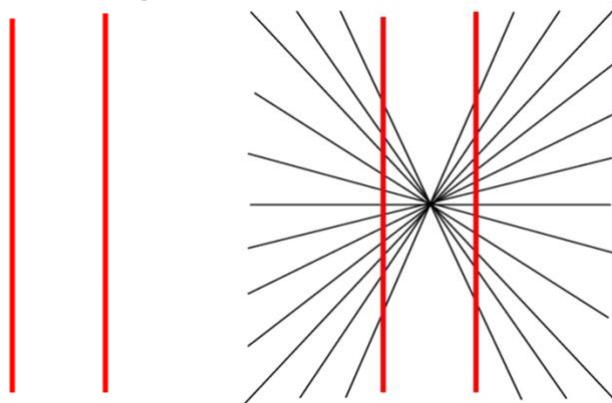
Coronavirus Playbook: Retooling Your Association to Succeed During the Pandemic

Strategic conversations went beyond, “*How do we brace for the downturn?*” They extended into, “*How do we rise to the top amidst the turmoil, and best position ourselves for the new world coming?*”

During my time working with President Jim Wolfensohn at the World Bank I had the opportunity to watch him in action as he responded to crises. When the globe is your domain, there is always a coup, a natural disaster, or a financial meltdown happening somewhere in the world. He always did two things immediately: (a) provide a response to the catastrophe, and (b) mobilize those who would develop the solution.

As you face the awful facts of our current pandemic (morbidity and mortality, social distancing, supply chain breakage, psychological trauma), the economic reality of massive unemployment, and the imperative to address systemic racism – I know you are working hard to address the impact on your organization. But, are you doing the comprehensive review of what you will need to succeed in the medium term, over the next two years?

Things look different when the circumstances around them change. That’s why your organization needs a review. What was in tip-top shape before the coronavirus likely will not suffice now that it is here. To illustrate, here’s a simple optical illusion. It shows how two parallel lines can be perceived as bowing outwardly just because the background is different. Same two lines. Different backdrop.



You may have a mission or strategy that you love and has served you well for years. But, how will it be perceived with the pandemic in the background?

This is a time for you and your leadership to take a hard look at five key areas with an eye on what needs to change and how you might plan now to get ahead as things stabilize:

1. Your Hook
2. Your Mission
3. The Course for Your Members’ Growth
4. Your Strategy
5. Your Operations

Coronavirus Playbook: Retooling Your Association to Succeed During the Pandemic

Your Hook

The most skilled organizations have developed a unique value proposition that is highly coveted by their members, something they can get nowhere else.

It's not your meetings. You may be the only one who convenes a particular subset of your trade or profession, but meetings are a *media*, not a value proposition. Similarly, it's not your publications or your education. Those are all ways of delivering value, but what's at the core of what you offer? And is it inimitable? What can only you deliver?

When I first began working with the National Apartment Association (NAA), their hook was their lease program. Nowhere else could a member go to ensure that when they printed out the lease for a renter, they would be fully compliant with local, state and federal law regardless of where they operated. This was the NAA's hook. What's yours?

If you have one today, *does it hold in the midst of the pandemic, our economy and the pervasive need to address racism?* If you don't have one, it's time to do some serious development. Crises accelerate change. This crisis will accelerate your members' revisiting their dues, volunteer commitment, and participation. Your hook will make certain they continue to choose you as their professional home.

To develop or update your hook, convene your board. Lead the conversation. Do the homework. Identify your most compelling value proposition, one that cannot be duplicated.

Your Mission

Today's missions now stand in sharp relief to the world's disorder. When a potential new member or partner reads what you are about, do they see something that inspires them, makes them want to be part of your cause? Or does it appear self-serving (as in *our mission is to serve our members*), irrelevant, or disconnected from what they are experiencing?

Regardless of the state of your current mission, make sure that your mission today conveys what you are here to do in a way that is compelling over the short and medium terms, the next year or two.

We know the impact of the pandemic is not limited to the first wave of morbidity and mortality (which as of this writing is not yet over), but will extend into a lasting influence on the national and global economies. Further there is massive national job loss, new norms that keep people apart and change the nature of business, and now justified, national civil unrest sparked by George Floyd's unnecessary and tragic death.

Does your mission say you will be part of the solutions, or does it make you appear disconnected from the pain or rebuilding that is ahead? Is it a call to action that you can be proud of and use to rally action? If not, this is the assignment for you and your volunteer leadership. You must review your mission.

Coronavirus Playbook: Retooling Your Association to Succeed During the Pandemic

The Course of Your Members' Growth

Your members look to you to highlight their paths to growth and prosperity. These pathways to progress look remarkably different from inside the pandemic. Have you adjusted adequately?

Of course, you are not be expected to have all the answers. But your members will look to you to provide them with practical information and tools that help in their time of need. This is the time to bring experts in your field together with outsider thought leaders to discuss and debate, combine their best thinking to generate new and helpful knowledge, and then provide your members with informed views on how they can safely reopen, reinvent, rebuild, retool and move forward.

Your members will expect you to invest in research and share what you are learning. They you're your help. They depend on you to assist them in making better decisions than they otherwise would. Their hope is that your organization will provide easy-to-apply options grounded in the best thinking to be found. If you don't do this, they will go to the organization that does. Or failing to find it anywhere, they will soldier on alone.

It's important, too, to recognize that there are psychological consequences to what we are going through. For example, PTSD is expected from the frontline healthcare workers, but it reaches so many more. Civil unrest stirs up grief and anger from past injustices. Job loss makes people feel desperate and alone. All of this influences their behavior and needs.

Psychological fall out will be felt in the business world as well. Who will go to certification centers when they feel unsafe on transit? How many will go out for dinner when they are worried about spreading the disease, even if it is legal? What percentage of your members will attend an annual conference if doubt lingers about the safety?

To address this, you must put in place the infrastructure that will help your members get up and running when it is most challenging. Are you making it easy for them to see their pathways to success, giving them tools to navigate those paths, and providing support they need to do their best?

The best way to formulate these services is by listening to your members, leading discussions with your board as well as your senior staff... drawing on the experience and insights of all who know *first-hand* your members' concerns, behavior, limitations, and assets.

Your Strategy

Every organization has a unique take on strategy. For many, the path to developing one is familiar: (1) interview members, thought leaders, volunteer leaders and staff; (2) identify opportunities and challenges; (3) choose those that will bring the greatest rewards; (4) build out the pillars required; (5) operationalize. That's what *used* to work. What works in a situation like we are in today?

Coronavirus Playbook: Retooling Your Association to Succeed During the Pandemic

We know the times ahead will be turbulent for months and perhaps years. Take for example the meetings industry. Spring and summer 2020 meetings are being pushed forward into the fall and winter, but they are landing on an already fully planned schedule. Meanwhile travel, hospitality and conference industries are juggling when and how to bring employees back to work. It's going to be a mess through 2021.

You need a strategic framework that will work in continued uncertainty yet provide the kind of beacon that your members can follow, and your staff can use to execute. That's why I recommend the two-pronged approach I call, **North Star, Next Stage**.

North Star refers to that which stays stable while the world turns under it. It is the guiding beacon that serves as a point of reference for all initiatives. **Next Stage** refers to the immediate plan, given what you know today. I suggest developing a 3-to-6-month business plan, to be revisited regularly and informed by changing circumstance when warranted.

By formulating both you set your sights on where you want to be as well as what needs to be done in the short run to make sure you get there.

Formulating your **North Star** requires strategic foresight. It identifies a positive future with new capacities and breakthrough performance. You develop it by pulling together what we know today and pairing it with what we anticipate tomorrow, including new technologies and capacities. To get there you must do the R&D to uncover what people are saying about the future of your members work and how it will influence (a) opportunities for your members, and (b) the impact your association will be positioned to deliver.

As you develop your **Next Stage**, don't just focus on the practical realities of today's disruptions. Integrate building the bridge to your **North Star**.

While you may be reorganizing, re-staffing, changing programs and services, and identifying new initiatives, you should simultaneously be looking at building new capacities, integrating new skill sets, increasing agility and speed, and evolving into the association of the future.

To discuss *how* to lead your board in the creation of a North Star, Next Stage strategy, contact me. I would be happy to recommend specific exercises and share with you how I have retooled board meetings to adapt to our virtual environment.

Your Operations

In a crisis you have permission to do things you would not otherwise take on. For example, shifting resources away from activities that take more than they give. It probably means more expedient decision-making, quickly repositioning staff, and enabling rapid skill development to take advantage of new technologies.

Coronavirus Playbook: Retooling Your Association to Succeed During the Pandemic

As you respond in real time to our changing circumstances, you and your leadership likely have license to deviate from tradition and address the urgencies of the moment. No one would ever choose to go through this kind of an ordeal. yet there is significant opportunity here if you bring a strategic lens to the work. Whatever you are doing, you are taking the first steps to building tomorrow's organization today. They might as well be intentional.

Resist the urge to do something just because it feels good or you have long been wanting to do it. Instead start with the areas I listed activities above – reexamining your hook, your mission, the course of your members' growth, your strategy and operations. This will put you in the best position to make sure the changes you are making, some of which may be forced, will position you to move out in front as our world evolves.

This is the work that will ensure your organization's continued success, so you can provide your members with the value they depend upon when they need it the most: now.

If this paper speaks to you, call me and let's talk. We may or may not find a way to work together, but I promise you the conversation will move you forward.

I want you to succeed, make it through the next couple of months and years. Our country and your members will be stronger for it.



Seth@VisionaryLeadership.com (301) 229-2221

