**My Perspective**

**A sunset in the background

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**Reaction, Assessment, and Renewal—Thoughts on Moving Through the Pandemic**

Dear fname:

The worst thing about a crisis can be the uncertainty surrounding the outcome. We all have coping strategies to pass the time before there’s a verdict on our well-being. One of mine is gathering information. When I’m not sure how a situation will unfold, I collect data, connect with colleagues, tap my network, and become a compulsive student of the unknown.

Right now, my ear is glued to the ground. I’m monitoring how associations are responding to the pandemic and documenting the most innovative approaches. I’ve had conversations with leaders of all stripes. Some have found an opportunity to showcase their organization’s value and others aren’t sure whether they will survive. Without exception, no one can say what the future will bring.

To take a more formalized approach, we convened the .orgCommunity Think Tank (virtually, of course) as well as several other leadership groups to discuss what the short, mid, and long-term impacts of COVID-19 might be for our organizations and the industry.

The dialogues were characterized by contrasts. On the one hand, the possibility for increased relevance, growth, and new beginnings in the long term. On the other, extreme volatility and precarious economics with no clearly defined end in sight. Both sides of this coin play out against a digital revolution that adds another layer of disruption. The only certainty is inevitable and continuous change.

The following is a recap of some of our observations.

**Reaction**

**Short Term—Through August 2020**

In just two months, this virus has profoundly changed the way we perceive our personal lives and our work. It has simultaneously stripped away the superficial, changed ingrained habits, forced us to look backward, pushed us to think forward, and kept us frozen in our tracks.

A picture containing sitting, man, black, small

Description automatically generatedThe short term is a period of reaction and contraction with a laser focus on the immediate operational and financial needs of the organization. There is no time for superfluous programs or activities. Leaders can use their soft skills to make a significant positive impact. Empathy with those who are challenged by isolation or overwhelmed with frontline service, transparent communication about the association’s status, and immediate adaptation to current circumstances is critical.

A strong organizational culture and vision will help employees cope with the stress of isolation and additional challenges associated with families working and studying from home. Where culture has not been a priority, the struggle will be more acute.

A strong culture and vision will help employees cope with stress.

**Assessment**

**Mid Term—From September 2020 Through May 2021**

This is a period of assessment, dialogue, and gathering information to guide the future. An evaluation of the organization’s initial response to the crisis will reveal weaknesses that should be addressed and strengths that can be maximized. Trust has either been enhanced or diminished based on the quality of the communication and responsiveness of the management team.

By now, there should be a good understanding of the association’s financial status and long-term viability. There may be hard decisions to make concerning staffing. If programs or activities were suspended during the short term, it’s a good time to evaluate their future. Are they important to member engagement or a drain on the organization’s resources? Frank conversations with the board can help to jump this hurdle.

Stabilization should be slowly occurring as staff become accustomed to new work styles and supervisors have a better understanding of how to motivate and manage their teams. As a consequence of remote work and outsourcing, some organizations may reevaluate their need for office space.

Among the significant activities we’ll be seeing through a new lens are:

**Meetings/Education**

Most associations didn’t jump on the virtual meeting bandwagon until the music was about to stop. The annual, big-tent blowout was still the king of revenue for many groups. Unfortunately, associations with limited reserves, who canceled that event, may suffer lasting consequences.

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We’ve learned the importance of a diversified portfolio the hard way. Associations that are not planning a virtual conference are, at least, investigating the mechanics and considering how online gatherings could be incorporated into their communities. Many groups are also looking at the possibility of organizing multiple, smaller local events. This approach could reinvigorate chapters and components, which had been falling out of favor for several years.

Most associations are investigating the logistics of virtual events.

Bite-size learning, once a growing trend, may be suspended while people are homebound and craving more immersive experiences. Some groups are organizing virtual town meetings and forums. These are an opportunity to gather real-time information on member needs. Future meetings may routinely include a combination of virtual and in-person activities and presentations.

**Advocacy**

Government affairs professionals may find themselves with an increasingly significant role to play as public policy develops around workplace and health issues. Associations have an opportunity to provide information, education, and guidance concerning new work methodologies such as telemedicine.

**Membership Dues**

Massive unemployment, lost productivity, and salary reductions will impact how both industry and individuals view the relevance of association membership. Groups that were able to quickly provide members with helpful resources may see a resurgence in engagement. Those who were slow to respond may experience significant declines, especially as members prioritize their time in different ways.

**Sponsorship**

A more creative, collaborative approach will be needed as companies begin to reassess their relationships with associations. Over the last few years, there has already been some pullback from sponsorship; if associations are unable to offer value that impacts the bottom line, this decline in non-dues revenue will continue.

**Renewal**

**Long Term–June 2021 and Beyond**

With knowledge and experience managing the virus, we will be standing on firmer ground. There will be an opportunity to reimagine business in light of lessons learned and changes we have been forced to make. Associations will have become more resourceful and adaptive. They will be finding creative ways to make the shift from up close and personal to at a distance but engaged. As the workplace continues to change, associations can provide a source of identity and community for the growing number of freelance and contract workers.

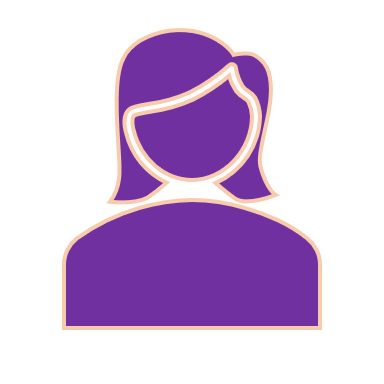
Across this timeline there is one constant: members must be at the center of every action and every initiative. If we focus attention on their needs today and are adaptable and innovative enough to provide that support, then the chances are good that our organizations will grow and weather an uncertain future.

**Ask the .orgSource Team**

A picture containing hat

Description automatically generated**People come to consultants for advice.**

Most of the time the questions involve how to launch a new initiative or save a project that has derailed. But occasionally people ask about issues they don’t want to discuss with a co-worker and, definitely, not with the boss. As consultants, we’re “safe.” We won’t judge or tattle. Plus, we’ve experienced every association blooper you can imagine and survived to tell the tale. Name your crisis, we’ve run interference. We thought it might help others if we shared some of these situations. The conversation usually begins like this. . .



**I can’t believe what happened—**

Our organization is understaffed and overextended. Recently, a co-worker was given a job she wasn’t qualified for because she was the only person “available.” She made a mistake that went viral. It’s impacted our sales channel, and now we’re in a crisis. Our volunteer leaders are up in arms. What hurts is that the error involved a core competency of our association. We teach members how to avoid this type of situation. How do we salvage our reputation, restore the trust of our volunteers, and put the shine back on our brand?



**Take a deep breath—**

The error may be bad, but it isn’t fatal. On the other hand, your staffing situation might be. It’s unwise and unfair to put employees in positions for which they have not been adequately trained--even in times like these when we are all stretched thin. I hope the supervisor who made this assignment took responsibility for the mistake. I can’t overstress the importance of hiring the right people for the job and training them appropriately. Your products and services are not your brand; your people are.

I’d urge your organization to take a close look at staffing and workload. Why wasn’t the right person available to complete this task? Are there projects that should be sunset? Where are the skill gaps? Is the issue lack of training or talent? Outsourcing is a great option for projects that require special skills. Make any difficult choices now. Don’t wait for something to change; it won’t.

If your organization has a history of competence, then this mistake, although highly visible, will be a bump in the road. Don’t panic, and don’t try to sweep it under the rug. Work with your team to develop an effective plan for preventing future issues. Dig deeper than the symptom, which is poor training. Address staffing and workload, which is the cause. Share your solution with the board, your team, and anyone else involved. Answer questions candidly. Listen to advice, and, if necessary, apologize.

Readers, what do you think?

* How have you resolved staffing issues?
* What steps would you take in a similar crisis?
* Who is responsible for this error?

**Emerging From Crisis—Considerations for the Future**

On April 30, .orgCommunity presented a webinar with a panel of association leaders who shared their thoughts on the topic: “What Associations Need To Consider To Thrive in the Future”. The following are excerpts from that discussion. View the webinar [here](https://videos.orgcommunity.com/emerging-from-crisis-what-associations-need-to-consider-in-order-to-thrive-in-the-future).

**A person smiling for the camera

Description automatically generatedModerator:**

Sherry Budziak, Founder and CEO, .orgSource

**Panelists:**

Jeff De Cagna, Executive Advisor, Foresight First

Stefanie Reeves, Executive Director, Maryland Psychological Association

Sharon Rice, Managing Director of Business Strategy, .orgSource

Sherry Budziak

**How can associations provide value to their members in the short term to keep them engaged in the long term?**

**A person wearing glasses and smiling at the camera

Description automatically generatedJeff De Cagna**

Jeff De Cagna

Think beyond membership and listen and learn with stakeholders outside current boundaries. The value that all stakeholders will need in the months and years ahead won't come exclusively (or even primarily) through the offers that associations make to them. Instead, that value will live in the mutually beneficial relationships (not necessarily predicated on membership) that stakeholders build with one another and will emerge through the processes of inclusive stakeholder co-creation that associations enable and coordinate.

**A person posing for the camera

Description automatically generatedStefanie Reeves**

Communicate, communicate, communicate! COVID gave MPA the opportunity to showcase benefits members may not have been aware of, including a resource toolkit for practitioners, which featured information on transitioning to telehealth. We also created a COVID webpage and held a webinar for all psychologists on how practice can be conducted under a stay-at-home order. A former member who was impressed with the content rejoined because “I felt guilty not paying for it [the content].” Providing quality, on-time information in the short term will help associations in the long term.

Stefanie Reeves

**A person smiling for the camera

Description automatically generatedSharon Rice**

In the best of times, engagement is predicated on a strong understanding of your members, their professional life, their goals, and challenges. While I am a big proponent of leveraging data to achieve this understanding, in times of crisis, nothing can replace actually talking to as many members as staff and leaders can. Ask them what they are facing and how the association can better meet their needs. Let them know that you are there for them. If you can formalize this as an activity, take notes that can be reviewed. You will discover ideas to act on in both the short and long term.

Sharon Rice

**How can association executives balance short-term needs with the long-term goals/sustainability of their organization?**

**Jeff De Cagna**

Short-term pessimism is the only responsible mindset for association decision-makers. Staff and volunteer decision-makers must operate with a clear-eyed and sober perspective on what is happening right now, and what will happen over the next 12-24 months and beyond. The pessimistic mindset forces us to deal with facts and information and brings discipline and focus to decision-making.

For staff, the priority must be on contingency planning for an all-but-certain recession—and possible depression—over the next 24 months. If they have not done so already, staff must identify and track the four-to-six most important indicators of organizational financial health, including appropriate revenue, expense, and cash flow metrics. Create a dashboard for leaders to monitor these metrics so they can provide more effective oversight, recognize red flags as early as possible, and implement contingency plans to minimize the detrimental impact.

For boards, the priority must be on developing scenarios for the next 24-60 months to spark the reinvention of their associations for the remainder of this decade. These scenarios must capture a full range of plausible futures that will be shaped by both the COVID-19 pandemic and other forces of turbulence, including the increasing use of AI and automation technologies, the urgent threat of the climate crisis, and worsening economic inequality, all of which are already being accelerated and intensified by the pandemic. Developing scenarios will make it possible for association decision-makers to explore the dynamic interaction among various powerful forces so they can generate a range of options for action today on the challenges these forces will create in the years ahead.

A close up of text on a white background

Description automatically generated**Stefanie Reeves**

Scenario planning can help you feel in control.

Associations need to take a good look at their landscape. Who’s thriving? Who’s hurting? This is a great opportunity to talk to members about what they will need to manage now and into the future. One area that required our immediate attention was members’ competency to provide telehealth to various populations. We developed a webinar series to address issues raised by COVID but not specific to the virus. The content can be used whether or not we’re experiencing a pandemic. The webinars will be presented live over the next few weeks at our regular registration rate and then converted to independent study courses creating an additional source of revenue.

**Sharon Rice**

One of the lessons learned during the Great Recession is that survival is everything. If an association can survive an economic downturn, it will have the opportunity to thrive in the long term. So, association executives must manage in the short term while making decisions that will position the organization to bounce back when the economic crisis is over.

Scenario planning is important to help you feel in control of operations when you can’t control what is happening externally. It can prevent knee-jerk responses that may make your financial situation worse. For example, lowering the price of products and services may feel like the right thing to do to maintain a revenue stream. But it is important to understand why customers are not buying. Those who do not have time to engage in education or certification cannot take advantage of the lower price. Those who do have time may not need the discount, just the right motivation. Tools like decision trees can help compare options and financial outcomes.

**Should associations work with their boards to adjust their 2020 strategic plans? Why or why not?**

**Jeff De Cagna**

**A couple of people standing around a table

Description automatically generated**There will be no going back to the pre-pandemic world, and no business-as-usual going forward. It is critical for association staff and voluntary decision-makers to free themselves of their orthodox beliefs, including those embedded in current strategic directions. Under ordinary conditions, the strategy window is a maximum of 36 months. The COVID-19 pandemic has irrevocably altered the trajectory of that time horizon, as well as all successive iterations throughout this decade. My guidance to boards, chief staff executives, and other decision-makers is to rid themselves of strategic planning once and for all and concentrate instead on building new capacity for strategy as a process of learning with stakeholders and learning as much as possible about the future through the practice of foresight.

Concentrate on building capacity for strategy as a process.

**Stefanie Reeves**

With so much uncertainty, it’s very easy for boards to cling to what has worked and hope that everything will work out. We need to plan for multiple scenarios that may not fit neatly into a strategic plan model and that will be a hard lift for some boards. However, it presents a great opportunity for creativity, not only in what we’re planning, but how we’re doing it.

**Sharon Rice**

During a crisis, focus needs to be on the short term. It is highly unlikely that even the most well conceived strategic plan, crafted before the pandemic, is going to be useful to navigate 2020 and beyond. In addition, while we can project how COVID-19 is going to change our world, it is going to be a while before we are on firm enough ground to engage in anything resembling long-term planning. Focusing your efforts on scenario planning will benefit your organization in a way that trying to follow a strategic plan cannot. It is a highly disciplined form of planning that is also responsive to the environment. I do think long-term plans will be important post-pandemic, but I doubt they will resemble the plans we have been creating for decades. That formula will be archaic.

**Read Sherry Budziak’s Latest Blog Posts**

**A group of clouds in the sky

Description automatically generatedDigital Leaders Fly Ahead of Disruption**

Technology is our silent partner in the challenging job of keeping the economy moving during COVID-19. This health crisis has taught us that the more we make the digital world our world, the better equipped we will be to manage both business and life in the face of disruption.

Associations who were early adopters of digital strategies made the transition to a remote workplace with minimal distraction. For others, the abrupt technological, administrative, and cultural shift has been destabilizing. I have heard about challenges ranging from lack of equipment to the complete inability to accommodate virtual business. [Read more](https://www.orgsource.com/digital-leaders-fly-ahead-of-disruption/).

**A close up of a rock next to a body of water

Description automatically generatedScenario Planning Builds a Resilient Future**

Should we cancel the conference? Are layoffs needed to keep the organization afloat? How much of the reserves can we safely spend?

Responsibility for the decisions that make or break an organization is the tough side of leadership. Selling a solution to everyone who must agree can be even harder. But you don’t need nerves of steel and a will of iron to survive. Having problem-solving strategies at the ready and understanding how to use them effectively will pay you back in hours of lost sleep, make you feel better about going to work, and give you a tool to build a more resilient association. [Read more](https://www.orgsource.com/scenario-planning-builds-a-resilient-future/).