

Association Leadership for the Future

By Jim Carroll, FCA

Jim Carroll lives five years in the future. As a leading international futurist, innovation & trends expert, he dedicates his time to helping people and organizations understand how they can aggressively adopt tomorrow, today. More about Jim below.

Every association executive is regularly inundated with information on the leadership skills they must need to properly guide their association into the future. As someone who spends a lot of time talking, writing and speaking about trends and innovation, and who is constantly taking a look at where we are going in the future, I have my own list that might be rather different from some of the others that you've heard.

Here's what I think you should do to ensure you know the issues that will affect your association.

1. Listen to the grassroots

With the rapid rate of change within every industry, trade and profession, it can be extremely difficult to keep up with what's important and what's not, not to mention keeping on top of the trends, challenges and opportunities that should be guiding your activities and strategies. There might be plenty going on within your member organizations, as they wrestle with new business strategies, rapidly evolving business models, heightened market competition, ever growing volumes of research and knowledge, and countless other challenges.

To be effective at what you do, you must keep on top of these trends, and determine how to adjust your activities and strategies accordingly so you are continually meeting your members' needs. That's why 21st century association executives should focus on building a strong collaborative culture with their membership base, using both leading edge tools and technology as well as ensuring they have a heightened degree of informal, personal contact.

Take the time to engender and build an informal, "open-door" culture that promotes regular and ongoing contact by your membership base, whether that be by e-mail, telephone or in person. Encourage feedback, complaints and observations, as well as a culture that provides for sharing of leading edge trends, challenges and opportunities.

2. Listen beyond the grassroots

You can't listen only to your membership to spot the trends that will affect your association -- you have to go beyond them and listen to what others are saying as well.

That's why figuring out the future is no longer restricted to listening to the "usual suspects" within your association membership base -- 21st century leaders recognize that everything in their industry or professional association base is being affected by events, trends and developments far beyond the norm.

The problem for any association executive is that it is all too easy to become isolated and focused on the issues of the day - the management issues and all the fine details that come with running a major organization. There's so much going on within your industry or profession that there can be precious little time to come up for air and simply see or "think" through what is going on elsewhere."

And yet, taking the time to listen "outside of the box" can be one of the most important things you can do. That's why you shouldn't just "think" outside of the box - but you should on a regular basis "step" outside of it. One way of doing this is by ensuring that you take the time to place yourself in completely different circumstances. Pick 2 or 3 conferences each year - in completely unrelated, different industries or professional that are far beyond your membership base. Go and listen - and see what another industry is saying!

That's but one example - you can also subscribe to professional publications from other associations. Grab your copy of the national association directory, and pick a few associations at random - and sign up for their magazines, publications or newsletters.

You might be surprised by how invigorating an experience it can be to open up your mind to what is going on elsewhere. You may find that it will help you discover the trends that will affect you in the future, long before your traditional trends radar might have picked them up.

3. Listen to the rebels

Often, the trends that will affect your association and members can be found in the offbeat chatter by those who are busy redeveloping the future right around them.

Those leading edge trendsetters are often at odds with the typical association member. They're the rebels in the crowd, eager to cast off the past to develop a future that will be very, very different. They're busy tearing apart the conventional business models that have guided your members for ages; they have different ideas as to the nature of the product or service that is delivered; they are all too eager to change everything around them to create the future as they see fit. They are often marginalized, simply because their aggressive attitude in changing the future can make them rather unlikable by many.

What should you do? Learn to learn from them! Seek out the rebels in your membership base - you might not like what they have to say, but often, they are probably right in what they will tell you. Great leaders recognize that while many people have an attitude, outlook, culture and approach to life and business that is completely at odds with their perspective - they are willing to listen to what they say because change often emanates from such people.

4. Maintain a willingness to do a right turn

There's no doubt that things change very rapidly in our world today.

Need evidence? A year ago, the guilt trip that you have when eating a Big Mac isn't quite what it is today. Within the space of but a year, we've had a major issue - our obese society - bubble up, come to the forefront and gain front-runner status as the trend and issue of the day.

The result is that many associations within the food, health care, agricultural and other communities are now scrambling to deal with the new focus on "healthy living" and "healthy eating". The issue has the potential to become a major topic within your events and conferences; and a topic within your publications. That's but one example - many other such issues can quickly go super-nova (i.e. SARS), so you've must have the ability to suddenly refocus yourself, and your association, to deal with new realities as soon as they emerge.

5. Continually reinvent relevance

Most association members - regardless of what type of group you might represent - live in a state of relentless shell-shock.

If they are in the business world, they're witnessing ongoing market disruption, regular business model change, consumer revolt and empowerment, heightened competition and constant new demands on their time. In the public sector, they are subject to decreasing budgets, increased public expectations, political turmoil, departmental and role transformation, and ever more challenging management issues.

The result is that on a daily basis, they're in crisis mode, and are having to constantly reassess their plans, careers, goals and activities. With so much change going on, it's critical that your association continues to provide services, value and activities that match their regular new realities. That's why you should ensure that you are constantly and regularly assessing and reinventing the relevance of your association to the membership base. Are you delivering what they need, at the right time, in the right way? Are you on top of all the emerging issues affecting your members so you can change what you are doing to ensure you are helping them? Do you continually reassess your roles and your strategies so you are delivering value, not routine?

6. Redefine your membership

Part of the process of reinventing your relevance consists of making the effort to reach out to new members who exist within your association market, but in a completely unconventional way.

Many people in our economy today don't work within the traditional corporate model that has defined your association base in the past. For example, many young workers continue to reject the traditional career path of long term careers with large organizations. Instead, they establish themselves in small, micro-organizations that provide needed skills to a corporate audience regardless of where they might be. Are you reaching them with your efforts?

Then there are nomadic workers - those white collar workers who were laid off in the last 10 years through a variety of recessions - and who have established small, home-based businesses from which they provide their skills to a global audience. They're working within your community of interest, but are they a part of your strategic plan?

Step back and consider where all of your members might exist today, and ensure that you change your strategies, activities and capabilities so that you reaching out to all of them.

7. Adjust for hypercompetition

Many associations are responsible for setting educational, professional and membership standards, and spend considerable time ensuring the value of the service or skill provided by their members is properly recognized for the value provided.

Get ready for a new challenge - that which comes from "off shoring," a trend that is picking up a speed that is simply stunning. In the first wave of offshoring, we saw simple manufacturing such as toys and shoes migrate to third world countries. Then, the second phase saw simple clerical and service work move away (such as the processing of credit card receipts). But now, we are seeing actual "knowledge work" move, a trend that will provide every association with significant challenge in the years to come.

The high-paying, highly professional jobs are now moving offshore. A recent Deloitte & Touche study suggested that upwards of \$356 billion in American wages - or more than 2 million jobs - will move offshore in the next several years. What impact might this have on your members, as they see less demand for their skills as a result of competition from a highly knowledgeable offshore workforce?

That's a loaded question - and it's easy to realize the complexity of the challenge when you consider a one square block area in Bangalore, India, a hotbed of the offshore trend. Consider these 4 companies: GreenPoint Mortgage of Novato, CA has moved their home loans processing to one company located there; the Massachusetts General Hospital has engaged a number of radiologists to examine CT scans; Texas Instruments has a number of engineers working on chip design; the Bank of America has moved some of their software development to this location. Each of these situations would have an impact on the members of associations in a variety of industries and professions.

Those are the people who are going to have a major impact on your association members in the not-too-distant future. We are now seeing the emergence of a global skills marketplace, in which highly talented professional workers can provide services of almost any type. The result is that professionals - lawyers, accountants, consultants, medical technicians, will now find themselves faced with an increasing degree of skills competition.

Begin thinking and planning now as to the reality of this important business trend, and undertake a plan of action that will help your members to survive and thrive into the future as hypercompetition takes hold.

8. Seek offbeat solutions to difficult problems

When a food manufacturer was trying to find out how to improve the changeover time of one of their assembly lines, they hit upon a novel solution: bring in an Indy race pit crew to show them how. Their thinking was, who has better mastered the talent of "quick- thinking, quick work" than a group of people who can instantly change several tires in a highly coordinated team effort that lasts only a few seconds? It was an offbeat solution, but it certainly did the trick.

That's why you should keep an eye out for the quirky, innovative, unusual things occurring within your association and other associations.

9. Kill indecision

There is no doubt that every association has suffered from rather aggressive indecision through the last several years, brought on by war, terror, a challenged economy, and much uncertainty.

The impact has been dramatic - many associations just can't seem to make decisions about many matters of the day. I certainly see this as a speaker - while I used to be regularly booked as far as a year in advance, now some organizations are booking me just a few weeks before their conference or event. Why? Because uncertainty has led to a degree of decision stagnation.

Pummel this trend to the ground before it goes any further. Make sure your association continues to run by timelines, deadlines and clear goals and objective. Carefully ensure that your culture provides for regular decision making, not deferral and discussion. There are quite a few issues you are probably wrestling with, and maybe some of them have been around for far too long.

What should you do? Encouraging risk taking is one method of ending complacency, as is rewarding failure. If your members or association board can't make decisions, then a bit of a cultural change is probably necessary!

10. Restore your sense of passion and purpose

Last but not least, get excited about the future again!

There have been so many challenges through the last few years with recession, war, terrorism and other problems, that many people in the business community have lost their sense of purpose and their passion for the future.

The key message for you and your membership base is - get over it! We're in for a bright and wonderful future, and it's by getting excited about the future again that you can best prepare and plan for it.

Carroll is well known for his critical thinking and business-oriented view of issues related to emerging technologies, business models, workplace issues and organization culture.

He has a proven track record as someone who delivers unique, specialized insight, with over 1,000 presentations in the past 10 years. He provides this insight through keynote presentations, executive briefings, corporate and board of director strategy sessions, interactive workshops and more.

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