

LEADERSHIP LEARNING THROUGH DISRUPTION: REFLECTIONS FROM A CONVENING OF ASSOCIATION CEOS

As we look ahead to a post-pandemic future, many are asking what we can learn from our COVID experience to help shape the organizations we work in and with, in healthcare and beyond. How can we use this experience to rethink our focus and impact, to reset our culture? What questions and issues must we grapple with to get there?

CFAR recently convened a diverse group of 19 leading CEOs from a wide range of associations to come together and discuss both the current challenges and opportunities in this disruptive time, as well as the variety of shifts impacting their members and fields. The discussion proved to be a rich one, both about the present and the future. Associations have been hit hard by COVID, as national and regional gatherings have gone virtual, membership numbers are in decline, and challenges to traditional value propositions have arisen. Associations play a vital role in the industries they serve and in the larger economy, particularly in healthcare, where they are leading voices in influencing policy, supporting research, and advocating for their professions.

Our discussion focused on three critical, interconnected areas in the business of associations—rethinking association business models given recent disruptions, creating the culture and conditions to be truly diverse and inclusive organizations, and engaging boards for greatest impact. We used Force Field Analysis—a well proven thinking tool developed by the organizational psychologist Kurt Lewin—to engage the group in identifying both driving and constraining forces moving them towards ideal goals around these topics (see Figure 1).



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The discussion unlocked some revealing themes and identified some of the shifts in mindset that will be required for organizations to navigate through what are really three interconnected major crises—health, economic, and socio-political. The challenges and ideas about how to respond to them, represented below, transcend sectors and organizations and offer helpful advice to leaders facing similar situations:

- Use the “pivot” out of the pandemic to bring a “startup” mindset to your organization. This is an opportunity to shift from a state of risk aversion to thinking more innovatively about the organization’s business model. You can look for “found pilots”—examples of innovation that already exist inside your organizations and that have the characteristics that might prepare you for the future—and invest in them. Innovations around associations’ national meetings that allowed participants to engage while joining virtually or experiments to rethink membership fees in more flexible ways are some examples of rapid innovation that can be taken forward.
- Focus on the essential value you offer, not the products. The pandemic has heightened a focus on the essential work that needs to be done to bring outdated business models and legacy organizational cultures into the 21st century. Our participants acknowledged that, at the end of the day, their traditional “products” did not really matter as much as what was going on for their members and communities they serve. They need to shift focus to talk about specific outcomes and how to best achieve them, rather than on their traditional offerings.
- Consider both the ethical and economic imperatives for diversity. This is a catalyzing moment in the broader society and a time for greater openness and a willingness to embrace diversity in all dimensions. Leaders are increasingly being held accountable for making this shift. CEOs realize that they cannot achieve their missions if they do not address diversity and equity in their organizations.
- Use this time to reimagine organizational culture and adapt it to new realities rather than reverting to how it was before the pandemic. This kind of reimagining requires healthy organizational cultures and boards, capable of thinking generatively. CEOs need to understand board members’ appetite for risk and where they can use reserves of this kind of energy to make bold investments, even if they have imperfect information.
- Be clear about where you want to go and how you will bring your members and other constituents along with this strategy. Leaders need to embrace the spirit of experimentation and avoid the fear of failure and of having to defend the “why” of their actions. Strategy execution requires that leaders differentiate between authentic challenges and unhelpful “noise.” Explaining and embracing change with clarity and transparency will enable them to accelerate into the future and shift organizational norms.
- Consider how much technology has enabled organizations to pivot this past year, and how to best leverage it into the future. We have had to learn, by necessity, to use technologies that were not part of our culture and practice, and now have the opportunity to be more intentional about what to integrate into our work moving forward.

Overall, we left this session with a sense of optimism and hope in light of a year of intense anxiety and struggle. Our CEO colleagues have an ambitious set of imperatives to manage, and a belief that they need to move quickly while knowing that real change will take time. Amid this tension, they nonetheless left the session feeling “freed up” in their thinking about the conditions necessary to move forward towards success.

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