

Meaning Matters: *A Strategic Conversation Every Association Needs to Have* *By Donna Cameron, CAE, President*

Recently, the American Society of Association Executives' (ASAE) Foundation collaborated with the Institute for Alternative Futures in a study of emerging issues that were likely to impact and alter the future of associations. The result of their efforts was published last year in a book entitled *Exploring the Future: Seven Strategic Conversations That Could Transform Your Association*. This groundbreaking study explores seven highly provocative issues that are likely to affect the vision, structure, and focus of most associations, and—in turn—will change the society in which associations operate, and in which we live.

A provocative study calls for provocative presentation. The ASAE Foundation presented its work in the form of conversations that association executives need to be having with their boards, their members, and their staff, in order for all to understand and incorporate these new insights into the organization's culture. Asking the right questions and committing to the right conversations are critical components of success in responding to a changing world. Ideally, every association will make time to have these discussions, and build a mechanism to make them ongoing—first in the board-room, and later in wider forums at which all members have the opportunity to participate.

The first of these conversations is "Meaning Matters" (*for a brief description of all seven, see the sidebar on page 2*). In a nutshell, "Meaning Matters" asserts that associations must be able to create meaning in the minds and lives of members and potential members—meaningful purpose, meaningful relationships, and meaningful contribution. Each of these are intangible, and for organizations accustomed to defining their value in terms of *tangible* benefits (continuing education, conferences, publications, perhaps an insurance program...), devoting more of your attention to *intangibles* may challenge your comfort level. But it is just these abstract aspects of "belonging and identity" that will create and maintain member loyalty—particularly now, when there is so much competition for the "tangibles," from other associations, corporate entities, even cyberspace. To maintain (or gain) competitive advantage, we need to be connecting with our members at a deeper level, or, as the Foundation study states, "engaging people at the level of their highest aspirations."

The challenge—and the beauty—of doing this is that meaning and purpose cannot be written into article two of the bylaws, or even spelled out in the strategic plan. Meaning is different for every individual, and even within the individual, it changes based on one's circumstances, stage of life, or phase of career. Thus, the creation of meaning is always fluid, always evolving and renewing.

Associations provide meaningful purpose when they know what members wish to achieve through their organization, and through the process of coming together. Purpose operates on two levels. There are often one or more "lofty" purposes (e.g., assuring that health services are available to all who need them), and then many

other secondary purposes (professional development, creating business opportunities, advocacy...). The clearer and more elevated an association's larger purpose, the greater is the likelihood of capturing hearts and building loyalty. This larger purpose should unify members regardless of their age, stage of career, or diverse interests within the profession.

Perhaps it's true that there are organizations that don't deal directly with an issue or trade that is considered "essential" to the future. Nonetheless, every association can build pathways or connections to the challenges of the future—by contributing to a healthy environment, a strong economy, or perhaps creating something of beauty that otherwise would not exist.

What is the lofty purpose of your organization, the one that makes you proud to be a member? Yet, even as you answer that question, know that purpose will evolve as the members and leaders continue to fashion it and apply it to a changing environment, and as we continue to welcome new members and listen—really listen—to their new voices.

Relationship is another intangible concept of vital importance in creating meaning. It is a basic human need to feel valued, respected, included, and loved. While we might not join an association with the clear intent to make connections, if we don't somehow connect, we will not become truly engaged in the organization, and we will not feel compelled to remain.

In a world where the pace of nearly everything has accelerated, associations must speed the process of helping their members connect. A sticky badge with name and business affiliation takes one only so far. As leaders in organizations, we must look for ways to promote deeper, more lasting connections—and we must be aware that different members will find connection in different ways. For some of our members—more likely the younger ones—connection may come through technology, through chat-rooms and listserves sponsored by the organization. Others—at a later stage of their careers—may be seeking connection through opportunities for unstructured, in-depth discussion, or through opportunities to pass along to others what they have learned. Still others may be looking for connection through projects or tasks that they can undertake with peers.

There's a special challenge to leaders here. By the time most have reached positions of leadership, they have built relationships. Their connections may be so long-standing or ingrained that they barely remember a time when they didn't have them. The challenge is to stand back and look at the ways your organization both encourages and discourages connection. From the physical set-up of meetings, to the accessibility and friendliness of board members, to the after-hours activities, to the formality or informality of the communications with members, even to the stories we tell—each of these invites or dis-invites connection. Each evokes an emotion or an experience—be it pride, trust, safety, ownership, a sense of vulnerability or a sense of value. It's true with members. It's true with staff. What do you think your members and staff are experiencing?

What we will get from an association is a very important question when we make the decision to join. Not so obvious, but also important is the question of what we will give. People want to feel that they are part of something "big" and "lasting." Contribution may be individual—service on a committee, or going the extra mile to be a mentor to a younger, newer member. Or contribution may be something that the entire organization is a part of.

The Foundation study cites the example of the Vinyl Siding Institute (VSI)—a decidedly unsexy industry—which, in the mid-‘90s, forged a relationship with Habitat for Humanity International. Since 1995, VSI has donated more than \$1.3 million in vinyl siding and accessories, as well as provided training and volunteers to build thousands of Habitat homes. VSI members are aware of a purpose that reaches well beyond their own specific industry, and they are proud of their own contribution to creating affordable and safe housing.

What are the ways that your organization is making a meaningful contribution to the environment in which it operates? How do you offer your members opportunities to contribute—commensurate with their time, interests, and abilities? Do we make it easy to contribute, or cumbersome?

There’s a catch ... there’s always a catch. The "Meaning Matters" conversation—just like the other six conversations—needs to be ongoing. While it may be lovely to set aside some time on the agenda for discussion, unless we keep it at the forefront of our vision, and express our intent wherever and however we can, "meaning" will be crowded out by administrivia.

It would be so easy to allow the concept of meaning to be pushed aside by operational concerns and the day-to-day fires we seem always to be fighting. That’s what boards do every day. The challenge is to make room for the dialogue, to relegate the "stuff" that most boards spend the majority of their time discussing to the bottom of the agenda, and put at the very top the deep and profound conversations that we need to be having. It’s a little scary to think about—because it’s new, it’s uncharted territory, and we’ll be forging our own path. And, like anything new, it’s likely to be awkward at first, and we will stumble. Sounds a little bit like an adventure, doesn’t it? All the more reason to do it.

Are we up to the challenge?

The Seven Conversations

In addition to “Meaning Matters,” the remaining strategic conversations that could transform associations are:

Global + Local = Glocal – this refers to the circumstance wherein organizations and issues are, at the same time, opening up to international membership and international concerns, while also seeing governance devolve downward to the

state and local level. We're seeing more organizations "think globally, act locally."

Inclusivity – this conversation asks us to become aware of the remarkable diversity that surrounds us, to value the differences, welcome them, and weave them into the culture of our organizations, knowing that the rich variety of backgrounds and viewpoints will enhance our creativity, improve our decision-making, and widen our programming.

Generational Synergy – the challenge here is to create associations that meet the needs of people representing very different age groups, life experiences and expectations, and to welcome their different contributions while also encouraging interaction and exchange among the groups.

Learning Culture – more than ever before, the ability to learn is the skill individuals and organizations need to thrive in the face of change. Associations need to facilitate continuous learning in a variety of ways that capture and engage the learner. Further, associations that can cull through the morass of information and deliver the valuable knowledge contained in it will be the ones with the competitive advantage.

Transparency – this refers to the expectation that associations will be open and accountable—to their members and to the public. Gone are the days when an organization makes its decisions behind closed doors without input from the members, and without honest and reasonable disclosure to its members.

Living Organizations – recognizing that we are operating in an environment of continual change, associations need to be viewed as living systems that will self-organize and adapt to change on an ongoing basis. They will evolve with their members and leaders in an atmosphere of trust and exploration.