

The Need for Organization Increases with the Degree of the Threat

Tough Times Make Associations Earn Their Keep

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For the past few million years, humankind has been traipsing around the planet in groups. We could make a case that association for mutual protection and common interests is as old as human DNA. Hunter-gathering tribes banded together for protection from various environmental dangers and to increase their collective productivity. Once the agrarian society began to develop and we figured out how to make tools, getting together to share common problems and seek appropriate solutions got to be the thing to do.



Whether it is primitive tribes in New Guinea, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a

basketball team at the University of Washington, a group of teen “mall rats”, or the National Association of Widget Manufacturers, the concept of grouping together and forming alliances to meet common goals is nothing new, folks. They came into being because of some necessity. (Okay, so you could argue that hanging out at the mall is not necessary but that is subjective.)

In case you haven't noticed, America is faced with times of economic and social upheaval and the collective angst of our members is growing by the day. If I am not worried enough about the sad state of my 401K, I can obsess over the fact that I am totally unable to grasp the current technologies such as Twitter, or lose sleep over the plans the state legislature has to balance the budget entirely by taxing my membership into oblivion. These are tough times.

The good news is that these are times when our members really need their trade associations and professional societies. We get to earn our keep and prove our value. Our organizations serve as channels for our members to get a sense of empowerment and serve as havens for sharing the misery with their peers. They offer hope that – somehow - together we can get through this and come out the other end stronger and better than before. In short, there is an opportunity here.

Washington Society of Association Executives' members were treated recently to a terrific program on how some of Washington's leading associations were coping with the crisis. If you were there, you heard some terrific ideas for ways associations can batten down, make themselves leaner, respond to member needs, and utilize the down times to improve their processes and keep their relevance. And why not? Isn't that what WSAE is for?

Those of you who are members of the American Society of Association Executives are aware that plenty of information is being gathered on how other professional societies and trade associations are dealing with the downturn.

There is some long-standing conventional wisdom in the association field that is currently being empirically tested: *associations and professional societies become stronger during challenging times*. We all know this instinctively and here is our chance to prove our worth.

In John Maxwell's *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork*, he cites the Law of Mount Everest (Law #4). In this rule, Maxwell says that as the challenge escalates, the need for teamwork elevates.

In other words, when things are darkest and toughest and nastiest, we can't afford not to work together as a team. We need each other. We have no choice.

Law #1 is also worthy of note. It is the Law of Significance – one is too small a number to achieve greatness. We need our collective wisdom and strength to get through this mess. We need each other. We have no choice.

As in any crisis, there are opportunities lurking in the darkest corners and it is our job to help locate them and bring them out of hiding. Times like this are times when we can begin to develop organizational structures that have more meaning and are more effective in solving the problems of the 21st Century. Tough times demand change and members are generally up for it. They are more willing to take calculated risks, to innovate, to become more resourceful, to become more collaborative and, like those hunter-gatherers, to be willing to band together for protection.

As association executives, we are challenged. Any inch-deep wienie can smile when things are going great, but to smile when things are tough requires real strength of character. We need to rely upon one another to maintain our sense of humor and our optimism.

While we may need to circle the association wagons, we also need to use our collective creativity to get out from behind cover and find new ways to be even more effective.

Your members need you. They need you to provide them with a place to work to build their future. They need you to help guide the organization through dangerous waters. They need your assurance and they need a place of refuge that the association can provide.

Robert Fulghum had it nailed when he when he wrote in *Everything I Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, "And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together."