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Associations of the Future Bob Harris, CAE

Does anybody know what the association of the future looks like?

At the Institute for Organizational Management¹ offered by the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation I have the opportunity to teach – or facilitate – a class entitled *Strong Associations for the Future*.

The elective is described as an environmental scan of challenges, opportunities and resources to better position organizations.

After presenting smart practices and progressive examples, the executives offer their input about the association of the future.

Here's a summary from the class at the University of Georgia program this summer.

Start with a Strong Mission – The mission frames everything ---- be sure it is clear, powerful. Examples included *The Voice for Visual Journalists* (NPPA); Hopkins Regional Chamber's *Champion for Business – Advocate for Community*; Florida Medical Association's, *Helping Physicians Practice Medicine*. (Can you tweet your mission?)

Business Acumen – Align with the terminology of business – “nonprofit” is only a designation. Transform members into *investors and shareholders*, and work to increase *member equity*.

Don't Let Borders Limit - Think beyond boundaries; develop products and license them to the other 49 states or to allied organizations. Do members have to be the *only customers*?

Intensify Collaboration - Find new collaborative partners. For example, a local component or chamber partnering with rural health or rural water organizations to focus on adequate resource accessibility into the future.

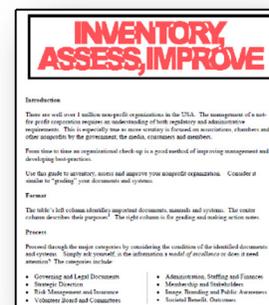
Global Benefit – Members and businesses may be expanding marketing share with an eye on *global* interests. Build relationships, insights and knowledge of global opportunities. Integrate international affairs into programs and services. For example, what is the potential impact of the enhanced Panama Canal on members, businesses and communities?

¹ The program is offered at five university sites to foster individual growth through interactive learning, resources, networking and introspection.

Technology Investment – Build technology platforms to reduce reliance on staff and improve member access to education, membership, mentoring, connectivity, etc. Invest adequately for the long-term, potentially up to ten percent of the budget.

Intellectual Property – Use the expertise of the board, staff and volunteers to create documents that position the organization as an expert in the field. Copyright the intellectual property to increase stature and credibility.

Measure Performance – Conduct an organizational Resilience Test. Available free, “Inventory, Assess and Improve” at www.nonprofitcenter.com.



Kick Ass Problem Solutions – *Innovation* must be a guiding principle for board and staff. Members foremost want answers, solutions and resolution to their problems (KAPS).

Right Size Board – State laws allow corporate governance with less than five persons. Does a board of 40, 50 or 70 directors make sense? Analyze costs associated with convening a large board, insuring them, keeping them informed, providing documents, food and beverage.

Fair Share Dues Model – What would members pay for dues based on a fair-share or value? The model comes from the restaurant promotion: “Pay only what the meal is worth.” Would members increase or decrease what they pay your organization? Upsell with tiered dues offering added access and value.

The Right Structure – Build subsidiaries to enhance revenue and opportunities in the form of a for-profit and/or foundation. Use the organization’s knowledge and equipment to create a management company for other organizations.

Trustees – Referencing the board members as trustees of the corporation should characterize the directors as having the trust of members to fulfill their fiduciary duties and governing responsibilities. A transition from, “I’m just a volunteer on a board.”

Revamp Staff Titles - Empower staff with titles that position them as experts. The Education Manager may be the *Director of Knowledge*; the Membership Director may be the *Director of Shareholder Relations and Engagement*; the CFO may be the *Asset and Equity Building Manager*.

Purposeful Abandonment – Evaluate everything that has been added to the to-do list over years and decades. If it doesn’t fit the mission or money criteria, revamp, drop or give away to another organization. Ask a task force to bring programs and resources back in line with the mission. Too many organizations simply describe their benefits

and services as a “long list without much value.” Work towards creating a “golden handcuff,” a benefit so valuable members are eager to join and renew.

The Energy of Emerging Leaders – Invest in an *Emerging Leaders and Young Professionals Forum* and give them responsibilities in the organization; they can be a powerhouse of energy and ideas.

Too Many Organizations in the Space? - Explore mergers to strengthen the community instead of divvying up the resources among multiple organizations. If not a merger – explore serious collaborative efforts.

Member Care and Wellness - If the organization positions itself as the lifelong home to members – consider a role in offering wellness services. Be ready with services when a member is stressed, addicted, etc. Don't ignore problems when members are hurting and need a place to turn.

Regional Thinking – Enlarge footprint, stature, issues expertise with regional thinking – avoid working in a silo. Find new and unique collaborative partners.

Customer Base – Focus less on “the member” but more on a broader customer base for the organization.

Issues Ownership – Consider adopting in-depth issues that impact members and community, for example *Drug Free Workforce Alliance* (resulting in insurance savings), the *Water-Economic Impact Nexus*, or the *Business Infrastructure Alliance*? Take up issues that impact members and position the organization as a respected resource and visionary.

Is the Name Tainted? – The word *association* or *chamber* denotes, “pay your dues.” Create an organization less reliant on dues, broader in services and focused on a bigger vision. Consider replacing name with council, alliance, or forum. Examples discussed included *Forius* (NACM Midwest), *Global Cold Chain Alliance*, and *Corenet Global*. Could an association of CPAs transform to the *Alliance for Business Success and Accounting*; can an Economic Develop Council be the *Economic and Global Development Forum*?

The leadership and staff should constantly scan the environment and adapt for the future.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.