



BECOMING A FIT-FOR-PURPOSE ASSOCIATION DIRECTOR

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NOTE: THIS IS AN OPINION PIECE. THE VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE BELONG SOLELY TO THE AUTHOR.

The fourth year of the turbulent twenties is underway. We are all witnesses to the impact of powerful social, technological, economic, environmental, and political (STEEP) forces that continue to create turbulence in our world, our country, our industries, and professions, and our associations. As these forces accelerate and intensify in the years ahead, the interactions among them will produce even more significant disruptions and threats. These complex issues are not going away, which means fit-for-purpose association boards will need to make many tough decisions to navigate unforgiving conditions, safeguard their stakeholders and successors from harm, and guide their associations toward thriving throughout this decade and beyond.

For anyone interested in joining an association board, please read this as a sober and unsparing reminder that board service is not a vanity exercise, a member benefit, or a reward for an association's most loyal contributors. Association board service demands genuine seriousness of purpose, demonstrable capabilities, and an unwavering commitment to accept the burdens of

stewardship, governing, and foresight (SGF) from every director and officer.

I do not offer this warning to dissuade anyone from pursuing their professional ambitions. As a past association director and national non-profit board chair, however, I understand that voluntarily accepting great responsibility and devoting oneself to a higher calling for



the benefit of others—including standing up for the futures of long-term successors whose identities remain unknown—is a momentous personal decision that cannot be taken lightly.

Six Reflection Questions

Building a fit-for-purpose association board begins with identifying fit-for-purpose board candidates. Are you one of those people? To help you decide whether you are ready to serve, I challenge you to reflect deeply on the following six questions. (Please keep in mind that deep reflection requires a quiet, distraction-free physical space in which you can concentrate on each question and capture your thoughts in writing, whatever that means to you, so you can continue to examine and refine them.)

1. **Why do I want to serve on an association board?** According to our community's orthodox beliefs, i.e., the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works, every unpaid association role is a volunteer opportunity. When it comes to board service, however, this belief is both untrue and unhelpful. Associations cannot fill their board seats with just anyone who signs up. The selection of directors and officers is (or should be) an intentional, rigorous, and thoughtful

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process that requires board aspirants to have the strongest possible rationales for their candidacies.

As I made plain above, you must locate your intrinsic motivation for seeking board service in something other than the pursuit of self-aggrandizement, status-seeking, or the expectation of achieving an advantage in your industry or profession. If you are unable to offer a convincing explanation of why you want to serve on an association board without including these self-interested reasons, you should stop pursuing a board seat until you reach a higher level of clarity in your thinking.

2. **Why am I one of the best-prepared people to help make tough decisions?** When I first shared this question in a November 2022 online article, I argued, “[p]roviding a clear, compelling, and future-ready response to this inquiry must be a *non-negotiable requirement for everyone pursuing association board service* in the turbulent twenties and beyond” [emphasis in original.] In just three months following that article's posting, we saw the explosive and disquieting rise of generative AI, the ongoing exacerbation of the climate crisis, and the continued struggle with ideological division and extremism, just three of the myriad problems boards will need to confront in this decade that confirm the importance of your answer to this question.





While the first two questions are closely related, they address different issues. Knowing why you are seeking board service is essential but not sufficient. You also must be able to support your self-awareness with persuasive evidence that you possess the requisite fitness to serve in a board role. Your answer to this question (and the next four) must demonstrate that you are fully prepared to carry the heavy burdens of stewardship, governing, and foresight.

3. **How do I learn and help others learn?** In the turbulent twenties, the experience of serving on an association board begins with the absolute need for intentional learning. Contrary to our community's orthodoxy, association boards are not omniscient. The developments of this decade's first three years remind us that association boards do not know everything. Our community was caught unprepared for the sudden (yet foreseeable) arrival of a global public health emergency and its follow-on consequences, and we still feeling the effects. As human systems guiding human systems into an uncertain

future, we must accept that boards are imperfect and will always operate with incomplete knowledge.

To validate your potential fitness as an association director, you must be able to show that you have robust learning capabilities, starting with the willingness to confront the detrimental impact of your orthodox beliefs and the humility to concede: 1) what you know; 2) what you do not know; and 3) what you don't know you don't know. Being cognizant of the limits of your expertise and knowledge helps nurture your innate curiosity, which is the energy source that powers the pursuit of disciplined learning and discovery. And since board learning is both an individual and group process, it is also crucial that you establish your authentic commitment to helping your future board colleagues learn as well.

4. **What does stewardship mean to me?** Stewardship is the board's shared commitment to leave the systems for which they are responsible better than how they found them for the benefit of stakeholders

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and successors. Through its use of the word, “systems,” this definition includes both the association and any professional communities or industry ecosystems within which the association participates and from which it benefits. Recognizing their stewardship responsibilities beyond association boundaries is a fundamental belief of fit-for-purpose boards.

Once again, we must question our community’s orthodox beliefs by making clear that it is the work of stewardship, and not leadership, that provides the solid foundation associations need to build fit-for-purpose boards capable of setting a higher standard of performance. As a possible candidate for board service, you must clarify how you think about stewardship, why it matters to you, and how you will make meaningful contributions to your board’s stewardship work.

5. **What is my orientation toward the future?**

The board’s duty of foresight, a term I originally coined in 2014, requires association boards to stand up for their successors’ futures. Fit-for-purpose boards recognize that fulfilling the duty of foresight requires a shared orientation toward the future among all directors and officers as they grapple with a full range of plausible futures, including unfavorable and unthinkable futures. This shared

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orientation is critical to board efforts to anticipate, adapt, and prepare for the challenges these plausible futures raise.

In thinking about your response to this question, you will need to grapple with the dynamic tension between optimism and pessimism toward the future. There is fundamental human need for optimism. At the same time, the reflexive choice to be optimistic in all situations interferes with the clear-eyed recognition of the wicked problems you will need to confront as an association board director.

6. **What sacrifices will you make for the benefit of your successors?**

In an October 2022 online article, I argued, “As they strive to become fit for purpose... association boards must replace [the] decades-long practice of deferring risk to future humans who have no say in the matter with a thoughtful exploration of the most meaningful sacrifices their organizations will make **starting now** to reduce the risk exposure and impact their successors will inherit in the years ahead.” [emphasis in original] To put it another way, fit-for-purpose boards must do all they can to safeguard their stakeholders and successors from harm throughout this decade and beyond.



To facilitate your reflections on the question above, I invite you to think about this additional question: **what will our successors say about us?** This is the preoccupying question of my professional life because it imbues me with a strong sense of purpose that, among other benefits, helps shape my thinking about the sacrifices I need to make to leave the association community better than how I found it. I expect you will find it to be a useful resource to help spark your thinking as well.

Can You Become A Fit-for-Purpose Association Director?

Deep reflection on difficult questions is hard work, and I want to challenge you to make it harder. Do not be satisfied with your initial responses to these six questions. Instead, push yourself to go deeper and do the uncomfortable exploration required to determine whether you have what it takes to become a fit-for-purpose association director.

If the answer is yes, I invite you to adopt my mantra: **association boards must become more.** Association boards must become more than they have been historically, and more than they are today. As a fit-for-purpose association director, you can make important contributions to help your board become more, deliver a real-world positive impact on the lives of the stakeholders and successors you serve, and emerge as the best version of yourself because of the endeavor. [F](#)



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