

Why Strategy and Foresight are



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UPCOMING KEYNOTE SPEAKER

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Associations need both strategy and foresight, and while they are clearly connected, they are not the same thing. Unfortunately, most boards of directors and chief staff executives conflate strategy and foresight in ways that can be counterproductive for their organizations and stakeholders. In this century's third decade—what I call The Turbulent Twenties—it is critical for association decision-makers to develop a crisper understanding of strategy and foresight, how they are related, how they are different and how they can maximize the benefit of both.

The Attention Challenge

Before taking a closer look at strategy and foresight, let's consider the implications of "the attention challenge" that associations must address today and going forward. Association decision-makers are mostly busy people and, in response to that busyness, associations often try to limit the amount of time they ask for from their boards and other key contributors. The famous mantra "the shorter, the better" is a widely adopted association practice that seeks to restrict not only the overall duration of board meetings, but the length of every agenda conversation as well.

Wisely managing and making effective use of decision-makers' time will always matter. In The Turbulent Twenties, however, the greatly increased cognitive complexity, as well as the accompanying emotional uncertainty created by the extremely serious issues they will confront, demand that associations and their decision-makers prioritize finding ways to maximize the generative impact of their collective attention.

The attention challenge has two dimensions: 1) applying decision-makers' attention resources to sustain their focus on the most difficult questions and issues in front of them and 2) enabling their attention as a way to interact with and experience a transforming world. The first dimension is primarily about concentration, a more difficult state to achieve among busy and often tired people whose attention is rendered even more finite, fragmented and fragile every day by ever-present mobile devices, always-on social content flows and other distractions. The second dimension is primarily about curiosity, which is about reconnecting with the intrinsic motivation to learn, the ability to reflect on and transcend long-standing assumptions and the willingness to see the world in a different way. Both strategy and foresight require contributors to operate in each mode of attention, and the manner in which contributors devote their attention to these processes is critical to ensure maximum impact in influencing the broader context in which their organizations, stakeholders and fields operate.

Not the Same Thing

By Jeff De Cagna FRSA FASAE

Differentiating between Strategy and Foresight

Within the constraints of the attention challenge, it is essential that associations design the work of strategy and foresight so they can be pursued in different yet complementary ways. Let's look at three considerations:

Different rationales—While both strategy and foresight are learning processes, they are animated by different underlying rationales. For associations, instead of an exercise in planning, strategy must be a process of learning closely with their stakeholders to develop a richly empathic understanding of the problems those stakeholders are working to solve, the needs they are striving to meet and the outcomes they aspire to achieve. The purpose of this learning process is to enable the inclusive co-creation of meaningful value, which is itself a process of learning conducted through ongoing collaboration, experimentation and innovation. To focus the association's (and their own) attention on the most important learning to pursue, strategy contributors can articulate strategic intent, which is a statement of how the organization intends to create value for itself and its stakeholders.

Foresight is learning with the future for the purpose of examining a full range of plausible futures. Every association wants to imagine its preferred future, i.e., the future it considers most favorable and beneficial. In The Turbulent Twenties, however, developing a single vision of a highly positive future will not help associations build their resilience for other less appealing futures that could emerge. To challenge their orthodox beliefs about what the future might bring, association decision-makers must actively devote their attention to considering unfavorable and unthinkable futures for their associations, stakeholders and fields. Through a consistent practice of foresight,

association decision-makers can understand and anticipate what they might have to confront over the next decade and give themselves an opportunity to prepare for it.

Different time horizons—Strategy and foresight operate on different time horizons. The pace of societal transformation, which has been accelerating for the last twenty years, will become even more relentless in the decade ahead. Strategy still matters in this uncertain environment, and yet it is best handled as a short-term learning process within a maximum window of 36 months. Inside the overall 36-month strategy window, associations should be launching experiments and capturing and applying learning in smaller windows of 6-9, 9-12 and 12-18 months, depending on the nature of the learning, and the complexity and scope of the experiments. The strategy window is not a fixed timeframe, but an iterative space that must shift with both stakeholders and the broader environment.

For association decision-makers, their attention to foresight must focus on the 84 months beyond strategy, which I call the foresight horizon. The foresight horizon, which like the strategy window is always shifting, is the period within which board and staff decision-makers can project forward from today, focus their attention on what the world could look like within that horizon and then bring what they learn back to the present to strengthen decision-making. While the learning derived from foresight is sure to provide useful insights that can inform the short-term strategy process, the focus of that process is on current stakeholders. In The Turbulent Twenties, associations also must devote attention to developing a long-term view of the future that can help boards navigate the most difficult challenges created by potent forces of turbulence, including AI/automation, the climate crisis and economic inequality.

Different contributors—Throughout my association career, there has been a consistent expectation that boards must set strategy for their associations. As we begin The Turbulent Twenties, however, it is time to challenge this sacrosanct orthodox belief by entrusting the work of developing and guiding strategy to the most important stakeholders for every association over the next decade: the under 40 cohorts. Every association wants to build meaningful relationships with their under 40 stakeholders. What better opportunity to forge an enduring connection with younger stakeholders than inviting them to take responsibility for the association's strategy work? Under 40 stakeholders are among the primary beneficiaries of an association's strategic choices, which means they bring a unique point of view to how those choices should be made. Boards can continue to play a guiding role, but the strategy as learning conversation will benefit greatly from a new infusion of attention from more diverse stakeholders who bring fresh thinking to the table.

Focusing on foresight is the most responsible and positive use of the board's limited attention. Association boards have a duty of foresight that, in many ways, is more important than the duties

of care, loyalty and obedience that comprise fiduciary responsibility. The duty of foresight reflects a moral obligation to the stakeholders of today and tomorrow and is central to the work of board stewardship. Most importantly, the duty of foresight is a choice, which is exactly what makes it powerful. Instead of an external mandate with which they must comply, association boards can exercise their agency and choose to devote their attention to learning as much as possible with the future. While other contributors are focusing their attention on short-term value creation, boards can pursue deeper sense-making, meaning-making and decision-making on the most critical issues and questions of The Turbulent Twenties.

A challenging new decade is underway, and associations will have no choice but to adapt to a more unforgiving landscape. This is not easy information to accept, but we must. We need to let go of familiar ways of working and help boards, their staff partners and other key contributors adopt next practices to give their associations and stakeholders the opportunity to thrive. In The Turbulent Twenties, we must manage the attention challenge and maximize the impact of strategy and foresight by not treating them as the same thing. 