

# Be a Voice of Optimism in Uncertain Times

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**WE LIVE IN** unprecedented times characterized by fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. These emotions are permeating every area of our society. If we are not careful, optimism will be lost, replaced by a sense of hopelessness, dread and despair. Now, more than ever, leaders have a profound responsibility to develop messages of optimism and hope. This may sound counterintuitive.

However, messaging during tough times must be intentional, future-focused and hopeful. Some may read this as disingenuous. In fact, it is one of the few tools that leaders have for steering their associations through today's turbulent times.

This article presents practical, actionable strategies that association leaders can use to message appropriately in light of

the threats that could potentially derail their organization's progress and decimate their members' businesses. Before presenting the strategies, there is an important theory that is worth considering. It is social constructionism. This theory is anchored in the idea that we have the power to create meaning together. Further, shared meaning has tremendous value



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that allows you to use language to shift and construct new understandings of our current socio-political health crisis. Fundamentally, using optimism requires the leader to actually be hopeful in spite of what we are experiencing. Optimism requires that leaders quell the panic by consistently using messages that refocus energy. This is especially important in the association world. Not only must leaders help make meaning for their staff, they must also help create meaning for the industries and individuals that they serve. This mandate cannot be taken lightly. Here are three steps required to message optimistically in the midst of crises.

### **1 Acknowledge Our Shared Reality**

First and foremost, messages must not ignore the current reality. That means admitting what is nebulous, acknowledging the unknown. Messages that are not reality-based will be immediately ignored. The skill is in acknowledging reality and putting it in perspective. What might that look like? It entails acknowledging the fact that we have never experienced a worldwide health pandemic like this. Certainly, acknowledging the very real fears of death and disease for ourselves and our loved ones. Further, acknowledging the fact that no one knows when this will end is a must.

After acknowledging the reality, the message should reaffirm the mettle inherent in human beings. Ask people to consider

what we have survived. Remind them of the terror that Americans felt after 9/11. Remind them that we withstood that terror with a renewed sense of patriotism, that we supported each other, reached out to strangers to provide comfort, and developed a new appreciation for first responders. The 9/11 tragedy forced us to consider new ways to protect travelers. We implemented new systems that have enhanced our sense of security. Your message may also include recalling the HIV epidemic. Again, we were rocked with fear, apprehension, and, for some, a sense of trepidation. Here we are a few decades later with treatments that have improved prognoses and significantly improved the quality of life for people stricken with that virus. Help people to consider that this is certainly devastating but it is not insurmountable. Help them to also remember that like every catastrophe, it will pass. We will not be unscathed, but we will get through.

### **2 Accept Our 'New Normal'**

After crafting a message that acknowledges reality and anchors it with past victories, the second strategy is to stress the fact that there will be a "new normal." That new state does not have to imply deficits. In fact, the new normal can be much of what is collaboratively created. Invite people to consider the fact that post-crisis there will be opportunities for innovation. As association executives you are in a prime position to advance innovations that expand beyond your organization to the larger industries

in creating positive change. One of my interpretations of social constructionism is that language is our most powerful tool of creation and re-creation.

Association leaders have the power to use language to create hope for the future. If you are willing to consider social constructionism as a foundation for messaging you will be implementing a powerful tool

## A leader's communication can create hope, optimism, and renewed spirits. All three are necessary if we are to revitalize after this severely impactful crisis.

that you represent and serve. Pull members, staff, and colleagues in other associations into the process of creating novel ways to serve members. Ask stakeholders to think broadly and consider ways in which your work can be leveraged to benefit communities. Imagine new ways of doing business that demonstrate a commitment to higher levels of social responsibility.

Use your messaging to encourage others to focus forward in positive ways. Build paths to collaboration by using messaging that encourages brainstorming about the ways in which the mission, vision, purpose, and values of the organization need to shift. The more that your message moves the energy from anxiety to action, the more likely that you will plant seeds that produce hope. Inviting people into the process of rebuilding engages them in using their energy to create the desired future. That effort is vital if optimism is to re-emerge. It will create a new momentum that enables the association to thrive, not just survive. It gives people tools for inspiring and motivating themselves. Leaders are tasked with giving people tools that they can use to improve their mental states. Asking them to think forward, propose innovations,

and collaborate to rebuild the association offers mechanisms to do just that. It will benefit the association in the long-run.

### **3** Focus on What We Can Accomplish Together

Third, and finally, the messaging should remind people of our shared humanity. Leaders are responsible for fostering the bonds that protect us all. With the reliance on teleworking there are greater chances of isolation. Use your message to reaffirm the importance of community. Encourage members and staff to define what community should look like now. Use your message to explore new, different ways that colleagues can provide support to each other. Be certain to ask them to define what support looks and feels like to them.

There are many different notions of support. It may include virtual support groups, use of counselling and therapy through your employee assistance program, and creative ideas for building community. Keep the dialogue going by asking stakeholders to share their ideas for support as they continue to move through the aftermath. Ideas will continue to evolve and emerge as we level-set organizations and industries. Stakeholders will likely present ideas that you have not considered because

no one of us has all of the answers. The collaborative effort is required to protect our human bonds.

Social constructionism is a powerful tool for creating new realities. It enables leaders to collaboratively create a range of new possibilities. Using this approach requires focused attention on language, as it is the most powerful tool available for creating new organizational realities.

The three messaging strategies provide a framework for dispelling pessimism and replacing it with a more powerful, positive mindset. What is presented acknowledges reality, uses the past to hearten stakeholders, builds collaboration, and reinforces the need for support. Finally, the messaging approach presented shines the light on our shared humanity. Protecting our human bonds is a paramount leadership responsibility. Use these messaging tools to inspire collective confidence, restore hope, and build resilience. ●

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