

RECONNECTING WITH MEMBERS AND STAFF AFTER A MAJOR DISRUPTION

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Without a doubt, we have been forced to disengage in ways we never thought possible. Even with the use of Zoom and other platforms, the association world has been rocked. Annual meetings, conferences, and conventions have been cancelled. Not only does that diminish revenues, it disrupts the relational element that is inherent in these important gatherings. Consider the colleagues who look forward to connecting at these annual events; these events are often the only time that many can share face-to-face communication, enjoy a meal together, and simply enjoy eye-to-eye connections.

Disengagement runs deeper than simply longing to see friends and colleagues at an annual meeting. Staff who see each other daily now have to connect electronically. That means that little rituals like meeting at the Keurig machine to discuss kids' sporting events, college plans, and curfew violations are lost. It also means that impromptu brainstorming sessions cannot occur. These may seem like trivial losses in the light of the current pandemic. In fact, they have the potential to leave deep and lasting scars on the association. Associations are relational by nature. Not only must you maintain strong relationships with members, you also have to maintain an organizational culture that fosters healthy staff relationships. Those connections have to be resurrected and strengthened in order to shape a new future.

Recognizing that disengagement is very real, we need to move to strategies for reconnecting. Let's begin by working on the internal reconnections. Getting staff back together physically will be easier than moving them back into synchronized operations and relationships. This will be even more difficult if you were dealing with disgruntled employees, silos, and poor collaboration before the crisis. Whatever circumstance you were facing before the pandemic, this is an opportunity to create a new, healthy organizational reality. The next paragraphs provide approaches for re-engaging internally.

The work begins with building fluid, honest dialogue. Invite your staff to share openly. This means sharing where their work has been derailed and the impact that it is having on them and members. They should be invited to share the strategies that they view as viable for getting their work on track. Each department will be well served by having these outcome-focused discussions. These discussions are the start. The next step is to develop a short-term strategy for getting the work back on track in each department. Notice, this is a collaborative effort that relies on dialogue. It is not simply whatever plan the leader concocts. It invites the staff to invest. That investment is how we begin rebuilding engagement.

Consider building dialogue about the human experiences of the pandemic. Do not assume that this conversation will only focus on horror stories. Intentionally draw out the stories of families growing closer, friendships recharged, and health restored. This is not to say that leaders ignore the trauma that staff experienced. Rather, it invites a range of dialogue that includes the stories of hope and resilience. In any catastrophic situations there



are always glimmers of light. The conversations that address human experiences should give voice to positive stories that encourage staff to regain their belief in better.

Re-engage staff by asking each person to select a member organization and one or two people in that organization that they will commit to reconnecting with. Here is what that may look like. An association that serves the aging services community asks a staff member, not necessarily one in member relations, to reach out to one of the member facilities. Ask them to schedule a call with a leader in the organization to simply check-in and discuss how they are handling the new normal. Not only will this foster deeper human connections, it will also help you gather more data about member needs. It also redirects the energy of staff. This new focus helps staff to see beyond themselves and develop new relationships that

they may one day count as part of their professional network and support system.

The reconnection between staff and members is a natural prelude to the next approaches. These approaches address ways to re-engage with members. Recognizing that almost everyone is shell-shocked, approach members with that awareness. Develop a campaign strategy for re-engagement. Smart politicians focus on messaging. Think long and hard about the messages that you want to transmit. Be clear about your strategic intent. Effective post-crisis messaging should reinforce confidence in the association. It should offer substantive support and encouragement. It should inspire optimism and stress our inherent human resilience.

Remember that the communication is not a one-way street. Build dialogue with members; don't make the mistake

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of talking at stakeholders. Just as it is important to have fluid dialogue with staff, it is important to use the same approach with members. This may sound very obvious; however, it is worth saying: do not send a message that has not been well thought out and vetted. While members can be forgiving, they will not forget major blunders.

Nothing replaces the human connection. **Plan a listening tour where you and others from your leadership team visit member organizations.** Schedule time to not only talk with their senior leadership, make time to say hello to the rank and file. This is a clear demonstration of your concern for the well-being of member organizations. It is also a way to develop a deeper understanding about the needs and challenges of your members. This is not simply a public relations gimmick. It is a very viable way to reconnect with your members and restore hope. It is also a demonstration of the association's commitment to each member's survival.

Shift focus to remain relevant. Gather members and staff together to determine the focus of the future. This can be accomplished through focus groups, town halls, or other methods that draw out multiple voices. Your association's survival is correlated with how germane your strategy is to current member needs. Revisit strategy and mission during these structured discussions. Do not assume that just because the world is returning to its new normal that your mission and strategy can meet your member's evolving needs. While you may mourn the past, it is essential that you move into the future. Survival often means letting go. Recognize the uncertainties of the future and still position the association to move forward.

Learning does not end because we are surviving a catastrophic time. Not only do you want to offer up-to-date content to members, you want to partake in the learning with them. Be certain that you, as a leader, are staying abreast of different ways to lead and inspire. Take the time for your learning as you offer new resources through multiple delivery channels to members. Learning extends to staff. Keep them actively engaged in developing new skills and competencies. Learning is an important tool in member and staff retention. Both want to be connected with organizations that consistently offering opportunities for growth.

Re-engaging after disruptions is not an impossible task. It is, without a doubt, difficult. It requires that association leaders be intentional and avoid a reactive posture. Focus not only on building stronger connections with members, but also with staff. Both sets of constituents determine whether you will thrive in the future. Dialogue, intentionality, and constant learning are pivotal in refocusing your organization for the future. ▶▶▶



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