



COVID-19 Resources

Reimagine, Renew, Rebound: The Path Forward for Association Leadership

By Joanne L. Smikle • April 3, 2020

No doubt about it, every association executive is asking themselves, "What's next?" What next for revenue? What next for member retention? What next for member services? What next for staff retention? What next for morale? The list of questions is almost endless. And the angst that accompanies those questions runs deep. Rather than acting in haste or becoming paralyzed, be thoughtful and strategic in your approach as you reimagine the future of your association.

You, as a leader, understand that change is a process, not an event. While we all want to right our ships immediately, reality tells us that instant, widespread change is seldom well developed. Immediate, sweeping change does not allow for thoughtful, well-reasoned and systemic interventions. Patience is not a luxury; it is a mandate for sound leadership, particularly during trying times.

Even in the midst of the current catastrophic climate, it is still important to remember that your association's rebound will be an iterative process that requires patience, time and determination. Equally as important, sustainable change begins on the individual level, spreads to the team, the organization, and then the industry. This means that the shift doesn't begin with staff or members, it begins with you. Association leaders begin creating change by developing an understanding of what needs to change in the way that they lead. It may be time to shed approaches that worked in the past but hinder progress in this evolving business environment. That may mean changing the way that you communicate or the way that you relate to members and staff.

Begin by gathering feedback from trusted advisers on what you need to modify and how. Invite stakeholders into the process of reimagining your association. The process of reimagining begins with discovering new approaches for envisioning the organization. Examine what is sacred, why, and whether it should remain hallowed in the evolving environment. Conduct a dispassionate analysis of your vision and core values. At the very least, your vision should morph into something that reflects the current and emerging reality. Reimagine the vision with a global perspective, meaning look outside of the association world to other industries. Be willing to continually seek input from the larger business world. Ask the same of stakeholders; invite them to bring ideas from outside of their normal sphere. A new vision is an imperative for moving into the future. It allows the association to dream new dreams and discover or create new possibilities.

Reimagining the association includes revisiting the core values to synchronize them with the vision that emerged post-crisis. Values are enduring characteristics of the organization. Values define what the organization, meaning all of its stakeholders, define as most important in everyday operations, in strategy, and in critical decision situations. As they are reshaped, they can serve as barometers or guideposts for weighing alternatives and considering whether potential consequences are acceptable. We often have the misconception that values are fixed. In fact, in the aftermath of tragedy values need to be reevaluated and reshaped. Just as people evolve and change with time, so too must the association's values.

As leaders guide the association in processing what has occurred during this pandemic, discoveries will arise resulting from the experience. Those discoveries will reveal facets of new core values that have the potential to aid in the rebound required. As we clear the ashes, it will be important to take stock of what we value most, both the articulated values and those that are unspoken. Emerging values should capture what is at the heart of the organization as it envisions its future. Leaders are responsible for guiding stakeholders in conceptualizing the design on the reimagined association. The design should be congruent with the newly created vision and values.

While it seems like reimagining vision and values are static processes, they are actually quite dynamic. This iterative work goes deep and offers the possibility for systems change in the association. The work calls for questioning what was the status quo. That can be threatening; it can inspire discomfort and fear. Post-trauma there is a deep desire to return to what was familiar – that is neither realistic nor possible. Leaders need to get comfortable raising difficult questions and encouraging others to do the same. Questioning will lead to periods of observation. Rather than accepting what initially comes forth post-trauma, leaders are well-served by paying attention to behaviors, details, relationships, resource allocation, and other factors that impact how the association will move forward. This is an area that is often overlooked because of the pressures and profound desire to get back on track. Making the time to be observant reduces the likelihood of being caught up in a tailspin of reinvention. Observant leaders create space for experimentation. Paying attention to what is actually happening enables, and even encourages, thoughtful experiments. What was is no more. Employ a systematic process so your rebound is defined by innovations emerging from multiple experiments.

The reimagining detailed thus far addresses structural elements of the organization: vision, values and redesign. The renewal required for rebounding addresses the human element. Leaders are responsible for helping individuals heal. Some readers may think that the concept of healing is too "touchy-feely" and not a good use of time. Others may think that it is more important just to get back to business or may have the mindset that healing should occur in private domains and has no place in the work world. I challenge all of those notions. Healing has to happen if employees are to ever regain any sense of normalcy. They bring their heads, hearts and hands to work every day. If any element of that triumvirate is broken, it becomes difficult for the other elements to function effectively.

Leaders promote healing, thereby fostering renewal, by creating a forum for feelings. Consider inviting a licensed trauma therapist to facilitate sessions that enable employees to process the experience of the pandemic from their perspectives. Larger associations may have employee assistance programs. Remind employees that those are available for their use. Encourage employees to find their own ways of supporting and encouraging each other. Helping employees heal may include pointing them to books, articles, podcasts, and TED Talks that restore the psyche. Recognize that it will be difficult for many to reconcile the events that have rocked our sense of well-being. They will need extended comfort and support. Be mindful that this is not a "get over it" or "snap out of it" situation.

Healing extends – in fact, it begins – with the self. Do the work required to shore up your emotional reserves. There are surely many thoughts and feelings that each of us has to make peace with. Like every other element of the rebound, this personal reinvigoration requires time. Rebuilding your reserve is as important as creating room for others to do the same. Use momentary pauses to identify ways to continue to focus on your own healing. Valuing the human element begins with the care and compassion you show yourself.

The rebound is possible. It is even probable if you are willing to consider how change happens. Remember: It is a process; it is not an event with a start and end point. Recognize the need for employing a systems approach that reimagines the entire association. That reimagining entails analyzing vision and values. Both will need to be revisited and revised to reflect the association's strategic intent for the future.

Vision and values deal with the operational side of the organization. The human element is at the heart of renewal. It cannot be ignored. It is the human beings who will make the rebound possible. While we are resilient, we continue to need support so that healing can occur. The leader is not exempt from that need. Recognize that reimagining and renewal are long-term commitments. They lay the foundation for the rebound that we are all seeking.



About The Author

Joanne L. Smikle, Ph.D., a respected authority on leadership and organization development, provides virtual and on-site services to organizations across the country. She is a frequent conference speaker who delivers substantive learning. Read more of her insightful articles at smiklespeaks.com.

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Apr 17, 2020

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Our March 26 webinar, Events in Crisis? What to Do Now & What to Do Next, generated several thoughtful questions about the postponement and rescheduling of events due to a crisis like COVID-19. We provided the answers to all of the questions here:
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