

CEO UPDATE

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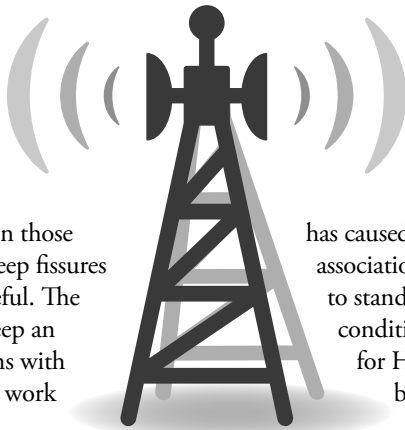
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Open communication with board is critical during crisis

Top execs must stay in contact with volunteer leaders but be mindful of their time; tips for holding virtual board meetings, page 7

By **Walt Williams**

Working with an association's board members can be challenging during normal times, but crises can cause hairline fractures in those relationships to grow into deep fissures if top executives are not careful. The best course of action is to keep an open line of communications with your board and do the extra work



to make sure their jobs are no more difficult than they need to be, according to consultants and association executives.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions for many associations, but not all groups can afford to stand still and wait for more favorable conditions. The International Society for Heart and Lung Transplantation began the year with a new CEO,

Greg Schultz, and a board of directors meeting that launched a complete overhaul of the Chicago-based organization's governance and structure.

"We have to move forward because it was not something that can be done halfway," Schultz said. "It was a vulnerable time for the organization. We are like a snake that has shed its skin and not yet grown its new skin, so it was important we completed the process."

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Now is time for groups to give back

Despite intense financial pressure, associations need to put members first, money second

By **William Ehart**

Your assets have taken a hit on Wall Street, meeting revenue is gone or at risk, and cash flow may be drying up. And that's just today. Tomorrow may bring a membership reckoning if the economy can't get moving again soon.

What to do?

Many associations with the financial wherewithal—such as a strong reserve cushion—are increasing member benefits, including discounted or free dues, products and services, like training and education for members and members' employees. Stepping up pays dividends in the form of goodwill and better positioning when the crisis is over.

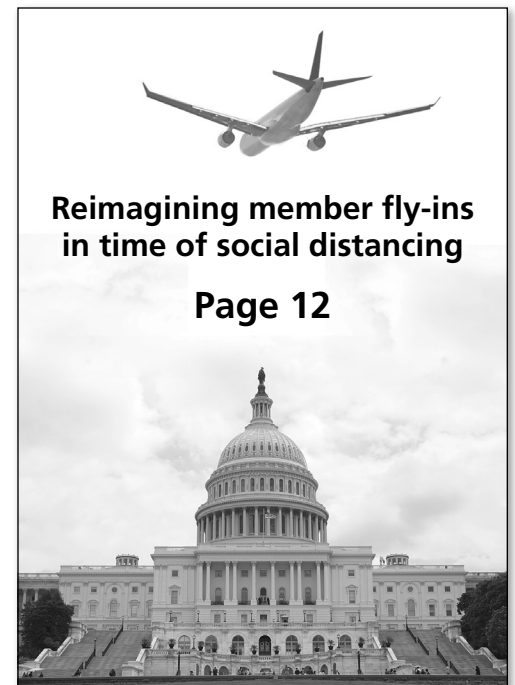
"The reason that you have to have a strong

trade association is moments like this," said Bob Goldberg, CEO of the \$245 million-revenue National Association of Realtors. "This is not the time to worry about making extra nondues revenue. This is the time to figure a way to give something back to your members."

Among other steps, NAR is offering its 1.4 million members and their families free 24-hour telemedicine benefits for two months as part of its relaunching of "Right Tools, Right Now," a program begun during the 2007-09 financial crisis. The benefit normally costs \$15 a month for a family.

ASAE has extended three months' free membership, and delayed payment terms to sponsors,

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Reimagining member fly-ins in time of social distancing

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HEBERT TO RETIRE AS CEO OF NURSE PRACTITIONERS ASSOCIATION

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Open communication with board critical during crisis

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In his former role as executive vice president at association management firm Kellen, Schultz advised clients on subjects such as board culture. Now as a CEO, he and his staff have been finding creative ways to keep ISHLT's board of directors and executive committee in the loop as the association pushes forward with its overhaul.

"The board meets quarterly, including at the annual meeting" that was canceled because of COVID-19 concerns, Schultz said. "We had to have three interim meetings by phone to make some of these important decisions around the meeting and some of the other issues we face."

Schultz also has had to keep in mind that as medical professionals, his board members are busy dealing with the pandemic and don't have the time to participate in lengthy board meetings. The materials he gives them for meetings "had to be very carefully sequenced with appropriate background information to protect their time, because they are very, very engaged with patients," he said.

Maria Brennan, CEO of Women in Cable Telecommunications, said the most useful thing her group did heading into the current crisis was model the pandemic's potential financial ramifications on the association and provide that information to board members. For WICT, transparency was key.

"As fiduciaries, (the association) needs to be able to look at all the different scenarios we may be facing," she said. "Likewise, as CEO, you want to loop in your leadership so they know these are the best-case and worst-case scenarios we were looking at."

Stay-in-place orders and health advisories against mass gatherings have forced most groups to switch from traditional in-person board meetings to virtual conferencing, and WICT is no exception. Still, it hasn't been much of a problem, Brennan said. Her group provides distance learning for industry professionals, so it had already invested and trained in the use of the conference software needed.

"So it's nice when you are able to take a technology that was purchased and intended for one thing and be able to apply it to the broad spectrum of things in a COVID-19 universe," she said.



Schultz



Brennan



Mister

Open door policy

Communications is key during a crisis, and consultant Seth Kahan of Visionary Leadership said those efforts should start with the board chair.

"Immediately you need to reach out to the chair and raise all the strategic issues," he said. "And the expectation is you won't have answers to them, but you just need to move into a highly collaborative tight relationship with the chair because this is an urgent situation."

Crises are a time for executives to get "very tight" with their volunteer leadership, Kahan said. That means establishing regularity in your outreach to top volunteer members.

"My recommendation in an emergency environment is you have a weekly conversation (with your chair) where you get to go through all the issues, and then you have another conversation in that same week where you touch base and talk about all the changes that have taken place, and that can be 10 to 15 minutes," he said.

Executives should extend those conversations to members of their organizations' executive committees so they remain in the loop, Kahan said. After that, if you have a larger board, you don't necessarily need to be in such close communication, but it doesn't hurt to touch base with board members once every week or every two weeks depending on the urgency of the situation for your industry.

"What all of these things boil down to is two things—systematic, periodic communication that is stepped up, and greater transparency on short-term issues and their impact on strategy."

A personal touch in your communications is also helpful. Just as association executives are stressed right now working from home and possibly dealing with children not in school, board members are facing the same challenges. "Plus this is their volunteer job," said Erin Fuller, president of association solutions for consulting firm MCI USA. Top executives need to show some understanding of their plight.

"This is really a time to nurture those relationships—to reach out to people and ask how are they and listen," she said. "This is the role of counselor or trusted adviser: someone who knows a lot about what the volunteer leader does but isn't in their professional space. There may not be a role for coaching, per se, but listening and empathy."

Still, the reality is that the executives who didn't previously take the time to build those relationships are much more likely to have their work cut out for them in the months ahead. Steve Mister, CEO of the Council for Responsible Nutrition, noted his group has gone out of its way to encourage staff to interact with board members whenever possible. It also held events outside of regular board meetings, such as dinners, where board members could get to know one another on a personal level.

"In these kinds of situations, that pays off because our members trust each other to make decisions," Mister said. "We've made some very important decisions in the last couple of weeks within our committees, and they are able to do that remotely—and are able to trust each other—because we built those relationships over time." ■

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ERIN FULLER

PRESIDENT OF ASSOCIATION SOLUTIONS, MCI USA