

Capable and Responsible:

Focusing Association Boards on What Really Matters

NLAE Green Industry Leadership Forum • October 13, 2006 • Dallas, Texas

Five Core Beliefs for 21st Century Association Boards and Board Members

- **Boards must accept the responsibility of stewardship**—One definition of stewardship is “taking responsibility for the survival and well-being of something that is valued.” At the micro level, the specific activities in which boards engage often do not seem connected to this overarching intention. And yet it is the genuine commitment to effective stewardship that every board member must exhibit at all times, especially when making critical strategic choices with long-term implications. Board members also must realize that “survival and well-being” are equally important elements of stewardship: **the former is about maintaining the present, while the latter is about building a sustainable future.**
- **Boards must act with integrity and authenticity**—The choice for a board to act with integrity and authenticity goes much deeper than the responsible and appropriate handling of the organization’s financial matters or the posting of meeting minutes to a website. The decision to be “open and transparent,” while very important, simply makes the board’s activities available for scrutiny by external audiences. It is *what* boards do and *how* they do it while others are paying attention (and when they aren’t) that determines whether they are approaching stewardship with the level of integrity and authenticity required today and going forward.
- **Boards must invest more into the future**—Association boards often get bogged down in debates about the continued relevance of cherished traditions or the minutiae of arcane governance issues, while not investing sufficient personal and organizational resources in exploring the future. As stated above, however, building a sustainable future is an inescapable responsibility of successful stewardship. CEOs and board members must collaborate to change both the content and form of their conversations, and place greater emphasis on where the association is going, as well as the values, principles and drivers that will enable its success as it heads there.
- **Boards must champion innovation**—Growth depends on innovation and every association board and senior management team must adopt and act on a growth perspective. The alternative is nothing more than the slow and inexorable descent into irrelevance and extinction. The profound, accelerating and intensifying disruption and discontinuity of today’s operating environment doesn’t offer very much protection, which is precisely the reason why association board must do more to shape the destinies of their organizations. The strategic pursuit of innovation is, without question, the best way to do that.
- **Boards must embrace simplicity**—One of the most significant innovation opportunities right in front of associations today is simplicity, and boards of directors should be doing all they can to advance those efforts. Staff, members and volunteers live and work in a time of extraordinary complexity along multiple dimensions, and intangible resources such as attention, energy and passion must not be squandered in the name of tradition or a commitment to the way things have always been done. Associations that can make it easier for staff to succeed, simpler for members to engage and less complicated for volunteers to lead will have a distinct advantage in the years ahead.

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