

*What could your association accomplish if you exemplified curiosity, care, imagination, choice, courage, and responsibility? In tomorrow's associations—"Associations 3.0"—embracing these new traditions could change everything.* **By Jeff De Cagna**

# The Next Traditions of Association 3.0

For associations, achieving sustainable success in the 21st century is appreciably more difficult because the underlying fabric of the society within which our organizations first emerged and grew in significance continues to unravel at an accelerating pace. These developments create numerous strategic implications for our organizations, but at a very basic level, this kind of deep-seated change raises difficult questions about the *raison d'être* for associations.

So far, we have failed to reorient our thinking in the midst of the upheaval induced by this global, technology-enabled transformation. Yet, as the first decade of this century draws to a close, a possible framework for designing the third-generation association—an enterprise capable of reweaving the fraying social fabric in original and compelling ways—is becoming clearer. To make the creation of such a venture possible, however, staff and volunteers across our community must first embrace its counterintuitive, animating belief: The only way to respect the past is to create the future.

### Association 3.0

Some very thoughtful observers of what's happening in our community have characterized the current period of our historical development as Association 2.0, largely based on the growing influence and impact of the social technologies and philosophies of Web 2.0. Without question, the web is the most potent and disruptive value-creation tool ever devised, and the near-epidemic proliferation of social media and networking tools is among the reasons why. But while the web may be only in its second iteration, associations are finally arriving at a later evolutionary stage.

The initial creation of associations in the late 18th and 19th centuries was a nascent period we can call Association 1.0. The emergence of societies of association executives in the early decades of the 20th century, including Association Forum of Chicagoland in 1916 and ASAE in 1920, set the table for a focus on "managerial professionalism" that eventually led to the creation of the CAE designation in 1960. Throughout this time, and up to the present day, the emphasis on strengthening the professionalism of our organizations has been the operating principle for this community, and it is more accurate to call this period Association 2.0.

Now that the long-term prospects for our membership-centric model are beginning to fade, and business model innovation is sorely needed, the time has come for Association 3.0. As we move beyond the premise of managerial professionalism, the defining dynamic of Association 3.0 must be "systemic capacity-building," an open, inclusive, and holistic approach to rethinking and redesigning the underlying human and organizational systems that make the act and experience of "associating" possible. We will be unable to adopt this new mindset, however, if we cannot update our conventional wisdom about tradition and the role it has always played within our organizations.

### A Tradition of Tradition

It is axiomatic that an abiding reverence for tradition lives deep inside the

DNA of associations—and certainly within those organizations measuring their longevity in multiple decades or centuries. On some level, of course, our community's enduring adherence to tradition is understandable, since it is a core element of the resilience many organizations have sought to build over time. But when associations face myriad unprecedented challenges requiring bold, inventive solutions, we cannot continue to honor our heritage at the expense of continuously innovating on behalf of our posterity.

For most associations, tradition is a set of practices—the ways we have always done things—that have been followed zealously since time immemorial. Indeed, the fervor with which we pursue some traditions suggests that they were handed down on carved stone tablets by omniscient immortals. What we must acknowledge, however, is that all of our traditions were invented at some point in the past, coming into being only as a result of what were most likely routine choices made years, decades, or centuries ago by people like us. And just like us, our ancestors had no realistic expectations that the world in which they lived would remain the same and no credible reason for believing that any organizational commitment to their choices would last forever.

So what if we choose to view tradition differently? What if instead of as a set of practices, we decide to make use of tradition as a platform for innovation? What if instead of ways of doing, tradition is simply a commitment to respect certain ways of thinking and being as an association, even as the world around us changes? As leaders in our organizations and guardians of the purposes they pursue, we can choose to reimagine our associations for a brand new world by inventing our next traditions. By living in the future and focusing our energy and attention on what's next—instead of living in the past and dwelling on what has been—we reinvigorate our pursuit of mission, the most sacred covenant that exists between and among our predecessors, our successors, and

ourselves. On the strength of a renewed intergenerational commitment, we can undertake the challenging work of building third-generation associations that are able to succeed in the long run.

### Next Traditions

If we choose to make tradition a platform for innovation, we must embrace ways of thinking and being that will serve our organizations well even as we progress toward a turbulent and uncertain future. Following are six "next" traditions that can form the core belief system of Association 3.0 and bolster our efforts to make innovation a top strategic priority.

**Tradition of curiosity.** Most organizations say the right things about the importance of learning, but precious few make it a constant priority, a condition that Association 3.0 cannot tolerate. In a world in which association leaders simply don't know what they don't know, learning is an absolute prerequisite for success. Before there can be learning, however, there must be curiosity.

Curiosity inspires us to learn as much as possible—especially about ideas that challenge our perspectives—rather than narrowing our search to the supposed "right" answers that reinforce our existing assumptions. To build curiosity, we must be able to ask more expansive and thoughtful questions, stay with those questions for as long as we can, and consider the entire continuum of possible answers, including both strategic opportunities and unintended consequences. Inquiry lies at the heart of curiosity. As Albert Einstein said, "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing."

**Tradition of care.** There is considerable discussion in associations about the need to build community, but genuine communities are much more than collections of like-minded individuals. Indeed, the strength of our Association 3.0 communities should be measured not by what makes their members the same, but by the ability of these groups

to sustain bonds of empathy and trust, even in the face of divergence and dissent. Before there can be community, then, there must be care.

When we demonstrate care, we act with empathy toward others. We try to put ourselves in their place, look at the world through their eyes, and we recognize that our differences do not need to divide us. When we care, trust is our default setting; we do not demand that our colleagues first prove their fidelity either to the association or to us as colleagues. Care is a gift we share with others because it matters to us, and one we hope to receive in return because it also matters to them.

**Tradition of imagination.** As I have argued repeatedly, innovation is the central association capability of the 21st century. But it is too simplistic to say that innovation is about nothing more than incrementally trying new things or doing old things in new ways. Innovation is about envisioning what is possible, pushing indefatigably to make that vision a reality, and creating radical new value in the process. Before there can be innovation, therefore, there must be imagination.

Only when we unleash the human imagination will we be able to create the full range of disruptive innovation that Association 3.0 will require to realize its full potential. To once again quote Albert Einstein, “imagination is more important than knowledge.” We cannot build a more vibrant future for associations using only what we already know. Through our imagination, however, we can discover what we don’t yet know, using the raw material of fresh insight to create something extraordinary.

**Tradition of choice.** Diversity, along all dimensions, is exploding in our world, and yet most of that amazing variety is still excluded from our organizations. Whether or not this omission is intentional, it is a profound strategic mistake that we must correct. Before there can be inclusion, then, there must be choice.

In a long-tail world filled with an infinite number of niches, choice is now a paramount business consideration

for all organizations. If Association 3.0 is going to be an attractive and worthwhile opportunity for diverse people and perspectives, we must make it easier for those individuals and ideas to find a home in our organizations. By creating more choices for how that can happen through new forms of collaborative engagement, we can increase the total surface area of our associations and, in the process, make them more inclusive. Rather than being all things to all people, Association 3.0 can be a trusted community in which all interested contributors are welcome to follow their inspiration and pursue their aspirations.

**Tradition of courage.** In concert with a tradition of choice, there must be a tradition of courage. It is impossible to look at the world around us and not recognize its increased openness, as well as the growing demand for even more transparency and authenticity from leaders and organizations. Before there can be openness, however, there must be courage.

Too often, association leaders allow personal or political considerations to squelch their true thoughts and feelings about the issues facing their organizations. For Association 3.0 to succeed, leaders will need to demonstrate the courage of their convictions by speaking forthrightly, even (and especially) when those views are politically unpopular. Moreover, leaders will need to act decisively to break down the walls that encircle our organizations and, in so doing, open our enterprises to greater daylight. Scrutiny is nothing to be feared when courageous leaders create transparent organizations that operate consistently with integrity and honor.

**Tradition of responsibility.** Perhaps the most significant challenge facing Association 3.0 is the need to imbue all contributors, and especially our boards, with a strong sense of stewardship. In the simplest possible terms, stewardship is a commitment to leave the organization better than how it was found, even though the stewards don’t own it. Stewardship isn’t about optimizing the

status quo. It is about embracing the future. Before there can be stewardship, therefore, there must be responsibility.

Responsibility is the lifeblood of stewardship. While accountability places a greater emphasis on identifying who is to blame when things go wrong in the short run, responsibility cares more about what will be done to make sure things go right over time. When association boards fully embrace their stewardship, it frees them to let go of personal agendas and set aside political battles. Stewards focus on what is best for the mission and the enterprise. They will not always agree on how to answer the crucial questions they ask, but they will always share a common agreement that creating a more vibrant future is their primary concern.

Eight years into the 21st century, many organizations continue to struggle with the transition to Association 3.0, and they need help. My advice to them is clear: the only way to respect the past is to create the future. Leaders in our community can no longer afford to believe that they will enhance the prospects of their associations by acting on the basis of a retrospective point of view. Never in human history has where we’ve been served as a less useful guide to where we are headed. We need to invent the next traditions for our organizations, ways of thinking and being that will allow us to move forward with greater confidence so that we may realize our full potential. This is what our predecessors did for us, and what our successors expect us to do for them today. **an**

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