

The world is in a state of incredible danger. I won't use Bridges to repeat what you read in the newspaper and hear on television. Instead, I want to show how I perceive

## The Best and Worst of Times

the state of the association profession and share with you some steps that GWSAE and your colleagues are taking to ensure that their organizations remain healthy and relevant.

Associations struggle with many critical issues, ranging from the ambiguous business climate to industry mergers to personal and organizational safety. In addition, the Enron and United Way upheavals are prompting greater board involvement and oversight of financial management and operations. Boards also are demanding more concrete metrics and increased accountability.

Associations are responding. Contingency budgets are commonplace, with associations budgeting for best- and worst-case scenarios and everything in between. All line items are being scrutinized carefully and nonessentials cut. Simultaneously, associations are seeking additional revenue by developing new products and services and spending more energy on those with the highest likelihood of strong returns on investment.

The need for transparency has never been greater — nor has the need for strong, ethical leaders. Associations value politically savvy straight shooters with demonstrated integrity and openness, and they are looking for those leaders at all organizational levels, from staff to volunteer. Also apparent is an increased propensity to listen to and honor the voices of diversity — generational, ethnic, and religious — and to ardently promote inclusiveness. All voices must be heard.

Even those processes long relied on, such as strategic planning, have altered. Gone are three- to five-year plans; the environment in which associations are

operating is evolving so fast that strategies and tactics relevant today will not be so tomorrow. One-year plans make the most sense today, and they must be living documents, not dust collectors.

Likewise, CEOs are paying better attention both to details and the big picture. One focus without the other simply does not work. In my early leadership days, I questioned scrutinizing the details for fear of that not being “CEO work.” I soon decided that details most certainly are the work of a CEO, but the need to balance details and big picture is the real issue.

Our colleagues are taking a hard look at all of their associations' products and services, going back to basics in some cases, aggressively slaying sacred cows in others, and acting on the belief that an organization cannot be all things to all people. Some are considering new relationships with other organizations to combine talent and resources.

The meetings industry, which affects almost all associations, is in a precarious position due to fear of terrorism and the weak economy. Online bookings of hotel rooms and airline tickets have undercut rates and are hurting the bottom lines of both the association and hospitality industries. Associations are working hard to develop meetings with “cannot-afford-to-miss” content and time-crunch sensitivity that includes blended learning and alternative delivery systems. They can succeed by shifting the approach from providing continuing education to facilitating continuous learning.

All levels within organizations are experiencing greater pressure to deliver beyond expectations and with little margin for error. This is further stressing association staff, who are experiencing time deprivation, job insecurity, and multiple workloads due to downsizing or “right-sizing.” Associations are seeking ways to relieve staff pressure by providing inexpensive, enjoyable activities that help people relax.

We are experiencing some of the worst times that I can recall, but I still believe the best of times is certain for associations that are both proactive and tough enough to make the hard choices necessary to survive and thrive. We all can better leverage our organizations' advantages — we have a built-in community of professionals to learn from, in addition to a well-developed community among our own members and stakeholders, whom we hope will view their associations as essential in these most challenging times.

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