

Being Expeditionary

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Why Expeditionary?

During periods of dramatic change, associations and other organizations are poorly served by traditional, incremental approaches to thinking about the future. Why? Traditional approaches assume the future will be some sort of extrapolation of the present, albeit at an accelerating rate of change. Traditional approaches also presume that even if external conditions change rapidly, the capacity of the association to respond is severely limited by culture, competencies, and cash. These limitations are real enough, in the short run. But they serve to squelch the kind of creative thinking needed by associations to confront the future. Our thinking must embrace the possibilities of truly transformed futures and eliminate current circumstances as excuses for being satisfied with incremental actions.

Our future will be dramatically different than today. It will also be different than we think it will be. We will be surprised in many ways by just how it all turns out. The Internet Age and knowledge-based economy are changing every industry and organization they touch, including the associations that represent them.

New experiences will emerge. It's not that every traditional practice, activity and process will be replaced by a virtual one. Future associations will still stage annual meetings and expos, engage volunteer leaders, and create and share knowledge, in some fashion. But the patterns and cadences of these activities will change dramatically. New mixtures of physical and virtual experiences will evolve.

Blending the present and future, the physical and the virtual. We will combine "bricks and clicks" capabilities to improve the efficiency of existing activities and to forge genuinely new experiences for our members, customers, partners, and other stakeholders. As we move forward into the future, our members and customers will respond to these new initiatives and help us sort out what works for which circumstances, because they will be invested in the effort.

These new times call for an expeditionary approach to strategy, planning, and product development. Expeditionary means a variety of things. First, setting expansive goals, and visions for what the transformed future could be. Then, planning from that future backward to today, identifying circumstances to be overcome and resources to be mobilized. Finally, devising continuously adaptive initiatives – expeditions – as our probes into the future. Expeditionary initiatives are our means of discovering the future, changing our course and reinventing our efforts as we go.

Association leaders understand the expeditionary metaphor. Americans have a rich history from the voyages of discovery to the New World, to Lewis and Clark, to today's expeditions to explore the remaining mysteries of our planet and beyond. We expect our expectations to involve strategic thinking, preparation for the journey, courage, inventiveness, willingness to be uncertain, embracing of short-term failure that



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leads to insight, continuous adaptation, and a sense of humility about our ability to foresee the unknown.

What Is an Expeditionary Approach to Strategic Thinking?

Expeditionary strategic thinking involves visioning how the future can be fundamentally different than today, then planning from that future backward. Several elements of the expeditionary approach include:

- **Treat the future as a “jump shift from the present.”** Association leaders must envision future association activities on a fundamentally different plane of operation from today’s, not just an extrapolation of the present. Richer, more engaging, personalized experiences for members and customers will be the new gold standard. New competencies, perspectives, and skills will be needed for staff, volunteer leaders, and partners. New competitors and collaborators will evolve. Revenue streams will be recalibrated and sustainable profitability will be our measure of success.
- **Create a vision of the desired future.** Expeditions must begin by pushing out a transformative vision of the future. Future visions capture the imagination and energies of members and staff. In reality, the future is likely to be an evolving blend of our transformed vision and present practices. Nevertheless, an energizing vision gives courage to those who believe “we cannot get there from here.”
- **Plan from the future backward.** It is easier to plan backward from a bold vision of the future than to struggle with the challenge of incrementally changing today’s activities to achieve dramatically improved performance. Planning from the future backward clarifies the need to change rules and eliminate confining circumstances.
- **Identify circumstances to surmount and deficiencies to be mitigated.** Setting a bold vision for the future helps us to identify limiting circumstances and deficiencies that are to be overcome and eliminated.
- **Launch expeditions to discover the future.** Expeditionary initiatives are our means of achieving our future vision and inventing the “killer applications” for tomorrow’s associations. Traditional association management involved planning for two years for products and services that we expected to be profitable immediately and to last for five years or more. Tomorrow’s expeditionary thinking involves visioning transformative futures and moving from ideas to expeditions in weeks. Then, over 18 months or three or five years of continuous adaptation, the expedition will discover the blend of activities that constitutes a truly breakthrough experience for association members, customers and stakeholders.

The expeditionary approach involves using members and customers as a perpetual focus group, providing feedback and testing modifications in products, services and experiences. Expeditionary skills are an emerging new core competency of the successful association executive.

