

TRANSFORMING AN ORGANIZATION – TALES FROM THE FRONT LINES

Jim Zaniello, *President of Vetted Solutions,*
Shares Lessons Learned from Association Leadership Change



Transformation is a revolution. It takes time. It requires a visionary leader, or better, a group of visionaries, to spearhead the change and sustain each other. It often requires breaking something down to rebuild it into something better. However, people will resist transformation because it is a challenge. As specialists in executive placement, we know the pattern – the revolutionaries who thrive on transformation start by changing their surroundings and looking for a new organization to lead. Transformation isn't easy. Jim Zaniello, president of Vetted Solutions, shares how he has helped many organizations transform themselves through selecting the right leaders. He also shares insight from specific organizations that have successfully implemented these changes and offers up questions you should be asking yourself.

Vetted Solutions is a Washington, D.C.-based executive search firm specializing in serving the leadership needs of associations, nonprofit organizations, hospitality and destination marketing industries worldwide. Jim possesses a unique understanding of the executive search process, developed through more than two decades in positions ranging from nonprofit executive director to publisher of the leading tool for nonprofit executive search. For 10 years, he conducted searches at Association Strategies, a leading Washington, D.C.-area executive search firm focusing exclusively on associations and non-profits, prior to his forming Vetted Solutions.

Transformation is a revolution. It takes time. It requires a visionary leader, or better, a group of visionaries, to spearhead the change and sustain each other. It often requires breaking something down to rebuild it into something better. Madison Avenue figured it out decades ago: “new and improved” sells better than “improved” alone.

However, people will resist transformation because it is a challenge. As specialists in executive placement, we know the pattern – the revolutionaries who thrive on transformation start by changing their surroundings and looking for a new organization to lead. Staff who resist change remain where they have been and are reluctant to try something that has not worked before.

Transformation isn't easy. Spend time browsing titles of business articles, books, and blog posts, and you'll realize that everybody has a perspective on what is necessary to turn something around or modify a behavior. But often, that advice speaks to change, not to true transformation.

Our firm's leading practice area focuses on the association sector. We have helped many organizations transform and, along the way, we have seen excellent examples of what is needed to successfully navigate a monumental shift:

- The business model was thoroughly reviewed and either redefined, or in some instances, completely redesigned.
- All decisions were driven by data – including strategic plans, programs and other offerings, membership goals, and employee assessments.
- The organization culture shifted into a higher gear.
- The organization committed itself to diversity and inclusion.
- Succession plans were created for the entire organization, and they continue to be reviewed and updated.

Below we share insight from organizations that have successfully implemented these changes and questions you should be asking yourself.

Review, Redefine, Redesign

Simplistically, for many organizations the strength of the business model is evaluated in short- and long-term strategic goals. When your organization achieves its goals, it must develop new ones. If you are falling short of your goals, consider whether they should be modified or scaled back. On a daily basis for association executives, and at least quarterly for board members, the road to transformation begins when you are unhappy with your answer to one of these questions:

Does our business model still make sense for our industry or the profession we serve?

How do we deliver value to our members and the industry in general?

Are We Innovating?

Are we accomplishing our mission and is our mission still relevant?

What information are we using to answer these questions?

What does success look like for us?

During 2017, one of the most widely discussed association initiatives was the rebranding of InfoComm to AVIXA, the Audiovisual and Integrated Experience Association. David Labuskes, the CEO of AVIXA, said the decision to rebrand was driven by three questions: who was the association, who did its members want and/or need it to be, and what was likely to be relevant in the industry going forward. Among the original directives to their consulting agency, InfoComm stated that it was not going to change its name. By the end of the process, the board and senior leadership realized that when they achieved their two-point version of success – be a catalyst for market growth and be a hub for their industry – they would, in fact, be a different association than the one they had been at the beginning of the process. Anything other than a reinvention of the brand and name would be a half-measure.

Data, Data Everywhere

Today, data is used for every election, every pop song, and every ad that appears on your electronic devices. Your organization must use data, too. But data needn't be a gigabit of computer code; for some it can be a simple member survey. Associations, seen by some as having been slow to adopt the practice of data-driven decision making, now heavily rely on data in many different ways.

Transformative senior leaders usually have a history of strong experience with data. They tell tales of how a few surveys and data points helped them change perspectives within their

organizations and eventually convince others in the association to rely upon the data. “We analyzed last year’s annual show, and that told us to what the industry responded as well as what had to be changed to better address member needs this year.” Or, “We thought we knew which programs were our most impactful, but when we finally dug into it, we were surprised to learn...” Or, “We’re pulling that information now to help us understand X.”

A data-driven mindset is a must-have to assess typical business operations, but it is equally as illuminating on the human side of your organization. There are a wealth of employee assessment tools such as McQuaig or the Four Tendencies that allow leaders to better understand their employees – identifying dominant characteristics, potential coaching needs, and preferred communication styles – and maximize the potential in their staff. The tools can help identify the person in customer service who is much better suited to be in charge of outreach, and they also can ensure that your team is working better as a group and boosting performance. If human resource data reveals gaps in how your organization runs, transformation may be needed first at the staff level.

Levelling Up

As your business model undergoes a thorough review, your organization also needs to evaluate its culture to ensure it can achieve its goals. This is more than just making sure the right people are in the right place at the right time. As Peter O’Neil wrote, culture is the unspoken manner in which work really gets done. Everyone – staff and volunteers – needs to move to a higher level of engagement, performance, and accountability. Are your teams collaborating to help everyone achieve the vision? Is everyone respectful of differing viewpoints? This doesn’t mean that all ideas are good or worthy of the same level of consideration, but a person who feels respected is a person who feels valued. That respect builds loyalty, fosters team spirit, and creates a willingness – even a desire – to go above and beyond to achieve the vision.

Transformative associations are increasingly customercentric. How would you describe your organization’s customer focus? Can everyone in your organization tell you who the customer is? Danielle Holland, President and CEO of the Financial Managers Society, agrees this is an organizational imperative because improving member experience is something that association leaders often wrestle with, more importantly, how do we deliver real benefits that are successfully executed to give our association a competitive edge? Her experience with this is that satisfied members spend more, exhibit deeper loyalty to the association, and create conditions for higher

levels of engagement. She asserts it is about creating a value proposition that delivers on service and operations. The success of this customer focus is readily evident because it results in consistent annual growth rates, extremely high retention rates, and very positive customer satisfaction rates.

Levelling up starts at the top with the board and senior leaders. If there are practices and attitudes that hamper the achievement of the strategic vision, they must be changed. Lead by example, lead through organization challenges, lead through motivational strategies, lead by whatever means resonates with your staff and volunteers. The key is to lead. Practice the ideals and require the same of your team. Actively develop, foster, and manage your organization through its levelling up.

Diversity and Inclusion

Kevin Keller, the CEO of CFP Board, highlighted the importance of diversity and reducing the barriers to entry in the *Journal of Financial Planning*. Kevin makes clear that diversity and reduced barriers enable traditionally underrepresented populations to join an organization and thrive. The demographics of every industry are shifting. How much does your organization, at all levels, reflect the industry that it represents today? Are a full range of viewpoints and backgrounds incorporated into your organization's decisionmaking, offerings, support, and development? Have you included the opinions of the board, the staff, the volunteers, and the members? In a 2017 diversity and inclusion report published by our firm, we analyzed practices and beliefs at associations. We learned many have realized the importance of diversity and inclusion but struggle with how to enact meaningful change. The report provided practical suggestions to help associations of all sizes. For example:

- Make the connections – Learn your organization's diversity and inclusion goals, their connection to your strategic priorities, and how your work furthers those goals.
- Respect – Listen attentively, and ask questions, seek feedback, and encourage open discussion.
- Put in the effort – Immediately address situations and comments that challenge the value of diversity or hinder inclusivity, understand your unconscious biases in order to manage or reduce them, and encourage diverse participation at presentations, events, and conferences.

Diversity and inclusion do not stop with hiring or initial participation. It is a fundamental that needs to be incorporated into every part of an employee's or volunteer's

lifecycle. Diversity and inclusion begins with genderneutral job descriptions and continues with a welcoming hiring process, onboarding, retention, development, and advancement. While this likely starts from the top, everyone at the organization can, and should, own pieces of this.

What Comes Next – Succession Planning

Your association must have more than a strategic plan to ensure viability, you must also have the foresight to have plans in place that provide direction and manage change. As Christine McEntee, executive director and CEO of the American Geophysical Union, advised, if we don't think about change until the day it happens, it's too late. Preparing for change requires multiple plans – one for an announced transition and one for an unexpected departure. At the leadership level – what process will your association use to identify new leaders? How will responsibilities be shifted to ensure that your association's operations continue as seamlessly as possible?

Succession planning should cover more than just leadership changes. How is your association developing and growing its staff and volunteer leaders? What are the plans for changes in non-management staff and volunteer leadership, and how are your new leaders being developed? What is the pipeline for growing talent and skills in your association? Should you undertake talent mapping to evaluate the resources that are already available to you?

Succession plans are living documents. They cannot be created, shelved, and allowed to gather dust. They need to be frequently reviewed – perhaps on a schedule similar to your strategic plan reviews – to ensure they continue to serve your association in the best way possible and address any changes, including new talent, key stakeholder populations, and title shifts.

Transforming your organization can be an electrifying experience. To make the most of it, rely both on questions that you ask internally and the collective wisdom of other association leaders. Study your organization down to its foundation and then ask stakeholders what needs to be changed. Armed with such knowledge, talk with other leaders about their experiences. The excitement of seeing “New and Improved” is felt not only by the customer but by the person who made the changes. Prepare for that excitement as you undertake your organization's transformation.