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**STRATEGIC
INTENT
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TRAINING

by Joanne L. Smikle

STRATEGIC INTENT, THE association's ability to align operations with the larger, overarching objectives that chart progress, is, at best, challenging. At worst, it's the impossible dream because association leaders are pulled in so many disparate directions. Recognizing the value of clear, coherent, well-operationalized strategic intent, how do we transform the concept from rhetoric to reality?

Understanding the concept

For the purposes of this article, an association's strategic intent is its desire to be best in class. This necessarily encompasses a leadership

philosophy that values member service, collaboration, challenging goals, flexible procedures, and resource allocation consistent with the strategic objectives of the association. Organizations, both within the association community and outside of it, that are governed by their strategic intent have fewer instances of confusion and uncertainty among the ranks. This is true because clarity of purpose has been, and is, constantly reinforced. People at all levels know where the association is going; they're aware of why and how their work fits in that larger scheme.

Strategic intent is strengthened by ongoing education, both staff education and member education. Education, learning, and expanded intellectual capacity are tools that support, reinforce, and clarify the association's strategic direction. If your association in its

quest to be the best has identified several supporting core competencies, a comprehensive developmental plan must ensue. Member and staff education are linked tightly to the association's strategic goals. Creating that link and fostering consistency and continuity between intent and education are no small feats.

Linda Magad, director of education for Women in Cable and Telecommunications, states that her association closely connects member education with the association's strategic goals. She says they use strategic planning to focus their efforts. "Our programs are geared towards leadership development. We have a tight focus and don't go off into other areas," explains Magad.

This tight focus is of critical importance if the link between strategy and education is to be

viable. With many associations experiencing declining attendance at conferences and other educational forums, it is essential that value, relevance, and substance be apparent to members. Peggy Comeau, executive vice president of the New Mexico Association of REALTORS, states that attendance at her association's state convention has been dwindling for more than five years. This has made it important for her association to form partnerships with the National Association of REALTORS to deliver relevant member education, mostly through online courses. The role of her association, a state trade association, has shifted to one of providing legal information and lobbying. It has become active in the legislative and regulatory arenas.

This shift in strategic intent necessitated another shift. The state association now relies more on the local boards to provide education. According to Comeau, the local boards are able to present a different perspective. She says, "We have complementary perspectives and can assist each other with meeting member education demands."

Remaining flexible

The shifts that Comeau cites are not uncommon in today's rapidly changing business world. Associations have to remain flexible enough to allow their strategic intent to change. Allowing, even encouraging, shifts and transitions signals an organization's responsiveness to its members, its industry, and its environment. Strategic intent is a dynamic concept. It is not impervious to the real world pressures that every association faces. When your intent becomes rigid and inflexible, your value diminishes to both members and to the industry you represent.

The need for flexibility becomes even more apparent when using education to reinforce strategic intent. Magad advises using blended learning (see the front page article in this issue of *FORUM* for more information on blended learning) and ensuring that all of your member education topics are connected to each other, just as they should be connected to the association's larger goals. Various approaches signal your organization's ability to change and be responsive.

Fast, flexible, and responsive are all characteristics that Linda Chreno, executive vice president of the Florida Society of Association Executives, cites as critical

competencies if you're going to align education with strategic intent successfully. Chreno says, "We have to be fluid, able to change." She, like Magad, believes blended learning is key. Her member associations want a mix and they want it in, as she calls it, "smaller sound bites." Because of the demands in their associations, they are often unable to get away for extended periods of time. So, half-day sessions are an ideal way of presenting education.

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Associations compete for member education dollars with the Internet, universities, for-profit entities, and even each other. This competition makes it even more important to leverage member education so that it reinforces association strategy. Creating learning organizations requires a focus on revising the way education is delivered as was the case with Women in Cable and Telecommunications. It also requires that the learning be blended to reflect topics that are linked to larger goals. Getting to the place where strategy is clear and alignment is evident is easier said than done. There are four things to remember in your quest:

- 1. The strategic intent/education link becomes more stable with time and practice.** Your first efforts may go unnoticed. Keep listening to members and staff to be sure that you are shooting for the right targets. Be very persistent in your efforts. It is easy to get sidetracked with trends and fads that will have no lasting value to the association.
- 2. Be clear about the desired outcomes of your efforts and equally as flexible about the means.** Allow staff and members latitude in the execution of the activities

that support strategic intent. Flexible processes create room for innovation. It is that innovation that will revitalize the entire association.

- 3. Create time for mastery.** Be sure that members and staff have time to digest one challenge before moving on to the next. When you overload the organization with competing (or even complementary) initiatives, people will disengage. Too many initiatives destroy leadership credibility.
- 4. Engagement is an essential component of linking strategy and education.** Using education, or any other tool, to make strategic intent operational reality requires the intellectual and emotional engagement of the entire association, its board and members. Create methods that allow and encourage the engagement of many different people. It is through this engagement that you achieve the culture change you ultimately seek. □

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