

“One must visualize a destination before the journey begins”

(Visualizing Success in Collective Problem Solving)¹

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Associations are about communications, products and services, and “collective problem solving”. Association managers communicate with the membership and the public in various ways, through meetings, multi-media electronic communications, journals, newsletters, reports, and face-to-face. Association products and services include, state and federal representation, public relations, certification, advertising, research, on-line systems, manuals, educational opportunities, *etc.* However, “collective problem solving” is an area where associations are not routinely successful. Some members may be satisfied with an honest attempt to resolve an issue because most members understand the difficulties in changing state or federal government policy or in modifying public perceptions. On the other hand, because an association is in the arena attempting to resolve an issue does not mean they will have a “winning” strategy or that they will be successful. Proper conceptualization of a problem and the development of a winning strategy, with the right intermediate phased tactics, is critical to success. This is related to the “vision thing” often talked about in US Presidential politics and in corporate board rooms. “Visualizing” success and strategic planning is not easy. And, certainly not everyone is good at it. The best leaders are often good at both.

Theodore Roosevelt once said: “The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood....” We all admire the man in the arena, but most of all we want to see a winner. Simply slugging away at a problem, spending money on consultants, holding meetings, and writing letters, are the tactics of a program. These efforts should not be confused as a well conceived strategy. Many associations work hard to solve problems, but successes are not routine, because the problems tackled by associations are normally highly complex and deemed insoluble by individual members.

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It is usually only politicians and corporate CEO's who are asked about their “vision” of the future. However, all successful leaders, whether in business, in government, or in a non-profit will have a vision. Where will they lead their organizations? How will they solve problems? Ask about your association's vision

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of the future and you may or may not get a coherent answer. Organizations and leaders without a vision will usually succeed only if they are lucky.

Virtually every association will be faced with difficult challenges and issues that the membership expects the association leadership and staff to resolve. Whether it is a regulatory, legislative, public relations, or a management issue the association leadership and staff are faced with, how the issue is conceived will in many cases determine the opportunity for success. In other words, the way issues are visualized will directly impact how issues are eventually resolved. Emotionally charged and potentially spurious issues championed by vocal, aggressive members often distract associations from their primary mission and are often a waste of time and money. How are issues and projects developed in your association? Are they primarily staff driven, member driven, or a combination of both and do you have an issue-management policy?

Converting challenges into opportunities leads to success.

Associations should establish an issue-management policy that outlines the internal policies, processes, procedures and the discipline necessary to properly address issues as they surface. An issue-management policy should ensure that all issues and projects are subjected to a well-defined decision-making process that allows clarification of the issue and time to think through a problem, and offers an opportunity to visualize how success can be achieved. However, the decision to act should still be relatively swift.²

Decision Criteria: The following criteria should be considered in this process.

1. Potential Impact. New issues should have potential impacts equal to or more important than current projects or programs.
2. Likelihood of Success. There should be a strong likelihood that the efforts of the association will be successful at resolving the issue under consideration.
3. Level of Commitment. The degree of officer, staff, volunteer, and financial commitment required to resolve an issue should be considered. Is this a long-term or short-term commitment of time and resources?
4. Cost versus Value. The incremental costs should be weighed against their associated incremental value in determining if the association should respond to an issue and what the nature of that response would be.

² There should be an administrative threshold for use of this formal issue-management process, otherwise the association can become too bureaucratic. The formal process should be used for actions requiring more than two days of staff time and/or requiring funds outside the normal working budget of the association.

5. Coalition Building. Developing coalitions with other associations should also be addressed.

“A problem well stated is a problem half solved”. (—Charles F. Kettering).

The issue-management policy should allow an airing of all aspects of the new issue through the staff and an Executive Committee. The policy should be in writing, in order to protect the leadership and staff from being “whipsawed” by the “issue of the week” syndrome and the “wild-eyed radical”. An issue-management policy would prevent the association from wasting valuable time and resources and from chasing “phantom” projects. And, most importantly, approval of a new issue should require the full commitment of the association’s top leadership at the outset, otherwise focus will wane and priorities will change over time.

Vision, strategy, programs, and tactics leads to success. Each strategy is different because each problem is different. Success will be achievable when you visualize and conceptualize the issue, develop a winning strategy, establish realistic goals, identify the implementation tactics, clarify support of the leadership for the program, and modify your approach as circumstances evolve. You can begin to routinely expect success if you have a clear vision of the “end game”. “Visualizing” success will result in yet another success story in “collective problem solving” for your association. Your membership will find it difficult to ask more from your association.

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⁴ First established in 1921, the American Wood Preservers Institute (AWPI) is the national industry trade association representing the pressure-treated wood industry throughout the United States. Member companies are wood treaters, preservative manufacturers, and supporting companies working to conserve forest resources, preserve the environment, and extend the life of wood products through the manufacture of pressure-treated wood.