



# Why are Volunteer Leaders Killing Good Associations?

Association Laboratory's ground-breaking environmental scan Looking Forward 2018 ([access HERE](#)) revealed how many association executives believe their **volunteer leaders are creating substantial governance challenges that threaten the long-term viability of their association.**

## Historical Membership Models and Governance Systems are Failing

In Looking Forward 2018, **86% of association executives believed that membership acquisition, retention and engagement was the most serious association strategy issue.**

Association Laboratory has worked with hundreds of associations on the research and development of membership strategy and four aspects of strategy development are clear.

1. The association must understand its markets and how these markets are changing.
2. The association must accept that as audiences change, their needs change.
3. New or emerging markets with different needs will require a different relationship with the association.
4. An evolving relationship means that new models of engagement or membership must constantly be adapted or introduced.



Unfortunately, the data from Looking Forward 2018 identifies a perceived gap between current and

younger volunteer leaders that inhibit the association's ability to address these four critical aspects of strategy.

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**The research clearly shows that members and young leaders are frustrated with associations.**

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81% of association executives highlighting membership as a critical issue stated that their market was *uninterested in traditional membership models.*

77% stated that their younger leaders were *uninterested in traditional governance models.*

The data is overwhelming. Without changing business and governance models customized to the needs of new audiences, associations will face substantial consequences that threaten their long-term viability.

## Volunteer Leaders Don't Trust New Audiences

But, to quote Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible, "It's much worse than you think."

Without new audiences, the lifeblood of associations, the people dry up. 56% of association executives who responded stated their *volunteer leaders were somewhat or very resistant to changing member audiences.*

Why would volunteer leaders be resistant to new audiences? Because they are different. Different experiences. Different needs. Different perceptions on the profession or industry.

As a result, current leaders, feel the association they have committed so much time and effort to supporting is changing. Becoming unrecognizable.

For example, consider building your house, picking out all the fixtures and paint and planting the garden. You decide the time has come to move on, so you sell the house to someone else. They throw out your old furniture, paint everything a different color and plant different things in the garden. While logically, you understand this, emotionally, it hurts.

**Resistance to new audiences has hard consequences for the association's business model.**

## Volunteer Leaders Resist New Models

New audiences naturally have different needs requiring new business models. But 51% of association executives stated there was *leadership bias against innovative new business models*



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Leadership resistance has limited associations' ability to adapt to a dynamic market characterized by increasing competition and a plethora of options for education and networking.

## Steps to Easing the Trust Gap

It will be critical for associations to build more effective relationships built on trust between current and future audiences and leaders.

To build leadership trust, association executives will need to help volunteer leaders deal with the emotional pain of seeing their association change to meet the needs of the next family. In addition, association leaders will need to collaborate on a methodical, data-driven approach to leading strategic change.

In Association Laboratory's white paper on **Leading Strategic Change in Associations**, the following 8 key steps to build leadership buy-in and translate leadership buy-in to effective implementation included the following.

1. Objectively diagnose the nature of the problem and what will happen to the association if change is not made. Objectivity is your friend, try to minimize the emotional or subjective components of your argument.
2. Recruit the right stakeholders for participation in the process. They should have the *power* to make change and the *interest* in making change.
3. Lead a collaborative process. Everyone should have opportunities to participate, outline their concerns and process new information.
4. Develop a formal process to manage change, adapting to real world results, and incorporating modifications into the existing operations of the association.
5. Creating a compelling story communicating the rationale for and strategies driving change, and effectively communicate this story in a consistent, continual manner to staff, leadership and members.
6. Implement change in phases or steps, constantly testing ideas prior to full-fledged implementation to determine if and how well they succeed.
7. Monitor strategy success and make changes as needed.
8. Embed the rationale and strategies for change into the association so that change strategies and competencies survive leadership turnover.

While no change management plan will be 100% successful, by taking methodical steps, you and help



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**Chicago, IL**

35 East Wacker  
Drive  
Suite 850  
Chicago, IL 60601  
Telephone: 312-224-  
2626

**Washington,  
DC**

1120 20th Street,  
NW  
Suite 750  
Washington, DC  
20036  
Telephone: 202-216-  
9675

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