

BUSTING THE 7 MYTHS OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN ASSOCIATIONS

A COLLECTION OF INSIGHTS
FROM **SURGE OPTIMISM**



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INTRODUCTION

The following pages house the results of an industry-wide virtual collaboration.

SURGE Optimism assembled association professionals from across the globe to harness collective knowledge, through a virtual conference focused on transformative ideas and designed to maximize social learning.

Attendees could not only hear from speakers, but converse with them in real time and contribute their own thoughts. We have now assembled some of the best insights from these conversations into a body of knowledge for the benefit of the entire association community.

This eBook delves into the session, *Busting The 7 Myths of Entrepreneurship in Associations*. It includes themes from the speakers' conversation, snapshots of ideas from guest speakers, contributions from attendees, links to further resources, and more.

Thank you to all who participated – and if you missed it, go to the **SURGE Optimism** [event page](#) to watch all the sessions for free, at your leisure

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01

FEATURED SPEAKERS



Emilio Arocho

Director, Technology and Digital Strategy, Food and Drug Law Institute (FDLI)

Emilio Arocho is a Washington, DC professional with over a decade of experience empowering nonprofit organizations by allocating their modest resources towards mission-focused digital optimization. As Director of Technology and Digital Strategy at the Food and Drug Law Institute (FDLI), he facilitates data-driven decision making across departments, and tailors cloud architecture and business processes to anticipate and exceed stakeholder requirements. Emilio holds a BA degree from Mount Saint Mary's University.





Dennis Sadler

Deputy Executive Director, Operations, National Association of Secondary School Principals

Dennis B. Sadler Jr. is Deputy Executive Director, Operations of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), a 23,000-member professional organization for principals, assistant principals, and aspiring leaders in middle level and high schools. NASSP also owns and administers four student leadership programs, the National Honor Society (NHS), National Junior Honor Society (NJHS), National Elementary Honor Society (NEHS), and National Student Council. In his current role, Sadler oversees the areas of personnel, finance, membership, customer care, and information services. He provides leadership for measurable, cost-effective results that deliver on the organization's vision and strategic intent. Sadler also designs and implements business strategies, plans, and procedures.

Prior to assuming deputy executive director responsibilities in the fall of 2014, Sadler was the Director of Information Services for NASSP, overseeing a major overhaul and modernization of the organization's information technology infrastructure to better serve its stakeholders in the 21st century.

Sadler previously served for 11 years as the Director of Management Information Systems for AABB (formerly the American Association of Blood Banks). He holds a B.S. from the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and is a Rensselaer Medal recipient.





Barbara Byrd Keenan **FASAE, CAE**

**Chief Executive Officer,
Endocrine Society**

Barbara joined the Endocrine Society as CEO in 2014. In the past four years, the Society has won 10 awards for education, program development, communications, and diversity, including sharing the 2018 Power of A Summit Award with Diabetes Disaster Recovery Coalition partners. Prior to joining the Endocrine Society, Ms. Keenan was the Executive Vice President/CEO of the Institute of Food Technologists and Feeding Tomorrow as well as staff head of the International Food Science Certification Commission. She has over 30 years of CEO experience, having previously served as CEO with the Hospitality Financial and Technology Professionals International and Community Associations Institute. Upon her departure from HFTPI, she was made an Honorary Member, and CAI created the Barbara Byrd Keenan Award in her honor and named her as the first recipient.

In 2013, IFT & Feeding Tomorrow established the Barbara Byrd Keenan Scholarship Fund to support the academic achievement of IFT student members. She is a Charter Fellow of the American Society of Association Executives and the recipient of the ASAE Key Award — the highest honor in association management—and the 12th woman to receive it since its creation in 1960. She holds BS and MS degrees from Old Dominion University in Virginia, where she was presented with the Distinguished Alumni Award.





Meena Dayak

VP, Integrated Media & Communications, American Public Power Association

Meena is an advocate of change because it moves missions. She has been on the executive team in trade associations since 2005 and spearheaded strategic planning and partnerships, media and communications, marketing, public education, conferences, and member services. She is solutions-focused and an evangelist of great ideas. At the American Public Power Association, she has helped members across the country raise public awareness of their contributions as community-owned energy providers. She supports strategic planning for the association and is an advocate of data-informed decision making. Meena is intensely creative and enjoys unleashing that gift in others. She has convened Associations Catalyzing Entrepreneurship, an evolving cross-functional group of association leaders and stakeholders who think outside the association box about survival and success. Through ACE, she is collaborating to develop a creative, nimble, bottom-line focused approach to association futures.



02

3 WAYS TO MAKE YOUR ORGANIZATION MORE ENTREPRENEURIAL

BY EMILIO AROCHO

The association sector today is thinking about innovation and entrepreneurship in new ways. Lean Startup principles that originated in Silicon Valley are becoming the standard for operating efficiently beyond the for-profit world. Even the federal government has a digital services agency with the sole purpose of helping other federal agencies operate in more digital, data-driven and effective ways. If they can do it, we can do it!

My organization's efforts to become more entrepreneurial, to prototype, and to build our business around design thinking principles when launching new digital products. Here are three of the key steps we have taken on this journey.

One: Experimentation

A concept that has caught fire at my organization is experimentation. I sprinkle it in whenever possible. In a situation that could be taken many different directions, we run an experiment and let our audience guide us based on the results. This style of work has caught on across department divides and become a more central way that we operate.

This can be an effective way of navigating through conflict. A disagreement can be a great thing. People being passionate enough about your organization to disagree about what direction it should take is a wonderful energy that you can harness to become more entrepreneurial. When we have disagreements about how to do something, instead of picking a course of action, we'll build a minimal viable product then we see what happens and settle the conflict based on the outcome.

This scrappy, evolutionary perspective helps attract and retain younger staff. When people hear that the association is seeking innovation and providing a culture of learning, millennials take notice. Millennials might be native to digital

technology but may not be experts at using it. By having a culture of upskilling, we can bring them in, get them excited about the work they're doing and then empower them with interesting tools to get that work done.

Two: Volunteer Power

We rely heavily on the volunteer activity from thought leaders in our field to curate an impressive slate of educational programming. We have highly engaged volunteers with defined roles in the organization. For some of our major conferences, we collect proposals from people in the community and they volunteer to speak about the ideas that are top of their mind. Previously we collected these ideas in an online form and saved it in an excel file. Live discussions at conferences are much more dynamic. This is an example of volunteers helping our organization become more entrepreneurial even if they aren't directly aware of it. Volunteer behavior hasn't changed, we just watch what they're doing more closely to get an informed perspective.

Three: Technology

When I joined the Food and Drug Law Institute two and a half years ago, our technology was in a bad way. We became accidental entrepreneurs when we started adopting new software that had innovation baked into it. We adjusted our culture to embrace those opportunities for change and to make the most of our technology.

An association might say, "Our website is not great, so let's get a new one."

Unpack that statement, and what does it mean? What specific elements of your website aren't working for you? Can you narrow down the problem and find a smaller piece of technology to change before you overhaul the entire online system?

When we came up against this question, we looked closely at what needed to change. Ultimately, we focused on improving our search engine marketing so that our work appeared top of the results list for people looking up related topics online. This process also involved linking email sign-ups and our website so that when people hear about the work we're doing through a search engine, we can more easily convert them to our email system.

The website is not a dumping ground for all the interesting work we're doing; it's a delivery mechanism for it. The website plays an active role in finding its audience. Our online resources connect directly to our mission.

We've been surprised at how inexpensive this change has been. An entrepreneurial mindset is liberating because you're not trying to create a perfect product all the time or putting all your financial resources in one basket. It's all about continuous improvement and experimenting with new products in an affordable way. We've implemented new technologies either at the same cost of our previous, less effective software, or at a surprising discount.

Conclusion

Associations of any size can make forays into being entrepreneurial. It doesn't require a complete overhaul of operations. Find opportunities to test out ideas or facilitate brainstorming in a more open minded way. Soon you'll be doing a great service to the organization and to members. It might catch on like wildfire and affect substantial change.

From the Chat – What Are Some Associations Strengths?

The industry is unique and has plenty to offer.

“I think the key to “winning” the competition is to focus on doing only what you can do well. Associations may not have the budgets that for-profit companies have, but they have community, they have members, and they have the ability to be objective.”

— Hilary Marsh —

“Membership model is limiting for ALL stakeholders. Associations should reposition themselves as experts in their profession, field, or trade ... which they are! This can be communicated and monetized for current/prospective members, corporate partners, policymakers, etc.”

— Bruce Rosenthal —

03

HOW DO WE BRING ADVOCACY INTO THE 21ST CENTURY?

Hint: it's about engaging people beyond your membership.

BY DENNIS SADLER

In an age of hyper-transformation fueled by advances in technology, the association industry's advocacy efforts must evolve past merely "mobilizing members" to amassing an expanded base of supporters to advance our legislative goals. This evolution requires both a shift in thinking and a recognition that technology provides a platform for value creation. Technology no longer sustains back-office operations, but delivers value directly to the surrounding community.

The board of my association, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, came to understand this when they determined **the systems of bylaws and founding documents that were created a century ago no longer serve the organization.**

An important part of their conversation about contemporary structures for the association is the language we use to describe who we serve. Previously, the board used the terms "members" and "membership" as stand-ins for all the people that we serve. We illustrated for them that one of the most important things we're engaged in is advocacy for public education. **We don't advocate only on behalf of people that pay us dues. Everyone that serves in the education space is one of our stakeholders.** And with the right technology-enhanced outreach, they can also become our champions.

Traditional associations rely on the easily identified and quantified mass of members to persuade lawmakers, and they often define success by the number of member contacts. Shifting our thinking from "members" to "stakeholders" can present a crisis in challenging conventional notions of who we serve. But progressive associations embrace the opportunity to gather support beyond their members with an eye to garnering "wins"—diverse constituent contacts to

lawmakers that will move the needle on legislation our associations champion. **If we can get 20,000 of those people to go to Capitol Hill or call their legislators, that's just as valuable as mobilizing the majority of our members.**

To respond to this attitude shift, we engaged in a software change. The providers we chose for our new advocacy platform spoke our language. They weren't talking to us about how to get members to act on our behalf. Instead they spoke about creating a grassroots group of advocates of the legislation and policy our organization is pushing forward. They also aimed to amplify our voice through multiple channels to engage the larger public, including social channels, and promote direct engagement where most consumers spend a majority of their time – their smartphones.

That change was fantastic for us, and we saw the number of people participating in our action alerts increase threefold just from this change in technology and shift in thinking. **We have only scraped the surface of what is possible, but indicators are favorable and we look forward to watching the experiment progress.**

From the Chat - Practicing a Growth Mindset

Some thoughts on individuals planning and thinking as an entrepreneur.

"Do you ever feel like an entrepreneur at your desk? How can run your position better and in a innovative way?"

— Jennifer Wickline —

"An entrepreneurial mindset relies on the unwillingness to settle or think that something is "good enough"."

— Tracy Vanneman —

"The after-action from the learning should 100% be baked into the original plan... then you never fail. You succeed or learn."

— Tim Parsons —

04

**THE STORY OF
A LIFE-SAVING
COALITION**

What does meaningful partnership look like in the 21st century?

BY BARBARA BYRD KEENAN

When we reached our centennial at the Endocrine Society, I saw the celebration as a springboard to focus on our future. I coined a phrase:

"We're in the first year of our second century."

A one year old behaves quite differently than a 101 year old, and our centennial has sparked a rebirth. We continue to build upon our historical foundation but we're not bound by our history. Our new strategic plan uses an outward-facing perspective. **We're not rejecting past practices but recognizing that now requires something different than *then*.** It's changed our perspective on many aspects of our work, including partnerships.

The 20th century model of partnerships involves getting together to work on a project with another organization, and then letting the partnership fall to the wayside when the project is over. Or the whole thing is reduced to logo slapping: *we'll slap our logo on your stuff and you slap your logo on ours*. That isn't true collaboration.

In our 21st century model of partnership and collaboration, everybody at the table yields some power for the greater good. When that happens, organizations start building trust in working with one another. They might allow somebody else to take the lead and find they realize wonderful benefits. They learn from each other.

Recently, we were thrilled to learn that **our [Diabetes Disaster Response Coalition](#) won an ASAE Summit Award.** Last year, Texas, Florida and the Caribbean were devastated by hurricanes. Many of our members treat patients with diabetes, so we looked at the storms with a specific lens. If a natural disaster prevents a patient with diabetes from accessing insulin, they are in grave danger. We knew

we had to do something to ensure individuals had the supplies and medical care they needed. The situation prompted us to form a coalition with organizations led by the American Diabetes Association.

We delivered four thousand pounds of supplies to affected areas. Our staff raised money for our partner, [Insulin For Life](#). We staffed a hotline so that physicians and patients would be able to find out how to access supplies. We saved lives in collaboration with our partners and as a result, we discovered how much we can accomplish when we come together under a common goal for the common good. The coalition is now building permanent infrastructure to support people with diabetes who are affected by future disasters.

We will have members who will be part of this organization for the rest of their lives because they will remember the impact of that program. **They will remember that we stay true to our mission, to improve health worldwide.**

From the Chat – Do the Leaders Set the Tone?

Where can the entrepreneurial mindset be fostered?

“I would say if the executives or executive team isn’t of the entrepreneurship mindset, they should have the trust in entrepreneurial staff who want to pursue different ways of doing things.”

— Aldo Maragoni —

“Having volunteer leaders engage with staff regarding their passion for the field is a highly effective way cultivate staff as stakeholders.”

— Rachel Miller-Bleich —

“Nonprofit is a tax status not a business strategy. Associations and charitable organizations are businesses. The minute you have an office, have staff, etc., executives have to be focused on running a successful business - they have responsibilities and fiduciary duties. Yes, associations need to run a successful business in line with the mission and vision of the organization in mind but they need to be connected - not mutually exclusive. Executives need to be constantly re-evaluating the mission, business practices, membership value, and return on investment to ensure that they are both running a successful business and delivering on the mission.”

— Jon Bassford —

05

**BUSTING THE
MYTHS OF
ENTREPRENEURSHIP
IN ASSOCIATIONS**

Myth Busters to the rescue! Dennis, Barbara, Emilio, and I came together to encourage association professionals to try a new perspective

BY MEENA DAYAK

Myth 1: Entrepreneurship is not for nonprofits and associations.

BUSTED

Entrepreneurship in associations results from marrying mission, money, and merit.

Entrepreneurship is about curiosity. Nothing is out of the question as long as there's someone to ask the question. We need to drive with questions and not premature solutions.

Language is a powerful tool. If the word entrepreneurship scares those around you, then don't use it. Frame your entrepreneurial wish list in terms of mission-driven improvement, problem-solving, or sustaining the value proposition.

Entrepreneurship is not a rejection of past practices — it's about framing for growth. Now requires something different from back then. And the future will require something different from now.

Any association that is not being entrepreneurial is missing the boat in providing value and remaining relevant to multiple constituents and stakeholders — members, staff, members' customers, and others impacted by the profession or industry we represent.

Myth 2: Entrepreneurship starts, and stays, at the top.

BUSTED

Entrepreneurship can start with anyone and really catch on.

It certainly helps if the person at the top is entrepreneurial but if they're not, there are workarounds. Everyone can adopt an entrepreneurial approach within our own sphere of influence. And when we deliver impact, we'll gain traction and can slowly change the culture.

To advance entrepreneurship, we must seek first to understand, and only then to be understood. If we understand where the other person is coming from and the roadblocks they see to implementing change, we can help reframe the issue.

If we as entrepreneurs want people to remain open and take risks, then we have to model that behavior. We have to be transparent, experiment, admit failure, and take time to learn from failure.

There usually is entrepreneurship at all levels of an organization and we need to cultivate it and support it. Think about the millennials, who don't buy the "This is the way we've always done it" excuse. They're looking to contribute and to be creative. To keep them, we must allow entrepreneurship to diffuse across the organization.

To support the millennials, we also must develop a culture of upskilling — to help them understand the mission, get them excited about the work they're doing, and use technology to get it done.

We really don't need every single person on staff to be a raging entrepreneur. We also need those folks who listen to the crazy ideas and say, "OK, what shall we do then?"

Myth 3: Entrepreneurship means taking big risks, and registering the big win.

BUSTED

To be entrepreneurial is to think big and start small. It's about asking why but it's also about asking why not.

We can mitigate risk considerably if we start with why and evaluate what the risk is going to be if a product fails. We agree on reasonable risks to take. Getting people comfortable with the thought process of evaluating and mitigating risk is as important as actually having them live through it.

Entrepreneurship is about fostering a culture that encourages people to fail often and fail cheaply. Frameworks like design thinking, lean startup, and human-centered design allow us to do that. Doing a pilot gives us cover and makes the big leap less daunting.

An entrepreneurial mindset is really liberating because we're not trying to create a perfect product at the perfect time. We are just building a model of continuous improvement. An experimental culture is not expensive, in fact it keeps us from breaking the bank. We build over time as we learn about our audience's needs and make the product better for them.

We can't do away with risk but you can "de-risk" a project from the get go. For example, instead of going to market with a preconceived and untested notion of what the market needs, we prepare the market ahead of your full-scale launch. We commit to being informed by what the market is telling us. So, the investment really comes at the end when the concept has already been proven and to a large extent adopted by the people to whom we're going to sell it.

Risk, and even failure, become valuable in a learning organization. We need to take time to talk about what we learned from doing what we just did. Continuous improvement — debriefing, learning and moving forward — is as important as the profit and loss statement.

From the Chat – Does Time Passing Play a Role in Our Ease to Grow?

Workplaces haven't always encouraged entrepreneurial thinking and growth promotion.

"I try to keep a "beginners mind" during my time with an organization. Love to keep asking questions to further the conversation and growth, normally my own growth within the organization."

— Jennifer Wickline —

"Continually reinventing yourself is exhausting. People who are more established may need more help in some ways but can bring more to the table in other areas. New faces might need less training on some topics but need more help in others. Let's have a little compassion for our colleagues on both sides of the spectrum."

— Holly Roseski —

06

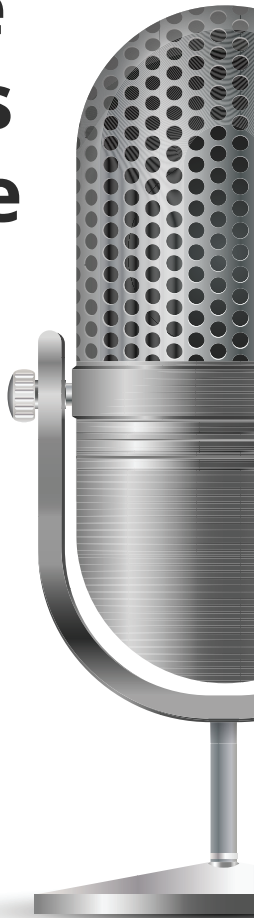
FURTHER RESOURCES

During the live chat, speakers and attendees alike chipped in with their tips for further reading and resources about entrepreneurial mindsets in the association industry. We've compiled them into a list here.

- [Association](#): Associations Catalyzing Entrepreneurship
- [Book](#): The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey
- [UX Resource](#): 18F is an office of federal employees that collaborates with other agencies to fix technical problems, build products, and improve how government serves the public through technology.
- [Article](#): Changing Culture When You Are Not In Charge
- [Book](#): Mindset: The New Psychology of Success by Carol S. Dweck



How Can We Solve Industry Problems Through Collective Knowledge?



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