

THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT THE FUTURE OF GOVERNING

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, *Thinking Differently about The Future of Governing*. 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



Jeff De Cagna FRSA FASAE
Executive Advisor at Foresight
First, LLC

Jeff De Cagna FRSA FASAE is executive advisor for Foresight First LLC in Reston, Virginia and a respected contrarian thinker on the future of associating and associations. He advises and has served on association and non-profit boards, and he has pursued executive development in both the work of governing at BoardSource and Harvard Business School and the work of foresight at the Institute for the Future and Oxford University. Jeff is the author of the eBook, Foresight is The Future of Governing: Building Thrivable Boards, Stakeholders and Systems for the 21st Century.





Alicia Skulemowski CAE

Senior Manager, Governance and Member Experience at Society of Tribologists and Lubrication Engineers (STLE)

Alicia has been with the Society of Tribologists and Lubrication Engineers since April 2009. Beginning in January 2018, she was promoted to a newly created role as Manager of Governance and Member Experience, where she leads STLE's Professional Development Department, with total management and focus on STLE's volunteer training, operations, and development (over 300+ active volunteers). Alicia also works directly with the Board of Directors, as well as various committees/work groups (20+) under the STLE organization, providing services ranging from management of STLE's governance, meeting planning/management, and administration/operations. Prior to this role, she served as the Manager of STLE's Certification Department (2009-2017), as well as served as the Board of Directors/Executive Committee Operations Manager for the society. In addition to these roles, she also has been involved with membership recruitment and retention, both on an individual and corporate level, with her current focus on engaging young professionals.

Alicia holds 2 undergraduate degrees from California Lutheran University and received the Certificate of Excellence in Nonprofit Leadership and Management from Michigan State University in 2016. She has been a member of Association Forum of Chicagoland since 2009 and is a recipient of the USAE & Association Forum's Forty under 40 award (Class of 2017), is a member of the Class of 2021 with the Institute for Organization Management, and is an ASAE member, successfully gaining the CAE credential in May 2017.





Veronica Meadows CAE
Senior Director of Strategy
at Council of Landscape
Architectural Registration
Boards

Veronica Meadows is the senior director of strategy for the Council of Landscape Architectural Registration Boards. She collaborates with the CEO to identify, analyze, develop and execute strategies that advance the organization's strategic and operational goals. She supports value creation through management of a strategic system that emphasizes environmental awareness, foresight, creativity, innovation, and continuous assessment and adjustment. In partnership with the CEO, she manages the leadership development, growth and renewal program and strategic governance processes to ensure ongoing organizational effectiveness and leadership.

Veronica is responsible for managing the organization's brand, developing communications strategy and leading the effort to promote member engagement, growth and development. Her 18-year career in association management includes experience in customer service, continuing education, marketing, communications, customer and public relations, strategic planning, leadership development and strategic governance. She is a Certified Association Executive.





Nabil El-Ghoroury PhD, CAE
Executive Director California
Association of Marriage and
Family Therapists

Prior to coming to CAMFT, he was an Associate Executive Director for the American Psychological Association, where he served as the director of the graduate student office. Nabil was recognized as an emerging association leader by the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) when he was invited into the Diversity Executive Leadership Program (2016-2018 class). He has presented at numerous conferences (in English and in Spanish) on issues such as student development in psychology, professional and legal issues in the use of social media, and health/educational disparities in autism spectrum disorders. In January 2018, he earned his Certified Association Executive (CAE). Nabil is particularly interested in self-care among association executives and diversity & inclusion. He completed his doctorate in clinical psychology from Binghamton University, and practiced for 7 years at MetroHealth Medical Center in Cleveland as a licensed psychologist.



02

WHY I'M OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE OF ASSOCIATION GOVERNING

BY JEFF DE CAGNA FRSA FASAE

In my new eBook, [*Foresight is The Future of Governing: Building Thrivable Boards, Stakeholders and Systems for the 21st Century*](#), I argue that associations must create a different future of governing by focusing the work of governing on the future. As I explain:

Associations need their boards, with the support of their staff partners and other contributors, to focus their attention on understanding, anticipating and preparing for a complex and uncertain future for their organizations and stakeholders, as well as the broader systems of connections, exchanges and relationships in which they participate and through which they also derive value.

This way of thinking requires a fundamental shift away from association management's orthodox beliefs about the role of the board and the nature of its work, and toward a future-ready perspective on what governing can become. Despite the clear challenges that associations will confront in making this shift, I am optimistic that it can be done for three reasons.

- **New awareness** - There is a growing realization among association boards and chief staff executives that powerful forces of societal transformation are reshaping every field of human endeavor and experience. No association is exempt from the long-term impact of disruption and more staff and voluntary decision-makers are taking seriously the need to prepare their organizations and stakeholders for a full range of plausible futures. As my colleague, [*Veronica Meadows*](#) from the Council of Landscape Architectural Registration Boards (CLARB) [*writes*](#), "Our board considers the duty of foresight part of their fiduciary responsibilities, and key to their mission of stewarding the organization." As societal transformation intensifies in the months ahead, I'm optimistic this mindset will spread throughout the association community.

- **New directors** - The arrival of younger directors is already making an impact on association boards. These 40 and under directors want to make full use of their talents to deliver meaningful outcomes through stewardship, not simply perform the traditional activities of governing because “that’s what we’ve always done.” Not only are these new directors younger, they are also far more diverse, which is a game-changing opportunity on which associations must capitalize. “You can have a board that is wholly curious and open to learning, but if the members are homogeneous they are likely to have the same blind spots. It’s important to have members on boards of different ages, cultural experiences and educational backgrounds,” [writes](#) my colleague, [Nabil El-Ghoroury](#) of the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (CAMFT). I’m optimistic that the number of association boards embracing this view is on the rise.
- **New technologies** - Accelerating technological progress is delivering a profound impact on our society, and it will be transformative in the boardroom as well. The application of artificial intelligence and related technologies will simplify board work, enhance board decision-making and enable directors to focus their energy and attention on building the human capabilities required to steward their associations into the future. These capabilities include empathy, collaboration, learning and what my colleague, [Alicia Skulemowski](#) of the Society of Tribologists and Lubrication Engineers (STLE) calls “radical candor.” As she [writes](#), “Radical candor is about keeping disagreement healthy. It helps your board to broaden their mind collectively and have a more rounded perspective when decision making.” I’m optimistic that associations are on the verge of integrating human and machine intelligences to strengthen board performance.

To have a chance of thriving in the 21st century, associations must create a different future of governing. I’m optimistic that we will, and it will require all of us who believe governing can become more than it is right now to work together to create that future today. ***Will you join us?***

From the Chat – Perspectives When Looking Ahead

What are some major contributing factors when moving forward?

“I think that the staff does play a role in providing the Board the guidance and space it needs to use foresight. But ultimately, as with everything in nonprofits, the responsibility lies with the Board to use it to move the association forward.”

— Nikki Golden —

“Sometimes leading your organization is like telling your kid they can’t have candy right now...managing those immediate frustrations with what our expertise and experience teaches us what will be best in the long run!”

— Molly Marsh —

“The CEO needs to be 100% responsible for the Strategic Direction. They have to own it, be completely in tune with it and know that they can implement it. I completely agree that the rotation of presidents and boards not to mention vested interests and pet projects means that group is not the correct owner of the strategic plan - a long term document. Probably the biggest reason the CEO needs to own it though is that only the CEO can reorganize the associations resources (personnel, programs and money) in such a way to make the long term and short term objectives happen. The BOD has lots of input and final agreement (governance) on the plan, but the CEO must lead and own the process.”

— Clive Roux —

03

3 KEY CONCEPTS TO GET YOUR BOARD BACK ON TRACK

How can an association reap the most valuable rewards from its board?

BY ALICIA SKULEMOWSKI

Let me open by sharing a line that I use to explain the role of my association's board and its importance to achieving our mission:

"It's called a board of directors, not a board of doers."

Have you, as staff or a board member, ever expressed similar sentiment?

There are certain types of high value work that your board should be focusing on, like strategy, long-term planning, and big organizational shifts, instead of day-to-day operational work. Here are three key concepts to help refocus a board gone adrift.

Foresight

The board is responsible for the direction of an organization. **It's an obligation in sustainability to think long term to ensure the health of the organization for future generations.** If they get bogged down in the minutiae of day-to-day operations, they're not practicing good governance. As a board member, you don't need to worry about the things a staff person should be handling. You're here for a reason, so let's use your time wisely!

Looking towards the future, not everything is going to be wonderful. You have to acknowledge possibilities that you might rather avoid, centering the common purpose of doing the best you can for the organization.

To use an analogy, think of foresight like parenting. If you are raising a child by thinking only about their needs and wants in that exact moment, without

planning for their future and considering the implications for what they could need later, you're doing your child a disservice. You're not going to be able to provide everything they need later. That doesn't make you the best parent!

Honesty

Boards need to take communication and collaboration seriously. One useful tactic for framing solutions to this is **radical candor**, defined by Kim Scott in her [book](#) and TED Talk. The fundamentals of radical candor are **honesty and transparency**. In the context of governance, it allows boards to have open and respectful conversations during the decision-making process.

Radical candor is about keeping disagreement healthy. It helps your board to broaden their mind collectively and have a more rounded perspective when decision making. If everyone agrees about everything, that may signal a fundamental problem on your board.

Dissent is important because it also gives you a preview of what emerging board leaders might think about an issue coming up in the future. Most organizations I know have a rotating board, where the voices present today will be replaced in a few years. If the group is disagreeing, look at those voices that are going to be around for a while - you might take heed to what they're saying.

Disagreement is healthy, so long as everyone's getting their voice heard and that in the end, the group collectively commits to move forward towards the shared mission and vision of the organization.

Diversity

Within association boards, different perspectives and experiences are valuable and beneficial. It all begins with the recruitment process. We usually find it easier to work with people similar to us, which is problematic when it comes to building a diverse board. Instead of taking the easy option and hiring an acquaintance, be more strategic when you are bringing in new directors.

A needs-gap analysis may help you to understand what's missing - both in terms of background and skill set - and match prospective volunteers with your needs.

Wherever they come from, an analysis will help you bring people to the table who can benefit your organization overall.

From the Chat – Let's Talk Disruption!

Thinking about the future means thinking about disruption.

Q: "Do you all have any tips around identifying disruption as early as possible? I love the idea of it being a tool, but only if we have enough time to use it well."

— Emilio Arocho —

A: "It is scary to think about the disruptors. But that's the point of a Board to look ahead and see what is coming for the industry. Finding disruptors isn't always easy. I think it means reading in lots of places, not just in your industry. For example, blockchain is going to affect a lot of industries, and many folks (and board members) don't even know what it is."

— Nabil El-Ghoroury —

"So when my previous employer called me a "Disruptor" I should've said, "I'm an Opportunity!"

— Lauren LeMunyan —

"Love thinking of disruptors as opportunities! Totally agree!"

— Sue Pine —

"Disruptors as opportunities - a golden nugget!"

— Shirley LaVergne —

"Disruption as a tool? BE THE DISRUPTION! Much easier to be out in front than trying to catch up."

— Clive Roux —

04

CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP ON THE BOARDS OF TOMORROW

How foresight, diversity and dissent helps one association board to thrive

BY VERONICA MEADOWS

To open this article, I want to share with you my board of directors' governing intent and the lens through which it works:

"As the organization's primary stewards the CLARB board of directors exercises its duty of foresight and learns with the future about the powerful forces reshaping the regulatory environment for landscape architecture."

Governing intent is so valuable because it is formally codified. Over the last 18 months we have completely evolved our governance structure, including leadership identification and cultivation.

This starts with transforming the way our existing board functions. **We've created space on the agenda for the board to focus specifically on foresight at every meeting.** What's coming next for the association, and how can we anticipate and prepare for it to turn disruptions into opportunities? Our board considers the duty of foresight part of their fiduciary responsibilities, and key to their mission of stewarding the organization. Building this capacity within our organization means omitting certain other tasks to free up the time, energy and dedication that it requires.

A smart person once said in one of our board meetings that the most powerful question is:

"What if we..?"

It prompts further questions about the way things have always been done and the way processes can be changed. Integrating practices like exercising the duty of foresight creates even more space to question orthodoxy.

Proposing structural changes to our board enables us to go out and seek new leaders, **ensuring that we have a good representation of different experiences, cultures, and backgrounds on our board.** We're looking differently at how we recruit and the types of people we're recruiting.

Part of the competency skill set that is being sought is the capacity for curiosity and commitment to learning, as well as a collective diversity of perspectives. Healthy dissent uncovers areas of needed learning.

For example, we're a regulatory association. Technology is going to impact us because professional practice is changing, and so is how that professional practice is regulated. When you've got a board made up of folks that don't have much understanding of technological advancements like blockchain, **a dissenting position on such a topic might uncover areas of additional learning that the board can focus on together** to gain a more robust understanding of its impacts.

We're creating greater opportunity for accountability in our board members. They're coming into these roles as jobs. Even if it is voluntary, they turn up with skill and excitement. In the long run, this provides a better experience for them as individuals. **They walk away from their governing experience better leaders than when they came in, and they take those competencies into their professional and personal lives.**

From the Chat – Where Does Foresight in Governing Begin?

Attendees shared thoughts on how boards make foresight a priority from the get go.

“Generation of board/job descriptions is a good exercise to include in board orientations and on boarding.”

— Rachel Miller-Bleich —

Q: “Is anyone building in duty of foresight to any board descriptions or job descriptions for Board members?”

— Nikki Golden —

A: “We have included “foresight” as a skill our committee on nominations looks for in leadership candidates. We also build it into our orientation and regular board meetings as well. To be good at exercising foresight, you must practice regularly.”

— Veronica Meadows —

A: “A key thing to focus on when selecting board members is their motivation. Are they there because it is a good thing to put on their resume, good networking, etc, or do they have true passion for advancing the purpose of the association. This motivation assessment can be done with the right type of interviews.”

— Amith Nagarajan —

05

WHY DO WE NEED DIVERSE BOARDS?

Strengthen your board of directors by inviting a wealth of experiences to the table

BY NABIL EL-GHOROURY

Associations must be prepared for future disruptors. Look at the horizon: what are the big challenges that your organization, members and wider world will face? Frame these disruptors not as objects of fear, but of opportunity. How can you capitalize on these changes?

I believe that this preparation for change requires associations to prioritize diversity and inclusion at all levels, including on your board of directors. My association has 28 chapters, some of which are doing great work on diversity and sharing that with other chapters and the board. When it comes to nurturing talent and looking out for new leaders to take on volunteer positions, **the board can look for the rising stars at our chapter events or meetings of chapter leaders, keeping diversity of thought in mind.**

You can have a board that is wholly curious and open to learning, but if the members are homogeneous they are likely to have the same blind spots. It's important to have members on boards of different ages, cultural experiences and educational backgrounds.

In the mental health field, we talk about difficult dialogues. Prepare people for the challenging conversations that will arise when board members have opposing thoughts on a situation. If the demographic of the board is weighted in one direction, the minority voices may be stifled by the fear factor. It's important to develop a dialogue framework that encourages people to be respectful, listen to contrasting ideas, and encourage new faces to speak up. People who have different perspectives on what the future holds are critical for an association. Dissent promotes diversity of thought and diversity of leadership.

In terms of board member experience, this group of directors can have disagreements then leave that dissent in the boardroom and share a meal after the meeting. **This ultimately makes board members better at civic engagement, and better people.**

I am optimistic about the passion and excitement that board members bring to an association. I've only been an executive director for six months, and meeting so many people excited about my organization inspires me more every day. I'm lucky that my association is interested in learning and promoting diversity issues, because I know **it's only making us stronger in the face of an unpredictable future.**

From the Chat – Can Diversity Be Planned For?

How does governing value diversity and ensure it as part of the board's future?

"Diversity of thought requires diversity in all other forms - and if we don't have diversity of thought, this whole conversation is useless because you'll just recycle the past."

— Amith Nagarajan —

Q: "Do some organizations have certain seats for young members, diverse members, etc?"

— Shannon Thompson —

A: "It may be difficult to achieve when the pathway there is somewhat structured, but this is where the organization needs to begin to use foresight in terms of planning for leadership. If it is too difficult to get the voices you need/want, then it may need to be re-evaluated because we need to fill a quota versus actual expertise or knowledge."

— Alicia Skulemowski —

A: "Make sure you engage the young board applicants somewhere else so they will be ready for board positions next time."

— Carolyn Hook —

A: "Great point.! Engage and nurture young professionals."

— Nabil El-Ghoroury —

06

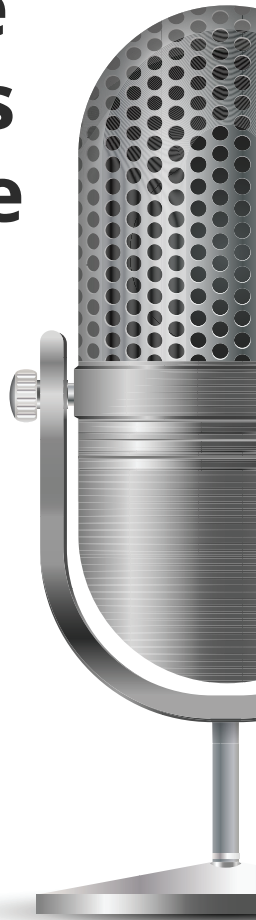
FURTHER RESOURCES

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

- [Article](#): Association 2.0 - Digital Transformation and Relevance in the Digital Age
- [eBook](#): Foresight is the Future of Governing by Jeff De Cagna
- [Newsletter](#): Shari Harley's Business Management Training
- [Book and Podcast](#): Radical Candor by Kim Scott



How Can We Solve Industry Problems Through Collective Knowledge?



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