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Board Culture: The Mortar of Governance

Dr. Lowell M. Aplebaum

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Board Culture: The Mortar of Governance

By: Dr. Lowell M. Aplebaum, EdD, FASAE, CAE, CPF, Vista Cova

In many ways, an organization's strength is supported on a foundation of leadership and governance. The roles and responsibilities of the board are the bricks of that foundation. Culture is the mortar that holds those bricks together.

Associations devote meaningful energy to strengthening governance structures. Boards refine strategy, update bylaws, recruit leaders, and clarify committee roles. Each of these efforts strengthens the structural side of governance.

The culture surrounding those structures often determines how effectively the system works. Board culture reflects the shared expectations that shape how leaders interact with one another, how they partner with staff leadership, and how they approach governance decisions. Culture shows up in everyday leadership moments. It influences how leaders listen, how disagreement unfolds, and how boards stay aligned when facing complex decisions.

For associations, this dimension of governance carries unique importance. Board members serve as volunteers who bring professional expertise, organizational affiliations, and personal leadership styles to the boardroom. The environment in which those leaders engage with one another shapes the effectiveness of governance.

Many CEOs describe their boards as having strong cultures. Those same leaders often note that healthy board environments grow through intentional effort. Shared expectations, deliberate conversation, and consistent leadership behaviors help boards cultivate cultures that support mission-driven leadership.

Recent research with association CEOs explored this topic in depth, leading to the development of a practical framework for building intentional board culture. The framework centers on three phases:

Define

Boards articulate the cultural values that guide leadership behavior. These values describe how board members engage with one another, how they approach decision-making, and how they partner with staff leadership.

Live

Values become meaningful when they are visible and integrated into the rhythms of board work. Many boards incorporate values into meeting agendas, reflection practices, and leadership discussions so that culture remains present in everyday governance.

Sustain

Over time, culture strengthens through reinforcement, reflection, and peer accountability. Boards recognize behaviors that align with their values and address moments when leadership expectations need clarification.

One of the most practical tools emerging from this work is a simple set of reflection questions boards can revisit regularly:

- Are our values present?
- Are they acknowledged?
- Are they verified?
- Are they shared?
- Are they taught?
- Are they explored?

These questions encourage boards to examine how culture shows up in leadership practice.

When associations invest in culture alongside governance structure, they strengthen the leadership environment in which decisions are made. Trust grows. Conversations deepen. Leaders navigate complexity with greater clarity and alignment.

The full white paper, "Intention in Action: Building a Culture of Leadership on Your Board," is available for free download here:

<https://vistacova.com/resources/white-papers/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lowell Aplebaum, FASAE, CAE, CPF is a CEO, Speaker, Facilitator, and Strategist.

He is the CEO of [Vista Cova](#), a company that partners with organizations on strategic visioning and planning, creating stronger stakeholder connections, and reimagining value and engagement. As an IAF Certified™ Professional Facilitator, Lowell frequently provides dynamic sessions to organizations – getting volunteers, members, and staff involved through experiential learning approaches.

After starting his career in the informal education realm, over the course of more than a decade, Lowell has worked inside associations on membership and value, volunteer leadership establishment and growth, professional development and learning, global alliance building, communications and marketing, online and in-person communities, operations, finance, HR, and staff oversight. After serving as the Chief Operating Officer for a medical association, Lowell founded Vista Cova – returning to his passion of facilitating for and partnering with volunteer leaders, members, and staff.

Lowell currently serves on the ASAE Research Committee and is a past Chair for the overseeing commission for the Certified Association Executive (CAE) credential. He chaired ASAE's Task Force on CEO Pathways, and previously served as Chair for ASAE's Component Relations Council. He is the creator of a master-level learning series, Through the CEO Lens, and Association Charrette – a co-creation retreat experience. He is the co-Executive Editor and Contributing Author for ASAE's Component Relations Handbook, 2nd edition, and contributed chapters to the latest versions of Professional Practices of Association Management as well as Membership Essentials. He is a mentor for ASAE's Diversity Executive Leadership Program and recently served as a facilitator for ASAE's Centennial Recognition Task Force. His work on global efforts for associations includes experience across five continents, hundreds of volunteer groups, and all 50 states in the U.S.

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