

## Leading During a Pandemic: Paths to Innovation

By: Mark Athitakis

Testing out new ideas can seem overwhelming right now. But there may be no better time to do it.

Association boards are slow. Association projects are slow. Associations are slow.

Plenty of myths are getting debunked in the COVID-19 era. There's no reason we can't add the myth of "slowness" to the pile.

Last week, I checked in on a video conference hosted by the New York Society of Association Executives titled "[Navigating the New Normal](#)," and much of the conversation by the collected leaders centered on the ways things have sped up in the past two months. Lingering discussions about what projects to sunset have become firm decisions. Associations have ramped up their capacity for virtual events, and have begun planning future meetings anticipating that they'll likely be at least partially virtual—with greater potential to connect with more attendees outside of North America. Leaders are getting creative about new membership tiers and nondues revenue, and boards are getting comfortable with setting strategy online and efficiently.

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"This is the time to try it—if it doesn't work, just blame COVID," said the conference's moderator, Gregory Offner. He was being tongue-in-cheek, but not entirely. "We're seeing a lot of red tape in every industry just miraculously disappear. People that you could never get on the phone before are now willing to get on a phone call."

Lest this all come off as pollyanna-ish, it's clear this newfound urgency is happening due to real concerns among associations about their survival, now that their biggest revenue sources have quickly dried up. Asked to innovate, many might think that the goal in the current moment is to invent a single whiz-bang revenue driver. But experts advise being creative in small ways.

In a recent article for *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, three leaders from the nonprofit consultancy Community Wealth Partners write that this is the moment for organizations to develop their "adaptive capacity," looking at the likely environment in the next year and making minor but meaningful adjustments. "Set short-term financial and impact goals, along with plans for what you'll do if you don't meet them," they write. "As you consider creative new approaches or solutions, [think about experimenting with rapid prototyping approaches](#), rather than launching major initiatives that require extensive analysis and proven track records."

And sometimes innovations aren't the result of particular projects or initiatives but changes in behaviors and expectations. In the *Harvard Business Review*, professor Gary P. Pisano points out that efforts to produce a big response to COVID-19, such as a vaccine, have to work in

tandem with smaller but meaningful efforts to change social norms about hygiene and medical treatment.

“Many improvements in medical outcomes have nothing to do with technology or drugs; they come from better patient management practices,” he writes. “Figuring out when [is] the best time to intubate a patient or whether to put them on their stomach rather [than] on their back is unlikely to make headlines, but it can lead to better outcomes. You don’t necessarily need game-changing drugs or technology to change the game; you just need a lot [of] learning about what works and doesn’t in practice. [Fast learning from experience will be critical.](#)”

And the path to being creative may be smoother than you think. Last week, my colleague Ernie Smith noted that [it may be easier to take on ambitious projects these days](#), with more remote-work tools coming available, many of them free.

It’s unlikely that any of us will look back at this time romantically. But your outlook needn’t be gloomy, either. We’ve been thrust into a moment where leaders can demonstrate their creativity, test new ideas, and (perhaps best of all) trust that the people around them are more flexible and capable than they’d previously imagined.