

Navigating the New Normal: Ideas and Insights

By: Amanda Davis, CMP

This fall, I had the opportunity to moderate a Think Tank event for Association Executives of North Carolina's (AENC) Young Professionals group, FUEL (Fostering Unity among Emerging Leaders). The event brought association executives and partner organizations together to discuss the problems they see facing the world and the workplace.

Though we came from different industries, different walks of life, and different parts of North Carolina, it was clear that we had experienced many of the same challenges. In this conversational setting, we asked questions, brainstormed solutions, and walked away with powerful insights.

I'm sharing my top takeaways with the hope that you might learn something, feel encouraged, or even find that you're not alone in navigating our "new normal."

Listen to Your People

Our conversation demonstrated that now, more than ever, paying attention to what your people have to say is vital. Association staff, partners, members, and prospective members all want to have a voice at the table.

In your work culture, make sure you are creating the space and the foundation for stakeholders to voice concerns in the moment, and if significant enough to your organization, make this principal a part of your value system. The time spent nurturing will pay off in your business outcomes.

A major discussion among the association executives in attendance was whether to return to the office and hold in-person events, remain remote and virtual, or take a hybrid approach. In 2020, work and events were remote for safety concerns, but now there is a cultural shift with many desiring flexibility.

The key to managing expectations around the in-person, hybrid, and remote debate is empathy. If you're a decision-maker, take the time to listen. Really hear what the concerns are, and try to understand each point of view. There is a higher risk of turnover or low attendance if you aren't listening to preferences.

Many suggested using employee and member feedback to decide whether to return to the office or hold in-person events. Try conducting surveys to gauge interest. However, if you conduct a survey, ensure you are willing to act on or even address the feedback.

Do More to Keep Young Professionals Engaged

Employee and member retention were brought up as significant concerns during the Think Tank event. There are plenty of opportunities in this era of the "Great Resignation," and if an organization is unwilling to show individuals how important they are, other places will.

A few ideas and suggestions that your organization may want to consider:

- Take a hard look at your perks and benefits. Are they enough to retain great people? If they aren't, *now* is the time to pivot.
- Comprehensive benefits are important to young people. Consider offering better insurance benefits, 401(k) matching, or professional development stipends that prove you're willing to invest in your employees.
- Some are seeing opportunities within their membership in trade associations to have more of a voice. Try increasing seats at the table to give more access to young professionals.
- Make a concerted effort to live up to your mission, vision, and values. More importantly, if you don't have them yet, create and define them. Young leaders want and need to see them in action.
- There are many options, but most importantly, do what's best for your business and your membership.

Strategize, Streamline, and Automate

We all have chaotic work schedules where we feel we don't have enough time to get everything done. In remote office settings, like in-person, it's all too common to get bogged down by meetings. So, how do association executives stay organized?

- **Delegate. Delegate. Delegate.** Let go of some stuff! If you can do so, get items off your plate to make room.
- **Find the best apps, tools, and processes that work for your team.** Using tools to help streamline your workload will enable you and your staff to be more productive, saving both time and money.
- **Try weekly or monthly working "sabbaticals."** The sabbatical was an active exercise for one of our audience members. The idea is to take one day every 6-8 weeks and act as if you are out of office, when really, you're prioritizing strategic planning and backlogged projects.
- **Implement No-Meeting Fridays** as a way for your team to get things done and wrap up the week.

Stay Flexible, Be Prepared

During this pandemic, being agile and resourceful is critical. Many organizations in attendance had to create or refresh policies and procedures at a moment's notice.

The most significant lessons learned regarding policy changes are the importance of patience and flexibility. Adjustments may need to happen quickly—so there's no need to make plans six months in advance. The world is still determining how to move forward.

Make sure all policies—especially for events—are clear, concise, and readily available. Get the word out about your policy so that employees and members are not surprised by any changes.

Another way to stay prepared is to create and share a team communication plan for when and if your staff is affected by COVID. What will your team do? Who will cover what? Outline a plan so that no one is caught off guard if someone is unexpectedly out of the office.

Navigate Events with Care & Consideration

How do you navigate the strong opinions of staff and members when talking about vaccinations or masks without sharing your personal beliefs? This is an important question to ask in any industry, and we centered our conversation around planning for in-person events.

The consensus was to do your best to treat everyone equally. Put the same requirements in place for all event attendees, whether they are vaccinated or not:

- Don't create separate lines for vaccinated attendees vs. those with negative COVID tests.
- Require masks for all attendees, regardless of vaccination status.
- Create pre-event resources so attendees know of policies and procedures ahead of time if they choose to attend in person.
- Require a signed waiver to attend.
- Try using colorful wristbands to help attendees signal comfort level to others (e.g., Red = Hands off, Yellow = Handshake, Green = Hug).

When I reviewed all of the ideas presented at the Think Tank event, it solidified my belief that the association world can make major changes to how we work. This event allowed us all to step back, take a deep breath, and hear how we are not the only ones struggling with these issues. We are not alone in our pursuit to move the needle. Our efforts mean something; in fact, they represent huge things for our future.

If you'd like to read all the notes and insights from the event, I invite you to check out the three-part blog series beginning with part one, [Thoughts from a Think Tank: The Shifting Work Culture](#).

About the Author

Amanda Davis, CMP, is a proud North Carolinian and the Vice President of Client Experience at Blue Sky eLearn. Learn more at blueskyelearn.com or reach out to Amanda at adavis@blueskyelearn.com.