

# The Purpose and Power OF ASSOCIATIONS

Michigan Society of Association Executives (MSAE)

**A**ssociations are a cornerstone of American civic and economic life. While often overlooked by those outside the association community, they significantly influence daily life in the United States and beyond. Associations advance professions, improve industry effectiveness, strengthen communities, and enable organizations to address shared challenges. They foster learning, set standards, develop leaders, support workforce growth, and facilitate collective problem-solving. In the US, associations also embody democratic traditions rooted in the freedoms of speech, assembly, and petition, allowing people and organizations to unite around common interests and pursue progress. Understanding their current significance begins with their origins.



“Associations enable people and organizations to achieve together what they could not accomplish alone.”

## Steeped in History

Associations trace their roots back to guilds in Europe that united craftspeople and merchants to protect common interests, set standards, and share knowledge. So strong was Americans’ inclination to form associations to solve problems and advance causes by the 1830s that it made a powerful impression on French historian and political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville, who later described associations as vital to democratic life. Since then, associations have elevated professional practice, improved safety and quality standards, supported education and research, promoted economic development, and organized collective action on issues important to their members and society as a whole. What were once informal coalitions became tax-exempt organizations, formalized to serve a shared mission rather than private profit. Organizations entrusted with work this important require equally thoughtful governance, clear authority, and careful stewardship to sustain their mission and public trust.

## Volunteers as Stewards

Stewardship begins with governance. Associations are typically led by volunteer boards composed of member leaders or community representatives. These boards oversee mission, strategy, fiduciary responsibilities, and policy direction. Their authority is defined by governing documents such as articles of incorporation and bylaws, and further guided by board policies, committee charters, and related rules. Staff, led by the chief staff executive, manage operations and implement board strategy. Boards set direction and policy, while staff execute plans and oversee daily operations. Clear role distinctions help boards focus on strategic priorities and prevent micromanagement. Strong governance and effective management are not ends in themselves; they are what enable an association to meet the needs of its members and advance the broader interests it represents.

## Who & How Associations Serve

Associations are structured and led so they can serve the people and organizations at the center of their mission. Some represent individuals, others organizations, and many serve a mix of stakeholders, including students, emerging leaders, retirees, chapters, suppliers, and allied partners. Their work takes many forms: convening peers, sharing knowledge, advancing research, delivering education, developing leaders, establishing standards, offering credentials, and amplifying the collective voice of those they represent. In these ways, associations help members solve problems, improve performance, adapt to change, and stay connected to a larger professional or industry community. Their impact extends beyond membership itself, strengthening the professions, industries, and communities they touch through greater quality, trust, capability, and forward momentum.

## Unity of Purpose

Simply stated, associations enable people and organizations to achieve together what they could not accomplish alone. They have shaped the past, influenced the present, and will continue to guide communities, professions, and industries long into the future. This edition of *Impact* serves as a primer, providing board members, Chief Staff Executives, and staff with a clearer understanding of association structure, governance, and leadership. As you read, consider how these principles apply to your own association’s governance. Reflect on your board’s strengths and areas for improvement and discuss these ideas with fellow board members to identify practical steps for continued growth and effectiveness.

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