
Can Associations Become High Performance Organizations?

Possibly. It depends on how a high performance association is defined and whether or not an association board and staff are willing to make the investment and deliver to their members. Based on research and writings on high performance organizations, and adjusting for the association perspective, a high performance association would possess the following key characteristics:

- Vision and mission are shared and owned by all stakeholders
- Strategy is performance-based, clear and mapped to ensure individuals and members of teams turn vision and mission into action and results
- Goals are challenging and make a difference to the way in which work is completed
- Teamwork is effective and empowered
- Better business practices are used to secure efficient organizational practices which are driven by focusing on:
 - Member and employee satisfaction,
 - Fiscal and operational accountability
 - Quality
- Strong emphasis is placed on performance measurement using key performance indicators

High performance associations have a culture of continuous improvement and strong leadership that believes the association should be a learning organization and should develop and provide the necessary competencies to get things done. With the right competencies, individuals and teams develop a commitment and apply the right tools to achieve desired quality and satisfaction levels.

The above characteristics can often be measured by specific performance indicators such as these examples:

- Fiscal targets met, i.e., accumulated surplus policy
- Member retention and growth targets met
- Strong and diverse volunteer targets met
- Reduction in cycle time in dealing with significant and routine issues
- Low staff turnover rate
- Number of new innovative measures
- Number of complaints or member service problems
- Number of successful team efforts
- New best practices implemented
- Planning policy and process is complied with
- Member input and satisfaction with strategic direction

Making it Happen

- A powerful and strong commitment to the vision, mission, values, goals and strategy of the association by all
- Effective and clear communication lines within the association from the Board down and from the member up
- A culture of performance in which all want to meet the challenges set and they are regarded as outstanding
- Leadership growing and developing with change
- Use of strategic management, benchmarking for best practices and other key tools
- Acquiring and engaging the necessary competencies to make it all happen

How Does Your Association Rate Out of Ten?

Association managers in the Association Management Education (AME) Program course - Association Leadership, Change, Strategy, and Structure - were asked on a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being high), "What score would you assign to your association in terms of being a high performance association?" Students were also asked to identify an association that would have a high score and explain why. A review of 22 recent responses reveals that the scores range from 4 to 8 with an average score of 6.3. This score may suggest that associations have considerable room for improvement. I have previously reviewed close to 200 responses and it was rare to find scores higher than 7. It was interesting to note that associations with higher scores had recently improved communications and strategic management activities such as strategy formulation (strategic planning) and strategy evaluation (performance measurement).

One manager raised good questions, "Should a high performance association rate a 10? Would it rate itself a 10?" The manager concluded it would not be likely as a high performance association knows there is always room to improve.

Common improvements identified and planned by association managers are:

- Improve strategic management activity such as strategy implementation and performance measurement activity
- Increase member opportunities for involvement
- Improve communications between members, members to Board and Staff and staff, and Board to members
- Reduce the number of one time attempts to get strategic direction in place and develop a policy and supportive process that will ensure increased frequency of activity

If some of these problems exist in your association, they need to be addressed in order to get on the track to becoming a high performance association.

- Budget driven decisions
- Crises driven management

- Membership restlessness
- Board is not chosen for competencies and ability to perform
- Communication challenges exist and everyone admits there is a need for improvement
- This is the way things have always been
- Implementation plans are not clear or focused with appropriate accountability
- Products and services are not relevant
- Resources spread too thin
- Not enough focus on measurement and impact
- One part of the organization does not know what the other is doing
- Errors in providing service to members
- Not enough time and knowledge to get things done

Who are the high performance associations?

From the outside looking in, managers in the course identified associations they perceive to be as high performing and provided reasons for their choice. A short list of associations mentioned on more than one occasion and based on the reasons provided are:

- Alberta Medical Association
- Alzheimer Society of Canada
- Association of Regina Realtors
- Canadian Chemical Producers Association
- Canadian Dental Association
- Ontario Library Association
- Retail Council of Canada
- Society of Management Accountants of Canada

Even though others perceive these organizations as high performance associations, it is likely that directors and staff from these organizations may see themselves as a high performance association with lots of room for improvement. If this is the case, it is normal, and part of the quest to become a high performance association.

A good site to start an Internet search on high performance organizations is:

<http://www.hgc.edu/~gmaffeo/hpo3.html>.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issue and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the Association Management Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com.