

A SHORT GUIDE TO

COMMUNITY FOR ASSOCIATION LEADERS

How to create accountability for community at the top



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Associations operate like communities. They have a mission for bringing people together – whether that be around a common topic, profession, or interest. The activities, events, and member benefits are all designed around furthering that mission. However, building community and getting support for community programs continues to be a challenge in these spaces. Community professionals are expected to build their business acumen and learn how to speak to leadership to ensure they appropriately communicate community value to gain or maintain support, and appropriately so. But there is also a responsibility on the part of association leaders to understand community as much as they understand membership or association management, especially if the decision has been made to intentionally invest in community programs.

An important aspect to building community to keep top of mind is that it is about people, relationships, and trust. And that means that your association must be in tune with what your potential community members need before you can understand how to deliver value to them. Your leadership team must all be on the same page about what that looks like and should be able to clearly articulate that across the business. It's not enough to say that community is important to business growth and longevity in a paragraph in your strategic plan – you must understand what that means for your organization. Here are some tips to ensure that happens.

Define community for your association

During a time when community is on the lips of leaders in all sorts of organizations, it is important that you understand what this means for you. Yes, there are foundational elements of community building, but that is not enough to bring success. Where do communities live in relation to your association? How are people gathering? What needs are being met? What is the purpose of these communities? Who is coming together and why? Clearly defining what community means and how it helps move your association's mission forward is key to creating a successful community program and ensuring the appropriate support.

Be accountable for community success

Yes, you need to hire a community manager, at the very least, to ensure the community program moves forward. And, yes, there needs to be someone responsible for ensuring it is supported across the association and that budget and resources are secured. That means that there should be top level support and advocacy to the board on the program's behalf. Executive support is integral to the support of community programs. Leaders should be articulating community's value to the board and membership as clearly as community professionals are articulating it to business leaders. Intentionality is key. Putting the same amount of muscle behind these programs that goes behind chapter and membership programs is paramount to their success.

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Remember that community fosters strong relationships

Have you ever thought about why it might be hard to retain members? Or why your membership satisfaction survey results aren't where you expected them to be? It could be a symptom of flailing relationships between associations and members. Community is at the heart of creating connection and supporting the full member journey. From the time someone discovers your association to the time they decide to volunteer or join their local chapter, community plays a part in guiding that journey because it is what helps build stronger relationships, trust, and connection with those you serve. It's not a nice to have. It's a must have if this is core to your association's mission.

In closing, it's important to remember that your mission as an association is cradled in a community mindset. If leadership can connect back to that mission on a fundamental level, creating rewarding connections across the organization through community to deliver value to your members becomes an integral part of how you support their journey and provide unique and meaningful experiences. And that will provide returns for the association for years to come. ■

