# Association Apocalypse

*The 5-Step Guide to Rebuilding Your Association Post-2020*

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**PROPEL**

# Introduction

## Pivot is the word of the year.

**And you've done it well.**

As the world has been rocked by the events of 2020, associations have had to make drastic changes on a dime. And maybe you are feeling a slight relief that you've made it this far—for good reason. Despite loss of revenue and lowered member numbers, associations have been able to pivot surprisingly, especially considering the "we've always done it this way" mentality that historically plagues this space. You may have incorporated elements like:

- **Work-from-home options**
- **New communications technologies**
- **Online event management**

These are not small changes. Congratulations are definitely in order.

Still, there is one area that has likely been ignored, though it is one of the most vital components of your association, and that's your culture.

> **Culture** is directly related to high performance of organizations, with the highest performing using culture to impact their management style, communication and employee training.

We're not talking about Taco Tuesdays or your Employee of the Month program. We're talking about the deep definition of culture, the underlying belief systems of your association that motivate all actions.

In other words, if you had silo issues before this all started, you probably still have silo issues. The same with transparency, inclusion, or hierarchy issues.

Despite your ability to survive the worst of this year, **the culture of your business isn't keeping up with the pivoting needs and challenges of a post-2020 world**. And probably not the world we will have in just a few months.

Unfortunately, most associations are simply unaware of what is right or wrong about their culture right now. We are all cutting corners and trying to do more with less, which is the absolute worst time to be dealing with the friction caused by a misaligned culture.

We've been arguing for years for the need to continuously align your culture with what makes you successful. Today, it has become an imperative.

It is vital for you to rebuild from the ground up. Rebuilding is an opportunity to create a more resilient organization from the ground up so you will be prepared for the next major disruption (because it will come).

**The secret is to integrate culture + strategy + execution.**

Over the next few pages, we're going to show you how to do this in five highly-tuned steps. And if you follow them, you will not only rebuild the culture of your association, but align it in such a way to promote phenomenal growth and extend your association's reach for good.

# Step 1

## Survey the desolation.

Associations have felt the impacts of the events of 2020 more keenly than many other kinds of organizations. COVID-19 caught a lot of us off guard, and we are scrambling to keep up with the changes it has brought.

**Over 95%** of organizations in the nonprofit sector alone have seen and are attempting to manage negative impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.[1]

Not only have there been massisve losses In membership and revenue, there are travel restrIctIons, new technologIes to adapt to, and remote team members to manage. Maybe you're one of the lucky ones who already had these skIlls under your belt, but the rest of the assocusatIon world has been scramblIng to keep up for nearly a year.

**These are core changes to the ways that we do business + they are having a devastating Impact on the health + longevity of many associations.**

Before you can begin rebuilding your association, you have to take a step back and ask yourself a few questions:

1.  What are the major changes to our organization that we've experienced as a result of the physical, cultural and financial stressors of 2020?

2.  What are the internal cultural changes that we have undergone this year? This can include work style, management habits and team wide focus areas.

3.  Which strategies have been put into place to manage the issues we are facing? Which strategies have been effective or not?

4.  How have these strategies been executed? Has the execution been as successful as you'd hoped? Why or why not?

Reading these is probably as exhausting as it is for us to write the questions. These are high-level evaluations, but they are really important for getting a handle on what has actually happened this year and how it has impacted your association. You need to shift from being reactive to being proactive. You have a tremendous opportunity right now to set yourself up for success moving forward.

When you've taken a minute to really think about that, you'll be ready for the next step—the step you didn't even know you were mIssing.

# Step 2
## Understand the impact of culture.

Culture as the second step to rebuilding in an industry that feels post-apocalyptic? Not what you were expecting, right?

Most of us were taught that we need to start with strategy and execution before we can make change within our organization. What you may not have been taught in business school, however, is one very important truth:

**Culture is the driver of all behavior at every level of your association.**

If you try to rebuild your association, and you wait to manage the culture part until later, we guarantee that your rebuilding efforts will fail. So, before you go any further, get a good handle on how to understand and manage your culture.

### What exactly is culture?

If you think it's about cool chairs, Foosball tables, and free donuts, your brain is in the same place as many other association leaders. Unfortunately, there is a lot more to culture than "cool factor"—so much so that it is the one underlying element that, when changed, can make or break your association. We have boiled down our definition of culture to make it as clear and actionable as possible:

**Organizational culture** is the collection of words, actions, thoughts, and "stuff" that clarifies and reinforces what is truly valued inside an organization.

We can break this sentence down word-by-word to really capture all the meaning that we've included here, but let's not and say we did.

What's important for you to know is that culture is what is valued by you as a leader and by every team member on your team—the thoughts, words, and actions that are people-driven (and often inconsistent or contradictory) as well as the physical "stuff" that you choose to have in your environment.

In an ideal world, your culture would follow your mission statement and marketing materials like sheep, but that's not really where culture's power lies. All that flowery language you spent so much time on in your mission statement? That's good to have around, but that's not usually where your culture is at.

Culture isn't about what should be important, it's about what is important as evidenced through the daily decisions and actions taken by your team.

Consider Enron. They had nice statements in their lobby about things like integrity and honesty, but that wasn't really valued at the end of the day, was it? It turns out making your numbers look good at all costs was the most valuable cultural agreement, so that's what people did, and it broke their company in the most spectacular way possible.

Your culture is the collection of things that clarifies and reinforces what is really valued by your association.

**Assessing** your own company culture can be hard. Sometimes a third party outsider is a better judge of what elements of your culture are holding your organization back. Chat with one of our Culture Designers about how to get a one-on-one consultation.

**Learn More**

## How Does Culture Affect My Association's Profitability?

Your culture is the collection of things that clarifies and reinforces what is really valued by your association.

From how your team members spend their time to how they treat each other, culture impacts every decision at your association. Although every situation is different, the crises of 2020 have put some of these cultural weaknesses under a spotlight. Associations that were "doing just fine" before COVID-19 were really suffering from cultural bedrock issues which the pandemic uncovered and exacerbated.

Here are a few of the issues that we have seen affect associations the most over the past year:

**Awkward collaboration.** Associations are generally very siloed, and while we value working together with colleagues at a personal level, we're not as good at collaboration among the different groups inside our organization. And then suddenly the pandemic makes it impossible to walk down the hall to have a quick conversation with the marketing department about a key issue, and now we're collaborating even less.

**Reactive transparency**. We have observed many cultures in the association space that are happy to share information when someone asks them, but they're not proactively creating systems and processes to ensure people have the information they need before they have to ask. And now that we're only communicating in an endless series of Zoom meetings, we're not even doing the reactive part well any more.

**Shallow solutions.** Associations have a tendency to stay on the surface when they address both internal issues/dynamics and understanding member and customer wants and needs. We'll happily put out an immediate fire, but we're not as good at digging deep to understand the underlying needs involved and solve things at that level. The pandemic certainly gave us a whole new set of fires to put out, and our employees and our external stakeholders may be feeling a little left behind.

You see how culture is much bigger and deeper than having Zen gardens in the break room or a company pizza party every month? It's about ingrained patterns that drive real action—for better or worse—within your organization every day.

**The patterns like the ones above will drive right to your bottom line, because they are causing friction that makes it much harder for your people to be successful in their work**.

You've been tolerating that inefficiency for far too long, mostly because you haven't been able to identify those patterns. As you get better at managing culture, the patterns become more apparent.

**28% of workers** who quit a job within the first 90 days said company culture was the main demotivator.[2]

## Culture Change Without All the Drama

Once you see the parts of your culture that are getting in the way of your success, of course, you'll have to address them. That means culture change, and that's where we lose a lot of people, who throw up their hands and declare that culture change is either too hard or takes too long.

**Not true**.

Culture change means changing the way you do things inside your organization that reflect a shift in what's valued. Let's say you suffer from the "reactive transparency" problem above, and you want to change that part of your culture so people start getting the information they need more proactively.

- **Talent/HR**. The way you recruit, hire, onboard, and evaluate ALWAYS impacts culture so make sure those processes are consistent with where you want to go.
- **Process.** Culture is "the way you do things," so every single process is subject to change if it will move the culture in the right direction. The pandemic has likely highlighted which of your processes work seamlessly and which, well, don't.

Here are some concrete things you could do:

- Share either the notes or at least the agenda of senior management team meetings with everyone on a shared drive. No, you don't have to share the confidential stuff, but knowing where the senior team is putting its attention can be helpful for everyone.
- Create a "heads up" channel on Slack where people can post updates on pieces of work that will require a lot of short-term effort or resources that could impact other parts of the organization.

- Add a "daily huddle" either within or across teams where people simply share what they're up to that day and if anything is holding them up. This takes no more than 10 minutes but can really help with visibility of issues.

**That's culture change**. When we work with associations on their culture design work, we find that actions (both large and small) that can be taken to deal with culture issues tend to fall in the following categories (these are sections in our Culture Playbook we create with our clients):

- **Rituals and Artifacts.** We need symbols and tangible manifestations of culture. How do you keep everyone connected when your staff is mostly remote?
- **Stewardship**. Do you have a team or person responsible for making sure your culture is nurtured and supported continuously, to avoid the issues we listed above?
- **Structure.** Organizational hierarchy has a huge impact on culture. We know a lot of associations are restructuring to be flatter these days, with less complicated decision-making.
- **Technology.** In the digital age, there is a technology component to just about everything, and culture is no exception. Are you thinking about your tech platforms in terms of how they are helping or hindering your culture?

You don't have to do all of that at once. Pick some areas to work on, then make the changes, and then figure out if things are getting better. Rinse and repeat. This is our simple framework for culture management, and you need to have that in place as you start the rebuilding process, because it's going to help you fix a big problem that you may not realize you have.

# Step 3
## Recognize your growth problem.

> You accepted less because you thought "a little" was better than nothing. Know your worth.
>
> - Trent Shelton

The pandemic has forced many associations to think differently about their annual conference—that's an area where there are many examples of organizations thinking creatively about how to take advantage of unexpected circumstances. If your conference has pivoted to virtual, could you expand your programming to reach a much larger global audience? Are you rethinking your sponsorship offerings? Are you playing with new formats for virtual learning? Some great things are happening in this area.

What if there was a way to apply this kind of bold thinking to all other areas of the organization? Why limit it to meetings?

It may feel odd to talk about growth in the middle of a pandemic, but remember, now is the time for either forced experimentation (lemons, lemonade) or for rebuilding.

Your association is used to having incremental growth targets each year for things like member-ship, attendance at the annual meeting, total sponsorship revenue, etc., and most targets we see end up in the category of "a little bit better than last year."

That's what the industry (and the board) expects of us. So instead of being bold, we settle for the proverbial +2%.

Consider the opportunity cost. Why not go for double-digit growth? Why not double or triple your profit in a particular area over the next five years? Why do we so rarely look for big opportunities like that?

The truth is associations are generally very risk averse. **Associations are not good at building real growth engines into what they do.**

> **59% of associations** said that their year-over-year membership numbers stayed the same or dropped in 2020. 81% said that revenue from membership stayed about the same (68%) or was lower (12%) than in 2019.[3]

To create a growth engine for your association, your strategy must identify the specific levers that will drive growth, and your operations must be carefully aligned to make sure those levers get pulled at the right time and in the right sequence.

So if your strategy is to run the exact same programs as last year, and your operations are finely tuned to run those programs in the same way you ran them last year, then you most certainly have NOT built a growth engine. You'll be lucky if you hit your 2% target.

But what if your strategy went deeper to address a major choke point in your members' industry that no one else was solving, and your operations were truly agile, learning on the fly and adjusting based on real-time data to meet member and customer needs?

## What is a Growth Engine?

**A Growth Engine** is the combination of strategic and operational building blocks that will generate perpetual growth for your association.

### So how do you get there?

Well, clearly you need to up your game when it comes to strategy and execution. In fact, if you Google "what drives growth," the experts tend to boil their recommendations down into those two basic categories: strategy and implementation.

But it's not enough to simply "do strategy better" or "do execution better" if you want a real growth engine. That logic feels circular to us, like saying the secret to growth is knowing how to grow better. The items under both strategy and implementation are laundry lists of areas where you might need to improve in running an organization, but we wouldn't call them "drivers" of growth. They feel more like table stakes.

A true growth engine will change the right elements from those strategic and operational menus at precisely the right time, and to make that happen, you need some kind of connection between the strategy and execution sides—a coherence between where you're headed and how you'll get there. You need an underlying intelligence that plots your growth solution in a way that is uniquely suited for your internal capabilities and your success drivers. It's the proverbial missing link.

You must have seen this coming, but that missing link is your culture.

### Integrating Culture + Strategy + Execution

Once you realize culture is the heart of your growth engine, it gives you a new perspective on the work of culture. It's not about creating a culture that makes you feel good or gives your association a shiny brand. It's about creating a culture that is completely integrated with strategy and execution in a way that drives growth. That's why you can't tolerate a culture that gets in the way, occasionally eating your strategy for breakfast, and generally causing friction that draws you back toward flat or declining (sound familiar?).

| Strategic Growth Levers | Execution Growth Levers |
|---|---|
| Products | People |
| Sales | Technology |
| Marketing | Systems |
| Risk Management | Finance |
| Customer Profiles | Distribution Practices |
| Market Research & Predictions | Transactions |

While executives believe that strategy is the most crucial element of a successful business, employees put strategy and "clearly defined and communicated core values and beliefs" as equally important for success.[4]

A coherent culture brings strategy, capabilities, and operations into powerful alignment. It is a lever for growth. We call this a culture-driven business, and it's the key to exceeding even your own expectations of what you can achieve.

You're probably already recognizing that this really changes the game. Culture-driven strategy and culture-driven execution don't look like the traditional versions associations have been churning out for decades. Turning your association into a culture-driven business will require the adoption of a new set of organizational habits.

## Culture

Core Values
Daily Actions
Belief Systems
Priorities
Personal Connection
Collaboration Style

## Strategy

Products
Sales
Marketing
Risk Management
Customer Profiles
Market Research &
Predictions

## Execution

People
Technology
Systems
Finance
Distribution Practices
Transactions
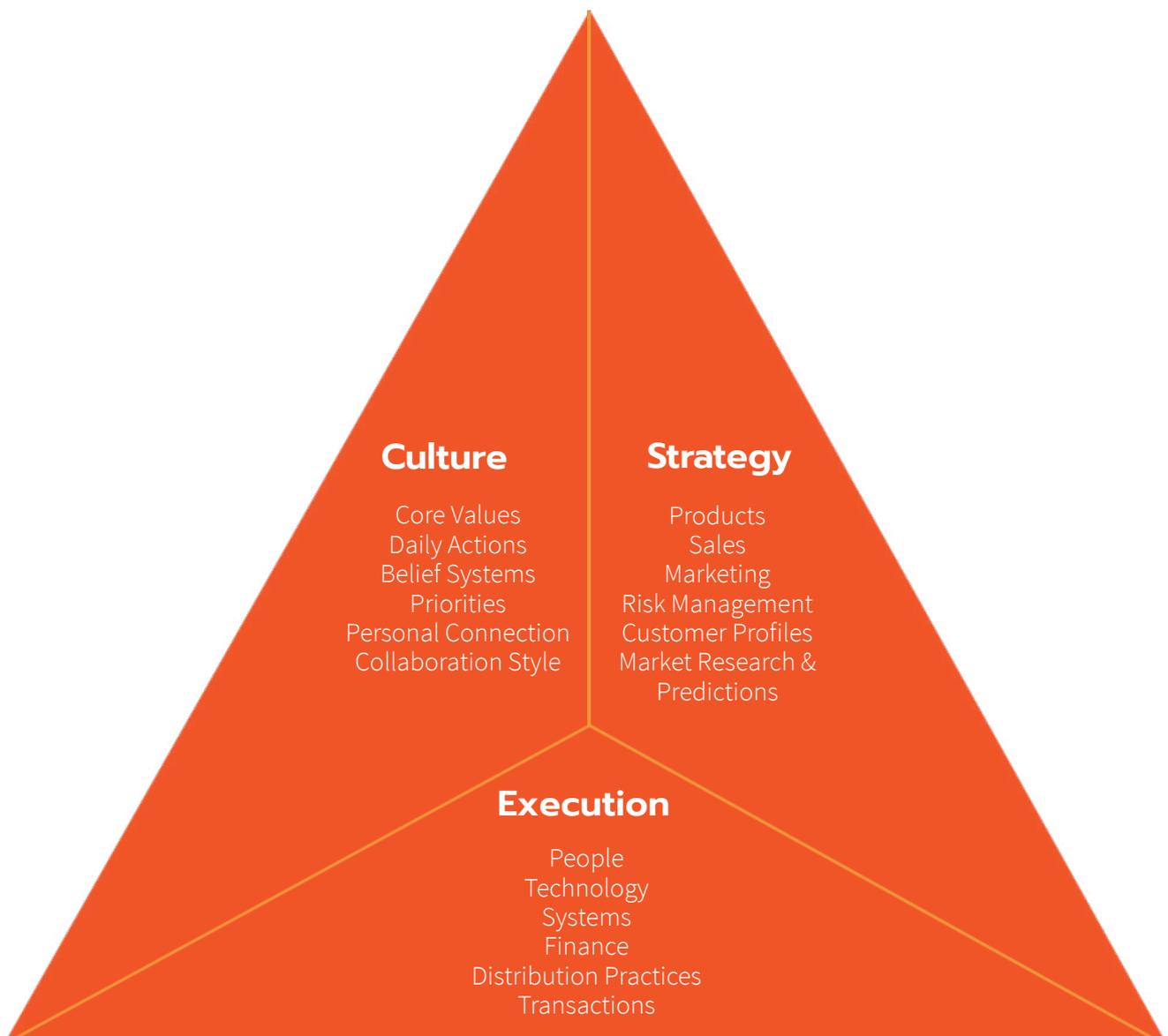
# Step 4

## Transform the way you do strategy.

> Our goals can only be reached through a vehicle of a plan, in which we must fervently believe, and upon which we must vigorously act. There is no other route to success. "
>
> - Pablo Picasso

Strategic planning in the association community has a bit of a religious quality to it. For the true believers, it is a practice that is unquestionably good and right, where salvation is delivered by performing a set of scripted rituals, handed down over the generations by other true believers who have historically seen no need to provide any scientific evidence to support the claims of their practice.

In the end, of course, there is no escaping the fact that we all do really need a good strategy. So, if ignoring strategy is not an option, why not pick a church and start showing up?

**Because faith is not a strategy, that's why.**

There are people who do strategic planning right—they're called successful entrepreneurs. And no, they don't just toil away in their garage for years until they suddenly invent Google. They are constantly developing, testing, and modifying their strategies, all the while integrating execution and culture. Want some of that religion? Then let's re-learn the work of strategy.

**The Disease: Strategy in a Vacuum**

The first step is to unlearn what we thought we knew. There are few key problems with how strategies are currently being developed in the association world—problems that can destroy your strategy even before you've had a chance to try it out. Such as:

- **The future is not as predictable as we think it is.** Strategies that are developed to be "road maps" for success in some fabricated vacuum are often outdated the minute that they are completed.
- **Strategic planning is too formal and not creative enough.** There is no room for innovation in a binder full of rules that is updated yearly (at best). We need a better style of developing right-now strategies that give us better ways to compete and drive growth.
- **Our strategies are too top-heavy—centered around how the executive level is driving change throughout the association.** Unfortunately, this leaves out everyone else, including employees and stakeholders who are as passionate about your cause as you are and who hold the keys to fresh ideas and new ways of doing things.
- **Strategy is developed alone in a room full of advocates, with very little data and input from the marketplace that is being used to inform decisions.** The strategy developed with the Board behind closed doors cannot easily be handed off to someone else to flawlessly execute. Strategic thinking should be woven together with implementation all the time.

We know all this. But we also know we need a strategy (and haven't identified a new church to go to), so we suffer through outdated processes, write up our 200-page strategic plan, and set it on the shelf.

**There is a better, more responsive way.**

## The Cure: Integrated Strategy

The good news is, many of you out there have already started to exorcise the demon of traditional strategic planning. You're on your way to making your plan a "living document."
Some associations have adopted a small number of key strategic principles to guide their decision making, and they adjust them based on changes in their operating environment, rather than on a three-year schedule. And heck, all of us had to completely transform our plans (and budgets) in early 2020, so we know that strategic agility is both necessary and possible.

But to be honest, we're still not straying far enough from the tradition. That's why we went outside of the association world altogether to find different ways of doing strategy that could be more effectively integrated with both execution and culture. Not surprisingly, we found some models that have proven to be very effective within a community of people who, by their very nature, are focused on growth: entrepreneurs.

By and large, the people who create start-ups are not shooting for 2%. They want real growth, and they want it fast. And the strategy models aimed at this community (e.g., *Lean Start Up* by Eric Ries, *Traction* by Gino Wickman, and our favorite, *Scaling Up*, by Verne Harnish) have many similarities, that we think need to be ported over to the association community.

Here's what strategy would look like if we learned from them.

### What is your X-Factor?

This term comes from Verne Harnish's book, *Scaling Up*, and refers to an underlying strategic advantage your organization has over the competition, something that would help you secure ten times, maybe even one hundred times the results that your industry would expect you to achieve. It's something that would be very hard for

your competition to recreate or do themselves. It's core to your whole business model.

## Drivers Come Before Outcomes or Activity

Most association strategic plans merely describe what they do (let me guess: networking, education, and advocacy?). Entrepreneurs start with articulating the underlying drivers that will make them successful and support their growth.

For example, one association we worked with was serving members who happened to be the small players in a particular industry. These organizations were generally out-gunned by the bigger players, but they were obviously still meeting an important need for their own customers. The association's X-Factor was their ability to act as an extension of the member company's own staff in certain key areas. This made the association irreplaceable, which is why it was driving their growth, and they made all their key strategic decisions with this core driver in mind.

### What are your Situational Success Drivers?

Your X-Factor typically does not change frequently, but there are other factors driving your growth that are based more in your current context and you need to stay on top of those in your strategy work. Situational Success Drivers are factors in your organization or its environment that have a disproportionate impact on your success and growth, and they should be driving your strategic decision making along with your X-Factor.

For example, another association we worked with was facing a situational challenge related to the speed of their work. Their members valued the fact that the association kept them "ahead of the curve" when it came to research and policy issues, but several factors in the environment had effectively raised the bar when it came to speed, and the association was not keeping up. Being fast was not the association's X-Factor, but falling too far behind on the research and policy issues could be very damaging to their reputation, so they maintained a strategic focus on improving their speed.

If you want real growth, then you need to get better at identifying the drivers as part of your strategy work.

### The Planning Rhythm Is Quarterly, not Annually

One of the biggest mistake's associations make in their strategy work is investing all their time in planning out what they hope will happen over a 1-3 year period. We think they used to prefer 5-year plans—apparently attempting to copy the wildly successful planning style of the Soviet Union—but thankfully they've cut that back to three years of late.

While entrepreneurs do set 1-year and 3-year targets, they recognize those targets are rough guesses, and they don't put too much effort into spelling them out in great detail. Instead, they put their effort into figuring out the 3-5 key goals that need to be accomplished in the next 90 days. Gino Wickman calls them "rocks", in other words, the biggest priorities. The rocks should obviously tie into your longer-term targets, but you'll be adjusting them every 90 days based on changes in your environment.

### The Rock & Sand Analogy

If you have a jar that you need to fill with rocks, pebbles and sand, you always put the rocks in first, allowing pebbles and then sand to flow around them. If you put the sand in first (the smallest and least important priorities), the rocks (the most important priorities) won't be able to fit in the jar.

Believe it or not, Netflix even does budgeting on a quarterly basis. They abandoned the annual budget, and now they create rolling nine-month budgets that are adjusted (thoroughly if necessary) every three months. You don't necessarily need to go that far, but you need to get used to making big strategic decisions more frequently than once a year.

### Strategy is Culture-Driven

Remember—and we can't stress this enough—a real growth engine requires the integration of strategy, execution, and culture. That means your strategy work must continuously include a consideration of culture.

When you identify your X-Factor and Situational Success Drivers, for instance, you must also do the work to ensure that your culture is tightly aligned with those drivers. This is what people mean by the "culture eats strategy for breakfast" comment. Even the best strategy will falter if the culture is telling people to row in the other direction.

Remember that association we mentioned above that strategically needed to focus on increasing speed? Their first step was to change their culture. They realized their culture valued inclusion so much, that nearly everyone was involved in every decision. That inclusion helped with employee engagement, but as they grew, it started to really slow them down. While they didn't abandon that value of inclusion, they did tighten up their decision-making processes and clarified roles to enable faster decisions. Culture and strategy are two sides of the same coin.

### Re-thinking Your Core Values.

One of the most visible areas of integration between strategy and culture is your core values. Remember, your culture is not some interesting "vibe" inside your organization—it is the collection of words, actions, and thoughts that clarifies and reinforces what is truly valued inside the organization. That's not values, with an "s" (we all love integrity, honesty, quality, etc.), but valued, with a "d." It's what gets our attention, our resources, and our rewards. What is valued will drive our behavior, and that's why culture is so important, and why it must be connected to strategy.

### Core Values vs. Culture Codes

Obviously, it doesn't matter whether you call them core values, a culture code, cultural principles or anything else—as long as they are tangible, clear, behavior-based and directly connected to your strategic priorities. Implementing strategy quite obviously requires a concerted effort on behalf of all your employees. Culture, in clarifying to everyone what is valued, will drive employee behavior, therefore the two concepts must be integrated internally.

**Your culture must value the behaviors that drive the success of the enterprise.**

One of the things that we do in our coaching sessions is help associations develop a **culture code**. It takes the idea of core values up a notch towards connecting abstract concepts to specific success-driving behaviors.

| Old Way | New Way |
|---|---|
| **Core Values** | **Culture Code** |
| Abstract & aspirational | Concrete & applicable |
| Broad & principle-based | Specific & behavior based |
| Consequence-free | Concrete consequences |
| Disconnected from success drivers | Clear connections between culture & success |
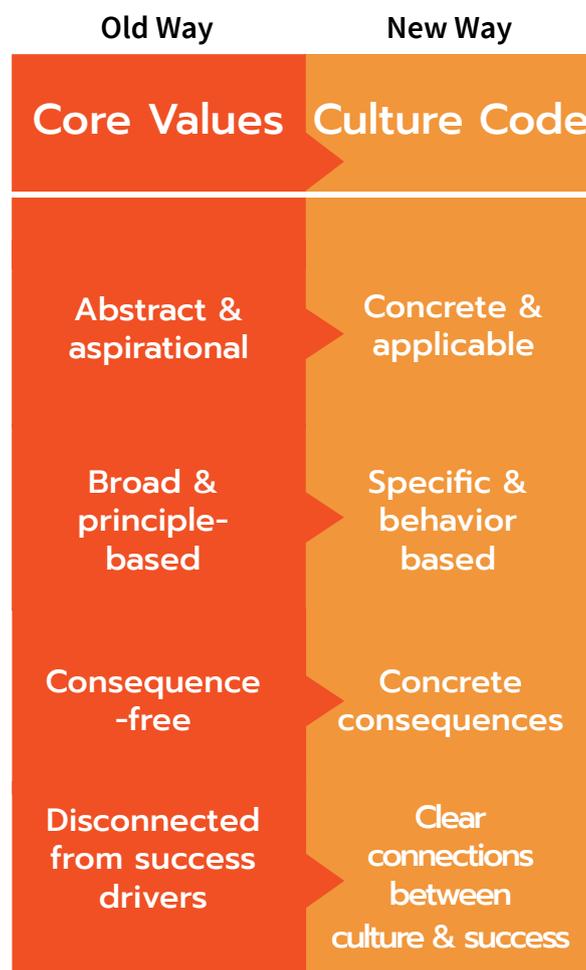
# Step 5
## Up your execution game.

I try to do the right thing at the right time. They may just be little things, but usually they make the difference between winning and losing. **"**

### - Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

When we coach association leaders, one of the first things we do is assess the current state of alignment among culture, strategy, and execution, and during that assessment, we've learned to take an extra hard look at execution. We pulled that insight out of the work we've been doing over the last several years in our deep-dive consulting projects with associations focused on culture design.

Every client put together a number of discrete culture change action items in their Culture Playbooks as part of those projects. When we analyzed those plays in aggregate, we observed an important correlation: **a large percentage of the plays lined up perfectly with the four Rockefeller Habits that are focused specifically on execution.**

If you don't know about Verne Harnish's Rockefeller Habits, you should. Our entire Coaching program is built around them, and while the 10 Habits together represent a good integration of strategy, culture, and execution as a whole, there are four that form the bedrock of your execution system. So if you're going to up your execution game, and make your execution culture-driven, you will want to start here.

## The 10 Rockefeller Habits

1. The executive team is healthy and aligned
2. Everyone is aligned with the #1 thing that needs to be accomplished this quarter to move the company forward
3. Communication rhythm is established & information moves through the organization quickly
4. Every facet of the organization has a person assigned with account ability for ensuring goals are met
5. Ongoing employee input is collected to identify obstacles and opportunities
6. Reporting and analysis of customer feedback data is as frequent and accurate as financial data
7. Core values and purpose are "alive" in the organization
8. Employees can articulate the key components of the company's strategy accurately
9. All employees can answer quantitatively whether they had a good day or week
10. The company's plans and performance are visible to everyone

## Be the Master of Internal Meetings and Information Flow

We mentioned above that associations tend to struggle with being more proactive in their transparency—making sure that people have the information they need before they realize they need it. The single most prevalent "technology" for information sharing inside organizations is "the meeting," which is something most associations take for granted. We think you should be intentional and strategic about how you have internal meetings so you can start making the right things more visible. Here are some concrete suggestions:

- **Implement daily stand-up meetings.** The idea of meeting every day is frequently resisted (we don't have time!!), but the point of brief daily check-ins is that they SAVE time. When you see the patterns of what issues get mentioned the most, or where people are stuck day-to-day, you are able to move to problem-solving conversations (done at a later meeting) that help you move faster.
- **Don't confuse tactical and strategic meetings.** Weekly team meetings are good for putting out tactical fires. Those should be an hour or less and the agenda items are typically generated at the beginning of the meeting, based on whatever's most pressing for people. But don't let yourself go down a strategic rabbit hole in those meetings. If you realize that you're way off on one of your company "rocks" (quarterly priorities), then you might need to schedule a separate strategic meeting to look at that one issue, and maybe gather some data ahead of time or have people do some homework. Addressing it half-way for fifteen minutes during a tactical meeting is more distracting than helpful.
- **Carve out a special objective for middle management meetings.**
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## Be Hyper Aware of What Members (and Customers) Want, Need and Experience

Every association will tell you that they are member-focused or member-driven, and at a high level, that is usually true. The high level, however, is rarely that relevant to execution.

First off, there are very few associations who do business exclusively with their members. They also have non-members as customers, and since that's a part of your business, you should be driven by customers too.

Second, how much do you really know about your member/customer base? If all you do is an annual member survey and some casual conversations at your annual meeting, you're not doing enough.

Here are some areas to consider:

- **Every single staff person should be gathering member/customer data.** It can be as simple as calling a customer to ask about their experience, but if everyone is doing something to gather data, you'll end up with a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the problems you should be solving for them.
- **Go deeper than your survey.** Technology can help here. PropFuel, for example, is a cool member data-gathering platform that can be used to collect much more context-specific feedback from members that you can integrate with your other data sources.
- **Balance leading versus serving.** Associations tend to bend over backwards to give members what they want, but there are times where you have to see past those squeaky wheels and give them what they need. What conversations are you convening that will help keep you ahead of the curve?
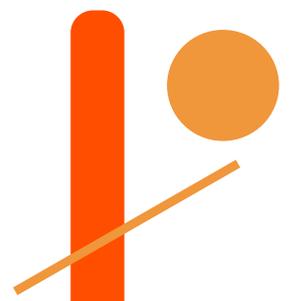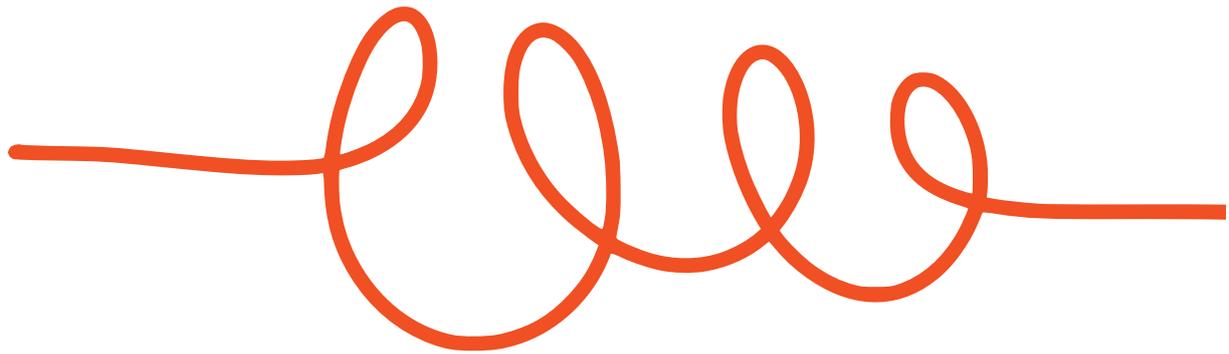
## Make Sure There Is Zero Confusion Around Accountability

> ### Accountability frustation
> 93% of team members feel that they are unable to align their work or take account-ability for desired results. 33% feel that their priorities change frequently, creating confusion.[6]

Accountability is one of those "Inigo Montoya" words—we do not think it means what you think it means. Sometimes we use it when we want to blame people for stuff, and sometimes we use it when we want to assert our authority, and despite the lack of clarity around what it means, pretty much every association we work with wants more of it, somehow. The essence of accountability is about following through on commitments, pure and simple, and if you want more of that, try some of these tactics to reduce the confusion that exists around accountability.

- **Be rigorous around decision making roles.**
  Before the project gets started, clarify who is making the decision, versus who must be consulted before the decision is made, versus who is merely informed about the decision after it's done. You never want people saying "Hey, why wasn't I invited to that meeting?"

- **Make progress metrics visible.**
  You don't want to get to the end of a quarter and then suddenly discover that major milestones haven't been hit. You should be looking at leading indicators that will tell you if you're starting to get off track.
- **Tie big priorities back to single individuals.**
  Yes, many people will be involved in making you successful, but make sure individual people really own stuff, and everyone knows who owns what.

## Make Sure Everyone Can Measure Their Own Success, Every Day

We mentioned metrics in the accountability section above, but it really deserves its own section under execution, particularly because we think associations have historically placed too little emphasis on metrics in the way they manage their businesses. Sure, they're tracking membership numbers, attendance numbers, etc. But they rarely can draw a line between what their people do every day, and those end-result numbers. Being able to measure individual success as an employee is critical—it is the very heart of employee engagement. So, it's time to up your metrics game.
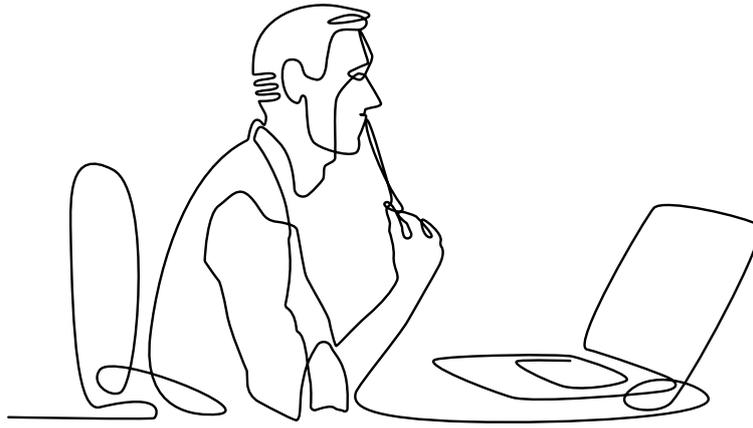
- **Identify cascading "critical numbers."**
Your organization should have a single critical number that you track all the time, and then every team and every individual should come up with their own version where you can see how the numbers all connect.
- **Have a system for tracking progress that is visible to everyone.**
We use a software program called Align that allows you to enter in the company targets for the quarter, but then also gives individuals the opportunity to create their individual numbers. This can be very useful for accountability as well.
- **Make the "stucks" visible too.**
Another piece of the Align software that we like is a component where you can identify who might be holding you up from making progress. Such as, you can't launch that marketing campaign until a decision is made on the product pricing. Seeing those connections and hold-ups not only increase execution effectiveness, it can help make clear how one person's work actually helps make another project successful.

Corporate culture is the only sustainable competitive advantage that is completely within the control of the entrepreneur. Develop a strong corporate culture first and foremost. **"**

— David Cummings,
Co-founder of Pardot

### Culture-Driven Execution

Just as your strategy work must continuously include a consideration of culture, execution must also be culture-driven. That means the execution habits you are infusing in your association must also be integrated into your core HR processes that are designed to build and nurture your culture.

It's not enough to just build out your processes for gathering and acting on member/customer feedback, or improving internal communication flow. You also have to hire with those things in mind, and build the behaviors associated with those execution principles into your performance management process so you can help folks find new jobs if they are not executing in a way that is consistent with the cultural expectations.

We know a software company that uses pair programming, a process where two software designers are simultaneously working on the same line of code (they literally are sharing one computer while they do their work together). That execution model obviously requires a high level of collaboration, so they built that directly into their hiring process. They start the process with group interviews and they literally pair up two people who are trying to get the same job and ask them to complete a task collaboratively. Can you imagine working together with your competitor like that? Well, if you can't, then you won't get a job at this company. That is culture-driven execution.

This level of integration, by the way, represents a very advanced level of maturity in the way an organization manages and develops their culture. But even if you're not there now, it's eventually where you want to be.

# Conclusion

## Fire up your growth engine and go.

Despite the hardships that 2020 may have brought your association, it is not too late to make powerful forward steps towards rebuilding the strength of your organization.

When we said now is the time to rebuild your association, we weren't suggesting an intellectual exercise. We mean ACTUALLY start rebuilding.

There is, of course, a lot to do in the 5 steps we outlined above. Don't try to boil the ocean and do it all at once, but by all means, don't wait until things "calm down" before you get started either. The longer you wait to start, the farther behind you'll fall. Here's a possible quick-start plan:

### Now: Fix your immediate friction points.

Quickly shine a light on the parts of your culture that are creating operational friction—and fix them. Don't worry about the deep long-term culture change that might be needed (that comes later). Once your biggest immediate-term friction point is fixed, move onto the next. Intentionally pick the things you think you can change quickly.

### Near: Connect the dots to your deeper organizational habits

While you're doing the quick fixes, layer on two additional tasks. First, start to measure the impact of those quick fixes. How did it make things better? How did it improve performance? Second, start looking past the quick fixes and come up with some hypotheses about how some slightly bigger change efforts might increase the impact. What if you weren't

doing one-off projects—how would you map out some bigger change efforts that would create more meaningful (and measurable) impact? This will help you identify the internal habits that need fixing, not just the pain points. This gets you one step closer to a stronger integration among culture, strategy, and execution.

### Far: Continuously Build Out Your Growth Engine

Now that you're making some progress on that integration, take it up a notch and make sure you incorporate all 10 of the Rockefeller Habits into your efforts Don't settle for anything less than the full integration of strategy, execution, and culture.

## You have the power to rebuild your association.

PROPEL has developed a coaching program specific for associations. These monthly coaching sessions allow association leaders or leadership teams to have hands-on, experienced guidance for taking fast action now that will also begin building the kind of "dream culture" that will make for a stronger organization with better profits.

## PROPEL culture-driven business coaching helps associations:

1. Define immediate culture actions to be taken now that will make a quick impact on financial, educational, or organizational goals.
2. Build a culture of accountability that creates a flywheel for organizational success.
3. Develop a plan that aligns your leadership and team around the main Rockefeller Habits buckets of strategy, execution and culture.
4. Hold "review and renew" meetings to define what is working, what is not, and what the next steps are to continue progressing.
5. Create yearly, quarterly and monthly goals that lead to successful cultural engagement and better daily alignment of work processes and products across your whole organization.
6. Understand their culture and how it impacts their financial performance and ability to make lasting change in their field of expertise.

Learn more about the **PROPEL Culture Coaching** program

# Resources

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## Previous clients include:
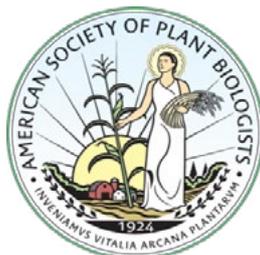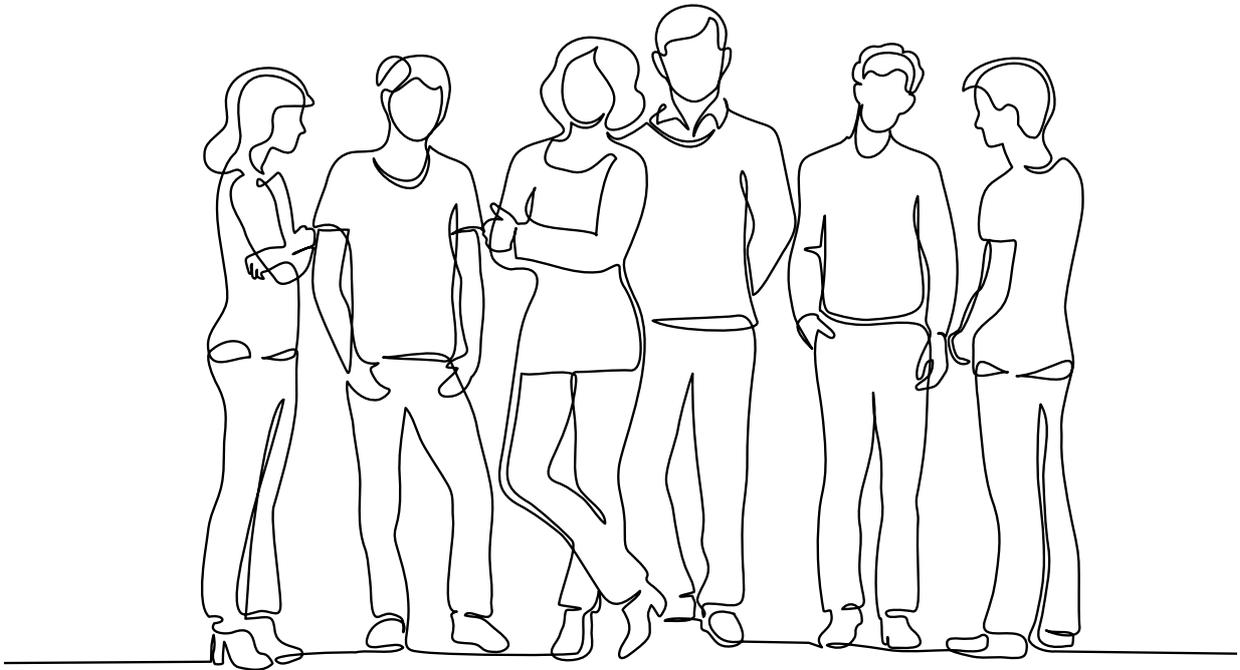
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Sign up for a one-time coaching session with one of our Culture Designers!

**You don't have to make all the changes today, but taking a single step in the right direction can have a huge impact. With our one-hour coaching session and readiness assessment, you get:**

- An interactive culture, strategy and execution assessment

- One-hour of professional level culture coaching

- Personalized feedback regarding your association's cultural health

- A custom report outlining the results of your assessment and coaching session

- Clearly defined next steps for your organization

Our Culture Coaches have worked with hundreds of national and international associations to make them more cohesive, connected, and powerful. The more you align your strategy and execution with the core values of a purposeful culture, the more power you have to change the world for the better.

[Sign up for a one-time culture coaching hourly session now](#)

# Jamie Notter & Maddie Grant

## Co-Founders

## About PROPEL

PROPEL (formerly Human Workplaces) is a culture consulting firm with a decade of success. Co-Founders Jamie Notter and Maddie Grant are two of the most dynamic and trusted names when it comes to improving performance and business growth through deliberate culture design. They are the authors of H*umanize: How People-Centric Organizations Succeed in a Social World, When Millennials Take Over: Preparing for the Ridiculously Optimistic Future of Business,* and *The Non-Obvious Guide to Employee Engagement*.

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