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A SMITHBUCKLIN RESEARCH REPORT

When an Association's Ambition Outpaces its Capacity

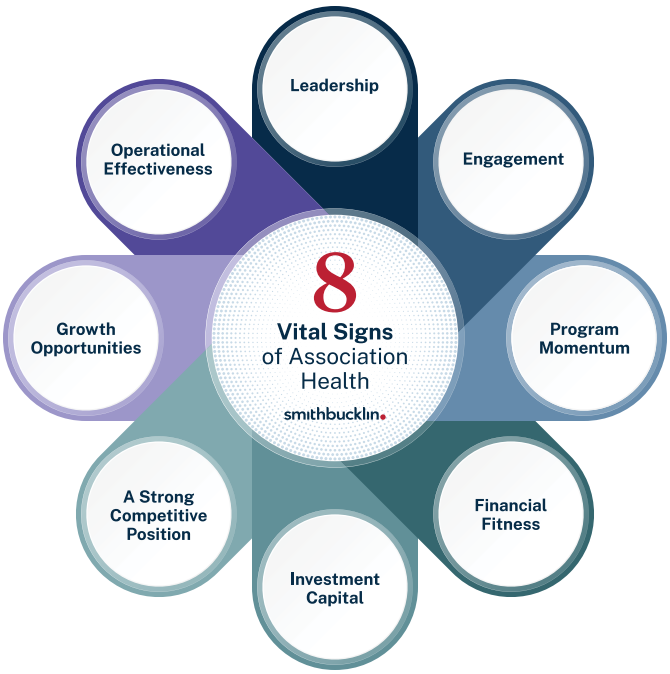
What 100 association board members and executives reveal about turning aspiration into action

By Matt Sanderson, Smithbucklin President & CEO

Association board members bring extraordinary professional experience to their roles. They are doctors, nurses, engineers, manufacturers, marketers and business leaders from many professions. They volunteer because they care deeply about their fields and the communities their associations serve.

While association governance isn't their primary professional responsibility, board members are asked routinely to make consequential decisions about strategy, technology, finances, growth, member value, and risk and resilience, while managing demanding careers of their own. What begins as an opportunity to contribute and give back can, at times, become overwhelming.

When progress is slower than anticipated or new challenges emerge, boards may question whether board members and staff need to work harder, smarter or both. Often, the deeper issue is organizational capacity: the organization's ambitions no longer align with the time, information, expertise, continuity and infrastructure required to support them.



Where does your association have capacity, and where is the system under strain? Assess your organization across the **8 Vital Signs of Association Health**.

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have made decisions without complete data or context

have missed opportunities to innovate or diversify revenue

Smithbucklin recently surveyed 100 association board members and executives to understand more about how boards operate, what gets in the way of progress and what support would help them prepare for the future. The findings reveal strong ambitions for their organizations alongside practical barriers that can make those ambitions difficult to achieve.

When respondents considered what could be possible with stronger board practices, **69%** identified greater capacity for innovation and new revenue, **58%** anticipated better data-informed decisions and **56%** saw a greater ability to anticipate and adapt to change.

Their day-to-day experience tells another part of the story.

Seventy percent find it challenging to balance immediate needs with long-term goals. **Sixty-five percent** say their boards have had to make decisions without complete data or context. **Fifty-four percent** report that reaching consensus on major decisions takes too long. **Fifty-one percent** say their organizations have missed opportunities to innovate or diversify revenue.

These barriers have meaningful consequences. **Fifty-seven percent** report slower than desired progress toward long-term goals. More than half say their organizations are more vulnerable to disruption, while others point to difficulty sustaining member engagement and strain in board-staff collaboration.

Together, these findings point to a broader issue: Board and staff leaders need a way to understand how the organization works as a whole and where its underlying system may be limiting progress.

Capacity comes from the whole system

Think about the operating system on your smartphone. You rarely see it, yet it connects the applications, information and functions you rely on every day. When it works well, you can focus on what you want to accomplish.

Associations also depend on a strong underlying system. An association's operating system connects the board's direction, the staff's work and the infrastructure, expertise and insight needed to turn priorities into progress. Its members, mission, culture and leadership make the organization distinctive. Its operating system provides the dependable foundation that supports the work and allows the organization to adapt as its needs change.

When these elements work together, board members have more capacity to govern and focus their attention on the strategic direction of the organization. Leaders can strengthen that system in four practical ways.

1 Create room to govern

Board members' most limited resource is time. Yet operational matters often consume the hours that should be devoted to mission, direction, oversight and the future. Among those surveyed, **70%** struggle to balance immediate needs with long-term goals and nearly half say their board meetings leave too little time for future planning.

Protecting the board's time starts with thoughtful choices. Design meeting agendas around consequential decisions.

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Ways to Increase Capacity

Clarify which matters require board attention and which belong with staff. Place routine reporting in concise pre-reads and reserve meeting time for discussion. Build dependable operational support so recurring issues are resolved at the right level.

A board with room to govern can look beyond the next deadline. It can ask where the field is headed, what members will need next and which choices will strengthen the association for the long term.

2 Put decision-ready information behind board decisions

Creating room to govern is only useful if board members have the information they need to use that time well. Yet the volume of information they receive does not always produce clarity. Among those surveyed, **65%** say their boards have made decisions without complete data or context. When asked what additional support would help, **62%** selected data and analytics resources.

A stronger operating system gives leaders a focused set of measures connected to strategy. It tracks organizational health across several indicators, since financial results alone often do not reveal the full picture. It also provides benchmarks and relevant external information that help leaders interpret performance, recognize broader changes and make decisions with greater confidence.

Clear dashboards and concise reporting allow board members to spend less time sorting through material and more time discussing what it means.

3 Build capacity to innovate

Better information can reveal opportunities, but associations also need the capacity to pursue them. Among those surveyed, **69%** believe stronger board practices could create more capacity for innovation and new revenue.

Ideas need room to move. Give each promising concept an owner, resources and a defined path forward. Use small pilots to test assumptions and learn quickly. Make deliberate decisions about which existing programs should grow, change or end. Ask whether the organization has the talent required to advance its best ideas. If not, strengthen the existing team with specialized capabilities, external perspective or additional execution capacity.

Access to deeper knowledge, external relationships and tested practices can help an association move faster and make stronger decisions. Innovation advances when the operating system can give a promising idea the attention, talent and resources it needs.

4 Connect governance, strategy and execution

Even with the right ideas and resources, progress can stall when governance, strategy and execution are not aligned. Among those surveyed, **54%** say reaching consensus on major decisions takes too long, while **53%** say responding to new issues or opportunities can feel slow. One-third report that responsibilities between the board and staff are not always clear.

When progress is slow, associations sometimes respond by adding more initiatives. Greater alignment may create more value. The board and staff need a shared understanding of the association's highest priorities, how progress will be measured, who owns execution and where decision authority sits. They also need a clear way to surface challenges and resolve them.

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The board sets direction. Staff translates that direction into coordinated work. The operating system supports reliable delivery by connecting the two through mutual accountability, open communication and a shared view of success.

Clear roles and priorities create organizational energy. People spend less time revisiting decisions, navigating uncertainty or working at cross-purposes. More attention can go toward the mission and forward progress.

Turning ambition into action

Strengthening capacity begins with seeing the organization as a whole. Decision-making, operational know-how, financial stability, engagement and growth may appear to be separate concerns, but each affects the others. A periodic assessment using **Smithbucklin's 8 Vital Signs of Association Health** can help leaders identify patterns, uncover vulnerabilities and determine where focused attention will have the greatest effect.

The central question is simple: Is our operating system aligned with our ambition?

Association boards already bring ambition, commitment and deep professional expertise to their work. They should not have to carry the organization's full operational weight themselves.

Ambitious boards do not need another list of responsibilities. They need the time, information and organizational support to fulfill the responsibilities they already carry. With the right operating system in place, boards can govern with greater confidence, staff can execute more consistently and associations can modernize, strengthen and advance to deliver better results for their members and missions.

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Read more about how boards and staff work collaboratively →

About Us

Smithbucklin is a professional services company that helps associations modernize, strengthen and advance to deliver better results for their members and missions. For more than 75 years, Smithbucklin has provided association management services in meetings and events, sponsorship and exhibit sales, education, marketing and technology. Smithbucklin has nearly 650 employees in Chicago and Washington, D.C. Smithbucklin companies include 360 Live Media, The France Foundation, SDI Meetings & Incentives and McKinley Advisors.

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