

EBOOK

Words Make Worlds

How “Corporate” Language & Ideology are Sabotaging Your Association

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An Introduction

Last August, I became deeply inspired by work coming from David Cooperrider and Lindsey N. Godwin at Case Western - Positive Organization Development: Innovation-inspired Change in an Economy and Ecology of Strengths. This paper is a MUST READ for anyone interested in innovation in our association community. In it, they use the phrase “words make worlds.” We often attempt to think innovatively while not recognizing the common terminology we use can work to block us in. This ebook is dedicated to asking a single question. How can we change our language and think differently about the work we do?

Shelly Alcorn, CAE
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Associations are worlds apart from their “for-profit” corporate cousins. Although association executives are well aware of this fact, they still often continue to fall into the trap of borrowing corporate terminology and strategies to plan and run their associations. As a result, associations are awash with language and concepts such as:

- “Membership” - rather than Citizenship
- “Governance” - rather than Stewardship
- “Strategy” - rather than Cultivation
- “Professional Development” - rather than Lifecycle Learning
- “Advocacy” - rather than Storytelling

In this fantastic new ebook, Shelly Alcorn, CAE, discusses the “human ecology” of association management, and how applying these misleading and perhaps misguided ideologies can limit and even derail the goals of your association.

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Part 1

Association Management, Human Ecology and IPOD

Before I begin, I want to set the foundation for where I am coming from. Associations have known for some time that they need to change their way of thinking. For too long, we have aspired to be watered down cousins to the for-profit corporate entity. We have adopted policies, procedures and practices better suited for “customer” as opposed to “member” or, dare I say it, “citizen.” We waste precious time on comprehending various management fads or how to apply concepts like “balanced scorecards” and other corporate tools to our environment.

Associations are literally societies within society. Sociologists have developed a canon of information on how societies form and evolve. If we accept their theories are applicable to nation- states (which is just one form of societal innovation), we can extend those principles out to the non-profit trade and professional association as a “societies within society,” for indeed they run with the same basic engine.

Much of the corporate management theory co-opted and applied in the non-profit arena largely ignores the most profound difference between non-profit and for-profit enterprises - the shared leadership structure between volunteers and professional staff. Many of the ideas we have attempted to implement have not only failed to gain positive traction, they have worked to our detriment. We do not operate at our best when using terms such as membership value, return on investment, consumers and stakeholders and do ourselves a disservice by diminishing our focus on the association’s role in society as democratic institutions. By attempting to centralize decision making in a command and control environment, we risk losing touch with our constituencies and compromising our ability to reach our full potential. We need a different skill set and a different understanding. We need make no apologies for being who we are.

In order to develop a different understanding and skill set, we would benefit from looking for information from sources external from the association community that best describes how societies evolve. In Human Ecology: A Theoretical Essay, sociologist Amos H. Hawley provides the most persuasive (and dense) explanation of how organized groups emerge within our society. For the first time, we can draw upon a theoretical framework to explain how associations emerge (and will continue to do so) in our society. Hawley draws a clear distinction that his theory only explains the functional aspects of a social system. But we need more than a functional analysis to understand associations in depth. We must also explore the normative order including norms, customs, traditions and myths.

By carefully blending aspects of Hawley’s theory with other mainstream sociological thought, I am making the case that associations must understand how to mimic the functional aspects of social systems as he describes. We must also develop the norms that enable the organization to establish the kind of social cohesion that support the individuals within it. The associations that can embrace the functionalities of this ecological framework as well as enhance the normative aspects within their social system will be far more successful than those who simply pursue the “cult of the customer.”

One of the more compelling parts of the Human Ecology theory deals with the notion of change within social systems and, by extension, organizations. Hawley discusses change in terms of growth (maximizing resources on hand) and evolution (introducing innovation). Mr. Hawley examines in detail, with support from other authorities, how individuals mobilize to form social systems to address a threat or challenge in their immediate environment. This goes to the heart of why trade and professional associations are formed and what they are expected to undertake. Our collective mission is not to make sure we have “ROI” on a dues “investment” but to provide platforms to facilitate change and evolution in our industry or profession as a whole as well as enhance the lives of the individuals within it.

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David Cooperrider and Lindsey N. Godwin from Case Western recently released a paper on their new theory of Innovation-inspired Positive Organization Development or IPOD. Both my husband Mark and I are practitioners and proponents of Appreciative Inquiry which is one of the cornerstones of the IPOD theory. We have seen the powerful changes that have taken place in those trade and professional organizations in which we have used the Appreciative Inquiry technique as part of our visioning or governance structure analysis processes.

The other theoretical models used in IPOD include a blending of ideas that many of us in the association world have been playing around with but have not yet coalesced into a manageable model – positive organizational scholarship, positive psychology, design theory, as well as bio- mimicry and the rise of the sustainable model. The work is a bold step forward and a beacon for those of us who work with organizational development and change and know there has to be another way.

I have been an association practitioner for seventeen years. Up until now, I have never run across something as simple and powerful as the conceptual framework behind a human ecology based view of societal/ organizational development and function. The addition of IPOD theory gives us both an understanding of how societies develop, what they are for and how to propel them forward into a brave new future.

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Part 2

Membership vs. Citizenship

A democracy cannot function solely on a pay-to-play philosophy. Barriers to participation are antithetical to the idea of an open, fair and equitable society. On the whole, citizenry should be determined by meeting certain existential criteria rather than how much (or whether) you can pay to obtain it. As democratic institutions, we have a responsibility to embrace the democratic ideals of inclusion and provide a voice to all members of our community, regardless of their economic station.

We build unnecessary walls between “member” and “non-member” and we deprive ourselves of talent, input and creativity from those people who choose, whether by ability to pay or otherwise, to not “pay dues.” Associations have complained for years that “non-members are just skating by because we are doing the work on their behalf.” That is true. You can complain about this reality, or take steps to embrace its positive potential.

A recent survey done by Kevin Whorton of Whorton Marketing and Research highlighted that the average penetration rate – active membership divided by total potential universe – as reported by California associations is around 46%. Many are much lower. Regardless, this is not the degree of penetration we want or need to have to credibly represent a profession or industry. Additionally, we have systematically fenced out 50% of potential participants perspectives and brainpower while simultaneously diminishing our own clout. Is a “better marketing message” or “finding more attractive discounts” really the answer to doubling your membership base?

Your association can make a conscious choice to accept the principle that all individuals who qualify are essentially already part of your community. Associations can immediately expand their reach by simultaneously lowering the barriers that prevent participation and by choosing to eschew the terms “member” and “non-member” in favor of a continuum that runs from “engaged” to “non-engaged.”

Member vs non-member does not build community, it builds clubs. “Member pricing” is a sales technique not a philosophy. Building a “member community” that is discriminatory and has significant barriers to participation may be why we continue to struggle with involvement rates far below the ideal. Only by accepting all qualified citizens into the system can we claim the title of “community” and benefit from all of the advantages that entails.

By embracing the “engagement continuum” we can cultivate the sociological imperatives of identity and belonging, honoring the entire lifecycle of our citizenry from emergence to contribution to the inevitable withdrawal whether through career redirection, retirement or death. We have it within ourselves to accept this higher calling. After accepting it, comes the hard work of implementing it. Dues structures and benefits will need to be revised, communications will need to change, pathways to involvement will need to be developed, technological solutions to handle additional influx into the system without increasing staff will need to be implemented. These are all challenges that can be creatively met once the overall vision is established.

Those associations that function as quasi-governmental agencies and closely regulate their member’s activities are not precluded from adopting a more open, less discriminatory atmosphere.

They may be prevented in some cases from being completely open, but they can deliberately make efforts to ensure they are minimizing barriers to participation whenever possible.

What about those who apparently behave unethically? Many associations believe their ability to “prevent” unethical individuals from joining their association is important for both their reputation and for the protection of the public.

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By using a more positive outlook we can re-frame our deficit thinking from “How do we keep out the bad guys?” to “How do we ensure all actors are behaving in the best way possible?” By changing the focus from a punitive, exclusionary process to a more inclusive one we may create additional opportunities to rehabilitate a bad player and encourage them to be a positive contributor instead. Besides, our fear of allowing a bad actor or two into our community comes at a very high price. And, nothing prevents the community from rehabilitating or ejecting habitually unethical players.

By shifting your terminology from “member vs non-member” to “engaged vs non-engaged member” can you see additional possibilities you may not have seen before? Does labeling someone as a “non-member” discourage them from approaching your group or make them feel unwelcome? How does this potential expansion positively impact your educational and advocacy efforts?

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Part 3

Governance vs. Stewardship

This ebook is taking a look at the common terminology we use to refer to different components of associations and brainstorming on ways to change our language to open up new avenues for action. The term “governance” is deeply embedded in any discussion about the inner workings of associations. This part will challenge our notions about “governance” and see if there are alternative terms we can use to describe its function.

Before we can begin, we need to develop a sophisticated understanding of what governance is. At the core, governance is the decision making structure within the organization. These decisions are reflected in the policies we implement and enforce. According to Amos H. Hawley in *Human Ecology: A Theoretical Essay*, ecological social systems develop policy along a change continuum. All policy is designed to facilitate the following four conditions: “to preserve the status quo by excluding change, to reverse a change in process, to accommodate a change underway or to produce a desirable change.”

Recognizing the underlying function of policy -- to start, modify, reverse or prevent change -- will give you an important tool to use to evaluate the decision making structures and policies within your association. By identifying where policies fall on the change continuum, you will develop a clearer understanding of the culture in your association and its actual tolerance level for innovation. You will begin to recognize those policies which were ostensibly written to facilitate change and yet include operational barriers and language undermining the change the policy purports to seek.

Many times, associations look to policy to reinforce control. This is a natural outcome of using the word “governance” to describe our decision making structure. “To govern” has a hierarchical connotative meaning built into it that we instinctively recognize. As a consequence, the board, other groups of volunteers and staff may become embroiled in turf battles using policy as the weapon of choice.

Policy is also often used as a way to marginalize the “troublemakers.” In some cases, making policy in response to the actions of the singular individual is necessary. However, reflexively using policy to prevent dissent or maximize control is a dangerous practice. A democratic citizenry may buckle under for a while, but will not stay silent forever.

There has been an unmistakable push in recent years to overlay our volunteer structure with a more corporate model for decision making processes. We frequently use terminology such as “stakeholders” or “customers.” Some associations have taken advantage of this and have manipulated governance structure and policy and ultimately ended up in ivory towers from which proclamations ensue and wild guesses are made as to “what the members want” (subtext: will buy). Unfortunately, democratic social systems don’t work that way. The end result is a litany of complaints the most frequent being, “our members don’t understand what we do for them.” Perhaps it isn’t really a matter of “finding a better marketing message,” but rather of investigating what the members should be doing for themselves.

Corporate terminology reduces the nature of the member to “customer” and serves to create a “lever/pellet” transactional relationship between your citizens and your association. This also feeds into the notion that “governance” is really about controlling the product that is produced and less about social justice and change. In practice, this two-dimensional view undermines the three-dimensional nature of a fully engaged citizenry. Our collective mission is to provide opportunities for open, engaged citizens to take action on all levels. “Governance” rooted in “servicing needs” does not easily lend itself to the idea of an open system.

Another common corporate tactic is to “streamline governance” by shrinking the board to a minimal few. It is tempting to consider elimination of board/volunteer positions as a way to take a short-cut to a functional policy making system.

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Beware of the potential deficit mentality associated with such suggestions. These moves can seem less like democracy and more like dictatorship. One size does not necessarily fit all. Some large boards are highly effective and engaged, use cost-effective measures and represent large and growing segments of their membership. Small boards can also be obstinate and uncommunicative with ugly politics and continual intrigue. The most important factor in judging effectiveness is typically not size, but whether the boards operate with a powerfully positive vision. In certain situations, I have recommended either increasing or decreasing the size of the board and/or volunteer groups within an association. However, those recommendations did not start with an arbitrary number in mind, but rather the needs of the membership, the estimated workload and the desires of those who choose to serve.

I believe challenges with “governance” cannot be met by using policy as a tool to enforce our will or by simply “eliminating the problems” by reducing opportunities for volunteers to serve. Maybe one way we can change our situation for the better is to move away from the power politics of “governance” and move toward a more civilized form of oversight, perhaps a term like “stewardship” instead.

A “governor” operates from a position of power, the “steward” serves the others who own the house. What a great metaphor to use to describe how we take care of our members interests. That’s what your boardroom can be - the people’s house. They elected you. They entrust you with the responsibility to use their money well, listen to their concerns, represent their interests with integrity and resist the influence from corporate sponsors who may attempt to buy their way into your decision making process.

We see a future in which we change our terminology from “governance” to “stewardship.” As stewards of an association the board and volunteer leaders embrace those duties assigned to them by law, demonstrate careful oversight of the finances, and focus on removing barriers to allow change and innovation to flourish within the citizenry. Stewards are caretakers and actively solicit input from the entire community and treat them as cherished pieces of the whole.

Stewards, both volunteers and staff, work hand in hand and generate only those activities that advance the great vision of the organization. Stewards protect and provide the comfort of rituals, ceremony and the transmission of customs and culture in a transparent manner. What a different role than the body that “approves” committee work-plans and “runs” the association.

If you changed your terminology from “governance” to “stewardship” what changes might happen in your association? Do you see additional opportunities to change the way you interact with each other in matters of policy as you pursue a meaningful mission and vision? Does it give you more freedom to delegate and allow members to create additional realities?

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Part 4

Strategy vs. Cultivation

Associations have value. Sociologically speaking, the deeply rooted human need to associate is not doomed to irrelevance. Humans will always have a need to socialize with their peers and to develop a sense of shared personal identity through our occupations, hobbies or interests. In fact, associations -- in various forms -- have actually been in existence far longer than the modern form of capitalism. We need not fear that our corporate cousins will provide a better model for the future and rob us of our purpose. We are apples, they are oranges.

The more we attempt to mirror our cousins, the more we water down what we really are. If we adopt the exact language, vocabulary and processes more suited to that environment, we may marginalize ourselves and miss the opportunity to harness and unleash our own life-altering potential. That is not to say that we should ignore or dismiss some of the excellent thinking coming from the corporate side. In fact, several key pieces of that thinking are used as inspiration in this post. However, we need to blend, adapt and intelligently apply those principles to our own association environment. One of the key items we may need to redefine is how we use the term “strategic planning.”

According to David Cooperrider, the deficit perspective (reviewing the problems you face as an organization) is not the place to start when looking at your strategic environment. The place to start is to ask a simple question - what is it that gives this living system life? Our associations are living, breathing, ecological systems made up of individuals who are linked by a common purpose and shared identity. If you think about it, most of the management theory we have been exposed to is focused on “diagnosis” and “repair.” It’s a 19th century, assembly line mentality and it’s been so ingrained in us that we feel it is natural and “right.”

Deficit thinking traces its roots back to Freudian principles that were extended onto organizations. Chiefly, the principle that humans are inherently flawed and can be “fixed” and if organizations are composed of humans they can be “fixed” too. The trouble is, humans aren’t machines. Instead of the continual “fix the problem” approach, we need to take into account that living, ecological systems are focused on producing a “way of life,” and are harder to predict and control than assembly line systems focused on producing a “product.” Strategic planning systems built for one arena don’t necessarily work in the other.

Strategic planning is a bedrock concept for most associations. Many associations have greatly benefitted from using strategic planning processes that have contributed to the creation of many positive programs. But in five or ten years, traditional strategic planning processes will not be enough to get associations where they need to be. We will not hit the highest level of performance using older planning mechanisms.

How do I know that? Because most of us have accepted the fact that three to five year strategic plans are a thing of the past. Also, they were inherently focused on incremental improvement, not creating large leaps in innovation. The complexity of our environment continues to outstrip planning principles we believed immutable only ten years ago. Creating powerful, positive visions and adapting as necessary to move toward their fulfillment is the way of the future. In my opinion, our strategic planning processes must evolve. Perhaps we can blend the best of Jim Collins (core purpose, core values and envisioned future) with principles included in design thinking and become focused on cultivation of purpose instead.

Design thinking, as explained by Tim Brown of IDEO, includes a human-centered starting point, collaborative and multidisciplinary approach and rapid prototyping to develop, refine and implement solutions. Instead of the Board making wild guesses as to what the members want in an annual strategic planning retreat, perhaps we use human centered design and begin with the member-citizen instead. Then we could use ongoing inclusive processes with member input, beta testing, rolling solutions and then refining or starting over. In this way, we can get much closer to fulfilling the needs of the system at its roots than if we used a traditional annual dart-board-esque strategic planning process.

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Let's consider this metaphor. If you look at your yard, you understand the basic way it works, how the grass and trees grow and what tools you need to have on hand in order to cultivate and shape your environment. You can sit down once per year and plan out everything you are going to do to the yard, assign areas of the yard to committees who develop recommendations and agonize over the cost of fertilizer. But in the meantime, grass is jumping the nice concrete barriers, weeds invade, some plants thrive and some plants die for what seems like no reason at all. All of these unpredictable elements impact your “strategic plan” for what the yard was supposed to look like and everything that doesn't fit the plan begins to look like a problem instead of an opportunity.

Cultivation is different. It starts with a vision of what the yard could be like and then depends on a constant growth mindset and careful tending to maximize and minimize the potential that exists within the system. Maybe you decide defending the concrete barrier is too much trouble and that area should go back to a natural state. Maybe when you see what plants are thriving, you shift your energy to supporting more of those.

Social systems behave in much the same way. There are basic rules within any social system but humans jump the barriers time and again. People are unpredictable and messy. If all we do is focus on keeping people behind the concrete barriers and stomping on everything that looks like a weed, we miss the rest of the beauty around us. If we only develop strategy for our landscape once per year we won't get the results we actually want.

Our ability to function as platforms for change is both a gift and a curse. Let's stop for a moment the next time we say, “strategic operating environment” and change those words to “cultivating our purpose.” Instead of defaulting to a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) let's move to a SOAR analysis (strengths, opportunities, aspirations and resources). With one simple switch on how we frame our environment, we can begin to concentrate more on what's good about our situation and less on the “problems that need fixing.”

Then let's imagine augmenting our quantitative data gathering with more qualitative analysis such as ethnographic observational research. Then imagine brainstorming new solutions from the ground up instead of coming up with to-do lists to assign to staff and volunteers. Instead of “tactics,” focus on outcomes. Instead of “planning” a year, shape it instead. We aren't charting a course to a “known” destination. We are continually sculpting and molding our environment in order to advance our interests. What if the metaphor for strategy becomes less of a military operation, with tactics and objectives, and becomes a potter's wheel instead? Where we shape and mold the clay to make it useful for ourselves and our member-citizens?

If we see members as citizens, and governing structures as stewardship, it is a natural extension to change strategic planning to cultivation instead. If our board room is the “people's house,” what kinds of gardens, and fun spaces do we have to create a memorable experience for our people? What can we share? Where should we plan to travel as a group? Can we be satisfied with the house as it is, or do we need to move to a new one?

By using core purpose, core values and envisioned future we build the shared understanding of who we are and why we are there. By incorporating a continual cultivation loop we can sculpt and mold a future filled with beauty and promise. With our shared language and our aspirations to be the best humans we can be, we have the grand opportunity to literally design our own future.

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Part 5

Professional Development vs. Lifecycle Learning

There is no doubt our country is facing an educational crisis. In “Waiting for Superman,” the most recent work by director Davis Guggenheim, we find that the top 5% of American students rank 23rd out of 29 developed countries. What to do to handle or reverse these trends is a matter of concern to administrators, parents and industry alike. Associations are not immune from this crisis as we represent industries and professions which are going to be directly impacted by coming workforce deficiencies. By 2020, the United States will have 123 million high-skill jobs to fill—and fewer than 50 million Americans qualified to fill them.

Our country has an urgent need and associations have a critical role to play and the capacity to do so. Edupunks are defined as people who approach developing educational frameworks from a “do it yourself” perspective. As the original “edupunk” pioneers, and the guardians of professional certification programs, associations have developed a vast repository of industry and profession specific knowledge. Who better to step in and provide resources to students and young adults in an educational crisis and to focus on workforce preparedness than associations? However, with a few notable exceptions, our integration into the formal educational system has been done on an ad-hoc basis and our contributions to society are not fully recognized or valued by the public at large.

In many cases, we have allowed our edupunk nature to be at once a benefit and an obstacle. We have left most of the transmission of our educational programming to industry practitioners, some of whom are natural teachers and some of whom are simply not skilled in the development and delivery of adult education. We can positively impact this situation with the implementation of aggressive train the trainer programs and working with local college districts to attract trained educators into the association sphere.

Associations have also allowed market forces to influence the way in which they develop and deliver content to their member-citizens. By treating education as a “commodity” instead of a mission we have unwittingly short-changed our constituents. If the first concern when developing an educational program is “marketability” rather than “necessity,” you have a situation where the developers are already focused less on needs that must be met in favor of how many seats will sell. The two are not mutually exclusive, but they aren’t automatically linked either. It is high time we embrace the notion that associations are not only providing expertise to those who wish to learn but are, in fact, the unsung heroes underpinning the educational system in the United States.

As society becomes more complex, increasing specialization makes it imperative that associations improve their ability to provide for fast acquisition of concepts on the part of practitioners. This includes access to the established body of knowledge as well as innovations in our respective fields. We need to stop simply regurgitating our materials in new formats and building protective walls around our resources. We must embrace life-cycle learning for the betterment of our members and society and focus more on developing “what’s next” than protecting what we currently have in our possession. We can’t fast-track life-cycle learning by meting out the same old tidbits in webinars and annual conferences. Removing major financial and time-related barriers to access the current body of knowledge, gives any association the opportunity to spend their limited time and resources developing and monetizing programming for “what’s next” in order to spur innovation and progress.

Associations must consider the needs of the whole person in every stage of their career from entry-level to advanced. Beyond technical knowledge, we need to assess and improve skills like communications, creativity, problem-solving, health and wellness. We need to meet people where they are, fill in the gaps, fast-track them to functionality and then push them into new frontiers. Associations should be thinking about creating highly customized learning environments which are much different than “programming to appeal to the most attendees at the conference.”

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We see a future in which association contributions are recognized and we move beyond simply providing resources to practitioners -- who stumble upon our professional development programs as they become immersed in an industry or profession -- to being an active player in the educational system. Improving and promoting our educational resources will significantly increase the speed at which we can access talent coming out of the high-school and post-secondary systems and fast track professionals to gain the skills they need to survive in an increasingly segregated occupational society. By embracing life-cycle learning, we can mitigate current workforce deficiencies and provide for a well-trained, engaged citizenry.

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Part 6

Advocacy vs. Storytelling

I have long believed that associations have a critical role to play in any democratic system. Clearly, we are citizen training grounds and operate with principles that are easily translatable to our societal governmental system writ large. However, we have done ourselves a disservice and, in some cases, earned the scorn that has come along with the term “special interests” by behaving in ways that are really beneath us.

But where did we go wrong? When did public policy become a war zone? When did we decide that advocating for our members interests, in spite of what might be good for society as a whole, become our paramount concern?

I believe it came from a slavish obsession with members being customers instead of being active citizens. Associations, convinced that demonstrating a “return on investment” on membership dues is of paramount concern, often turn their conversations in the government affairs arena to “winning....at all costs.” What other, more powerful weapon do associations have in a “democratic” society to demonstrate “member value” than “winning” in the legislative and regulatory arena?

Unfortunately, it all depends on what you define as “winning.” In a society that functions from a position of fear, reinforced by the media at all turns, “winning” becomes less about meaningful change and more about preserving the status quo. Preserving the status quo is antithetical to innovation and progress. Instead of recognizing our unique position as societies within society with a duty to benefit the whole even at a cost to ourselves, many of our associations have become wholly, and sometimes selfishly, focused on winning every legislative fight for “their members” without considering the consequences. When we complain about “gridlock” in Washington, we must look in the mirror and realize that in many cases we share in the blame.

How many times do associations advocate against the public interest solely on behalf of preventing their members from absorbing costs, changing the way they do business or perhaps changing their chosen profession? I understand associations who represent oil and gas interests might passionately advocate against making any changes that will impact the consumption of fossil fuels. This is ostensibly “in the best interests of their members.” But is it really? Is it in the best interest of society? What if your members are working in a dying industry that will eventually collapse under the weight of scarcity and depletion? What are you doing to help them adapt, and help the larger society benefit from a cleaner world? Are the roadblocks to progress and change you so vigorously defend sustainable over the long term? Are your choices ethical or simply expedient? What kind of narrative could you create by offering a noble sacrifice for the good of all?

Beyond today’s chapter, how does your story really end?

By creating a new story for ourselves – as guardians, protectors and stewards of society might we also be able to develop new, heroic narratives for our legislative agendas? Instead of giving in to a culture of fear and scarcity and let’s work for a future where legislative, regulatory and public policy goals are focused on benefit and abundance for all.

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About the Author

Shelly Alcorn, CAE, began her career in change management at the age of 5 when she was enrolled at what was to be the first of the eleven schools she would attend prior to graduating from high school. Being the perpetual “new kid” forced her to quickly and strategically assess new environments, orient herself to new curriculum, policy and rules and figure out the political nuance involved in navigating recess.

Shelly kept up the fast pace by working her way up from receptionist to executive director of two different non-profit associations, passionately pursuing developing her skills and is now a consultant. A revolutionary, self-proclaimed edupunk, she got her CAE (Certified Association Executive) just to prove she knows what she’s doing.

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