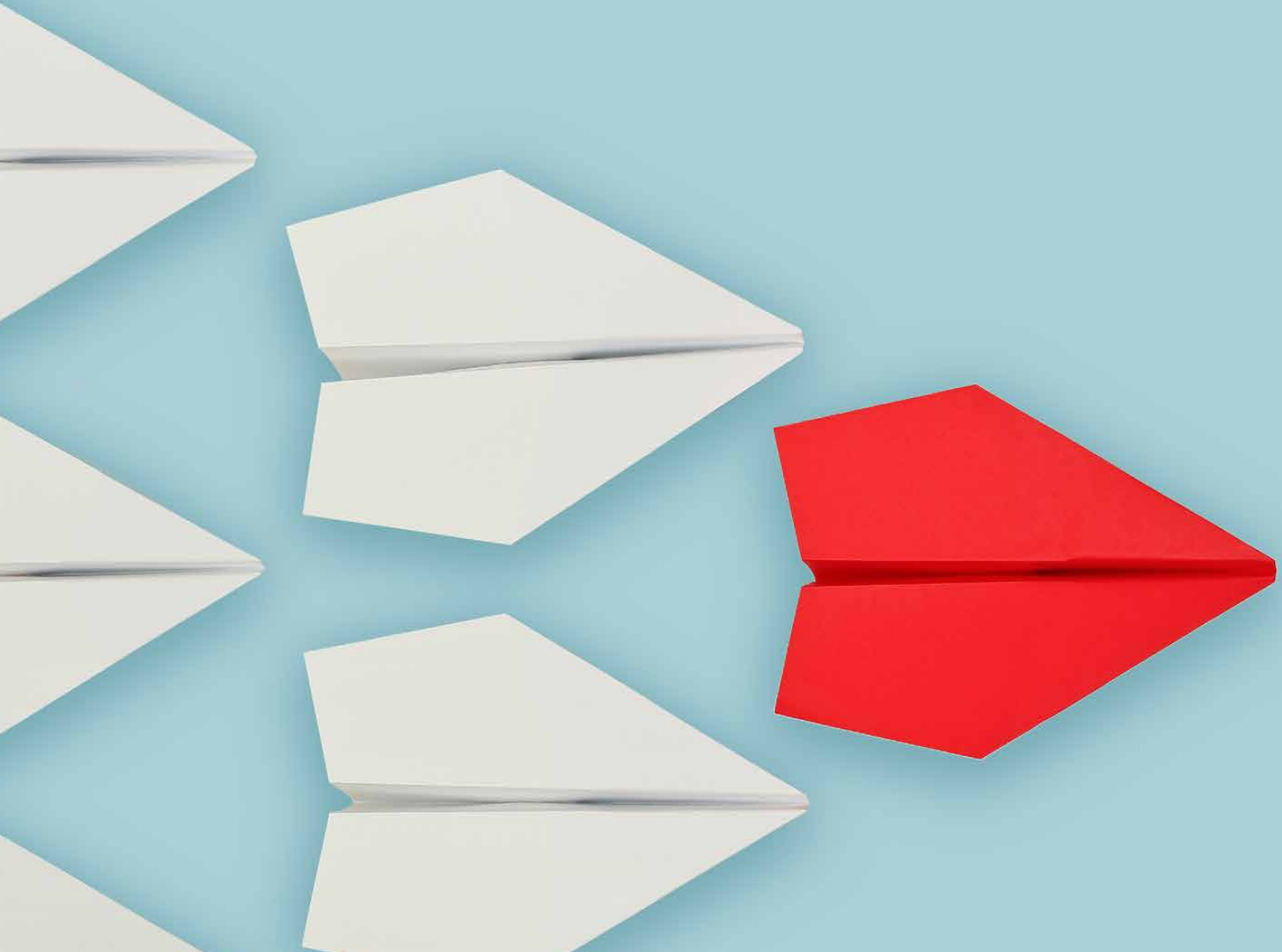


HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES



Association CEOs: Leading through Change

A survey of more than 500 trade and professional association leaders looks at how they make decisions, approach challenges, and transform their organization in an era of turbulent change.

By Julian Ha, Bill Hudson, and David K. Rehr

HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES



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Association CEOs: Leading through Change

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Foreword

The management of trade and member associations is professionalizing rapidly. Demands on association senior leaders, especially chief executive officers, have never been greater. Association boards of directors want their CEOs to serve not only as the leader of their organization, but also in many cases as the face and voice of their industry. The CEO now is the lead salesperson, chief media spokesperson, industry promoter, and top organizational fundraiser, among other operational responsibilities. Adding to these increased duties for association CEOs is an environment of hypercompetitive business pressures, increased government regulatory activism, greater media scrutiny, and the explosion of social-media platforms—any of which can quickly affect an association’s strategy, reputation, or both.

This research looks to better determine how association CEOs deal with uncertainty and change. It is influenced by *The CEO Report*, developed through a partnership between Heidrick & Struggles and Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford, and delivered at the 2015 World Economic Forum in Davos. We believe this report is the first of its kind for an industry sector representing more than 66,000 organizations.

As the lead researcher, I would like to thank *CEO Update*, the publication that reports on association news and executive careers; the Graduate School of Political Management at George Washington University, where the project began; and the George Mason University School of Law, which strongly supported this project and where I now teach. I would also like to thank my fellow association executives for contributing their time and expertise to make the research compelling and informative.

Finally, I would like to thank Bill Hudson, Julian Ha, Ashley Jones Slayden, and the entire Heidrick & Struggles team for their support, encouragement, and expertise so this research could become a reality. We hope it provides valuable and important insights for current and future association leaders, directors, and rank-and-file members.

Dr. David K. Rehr

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Introduction

According to the American Society of Association Executives, the United States is home to more than 66,000 associations, encompassing both professional membership societies and trade organizations.¹ Each of these institutions is evolving due to the changing economy, political landscape, and demographics of its members. Indeed, these organizations—like their private-sector counterparts—operate in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. And yet performance objectives are higher than ever. As the expectations of members, the board, and other stakeholders shift, so too does the role of the association CEO. Management of associations is professionalizing, borrowing tactics and operating models from the private sector, and thus the expertise needed to be successful in the top spot is increasing.

In recognition of this changing environment, we conducted a survey of association CEOs to learn more about how they approach their job. Where are they focusing the most time and energy? What obstacles do they face? And how do they find their way through tough decisions? The survey results offer first-of-its-kind insight into the changing role of associations and their leadership.

The results also paint a picture of what the tensions are—and what they aren't. No longer are association CEOs simply administrators charged with keeping the organization solvent and on track; today, they must be visionaries, forward thinkers, innovators. They must know their association inside and out, from its finances to its members' interests. They must cater to new generations while retaining longtime members. They must adjust messaging to incorporate new channels, particularly social media. They must represent their association in an increasingly polarized political sphere. They must adapt to change. They must think global. And above all, they must thrive in uncertainty.

¹ An association is defined as "a group of people banded together for a purpose." See *The Power of Associations: An Objective Snapshot of the U.S. Association Community*, The Center for Association Leadership, updated January 2015, thepowerofa.org.

About the research

This research consisted of four stages: development of the survey, refinement of survey questions, execution to drive statistical validation, and data analysis.

Questions and topics were drawn from ideas initially reported in *The CEO Report*¹ and a presentation, “Redefining Leadership at Associations,” delivered to association CEOs in Washington, DC, on May 13, 2015.² A small subsample of prominent association CEOs were then asked for feedback and suggestions on the survey document to ensure clarity and eliminate issues tangential to the focus of the research.

All survey targets and participants were drawn from a randomly generated sample provided by *CEO Update*, Heidrick & Struggles, and Dr. Rehr. The total sample size was 2,617 association and professional-society CEOs. Of the potential respondents, 525 completed the survey, which yields a margin of error of +/- 3.82%. The demographics of this response group, including gender, age, and revenue of association (see appendix), is an excellent sample of the larger community estimated to be more than 66,000 organizations.

All survey links were individualized so no person could take the survey more than once. The survey was conducted via email from November 20, 2015, to December 11, 2015.

Qualitative data

In addition to the quantitative questions that constitute the bulk of the survey, a series of open-ended questions gave respondents the opportunity to offer more detail on their insights and experiences. These answers generally do not offer statistical significance but rather practical insights into challenges CEOs encounter at various stages in their tenure. A number of these answers have been included in this report to provide deeper context on what association CEOs are thinking.

Secondary research

Additional data points have been provided throughout the report to allow for a better understanding of the context of the research and to generate additional reader insights.

¹ *The CEO Report: Embracing the Paradoxes of Leadership and the Power of Doubt*, Heidrick & Struggles, in conjunction with Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford, January 21, 2015, heidrick.com.

² For more about this presentation, see Julian Ha, Bill Hudson, and Eric Joseph, “Redefining leadership at associations,” September 1, 2015, heidrick.com.

The role of the association is changing

The top five priorities of association CEOs offer insight into the evolving role of the association itself. When asked about their top focus areas, more than half of association CEOs name “mission and organizational vision” (54%) and “membership outreach and retention” (52%). “Board management” (48%), “financial oversight” (42%), and “advocacy efforts” (42%) are not far behind (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Areas of greatest focus for association CEOs

Question: Since you have seen changes in your role and responsibilities, what areas NOW have your greater focus and attention? (Please select all that apply.)
n = 440



Top two focus areas reveal discord around core value proposition

It is perhaps unsurprising that the top-cited concern among association CEOs is around mission and organizational vision; this finding supports the hypothesis that the fundamental role of the association is evolving. The many different stakeholders attached to a given organization almost always seek to add new and expanded commitments to the organization’s mission. The traditional paradigm has been for association leadership to listen to the interests and concerns of these stakeholders and then try to act on all of them. They’ve succumbed to being pulled in every direction, and the association CEO was little more than the executive secretary, taking notes and leading meetings. He was less likely to have the stature as CEO to say “no.”

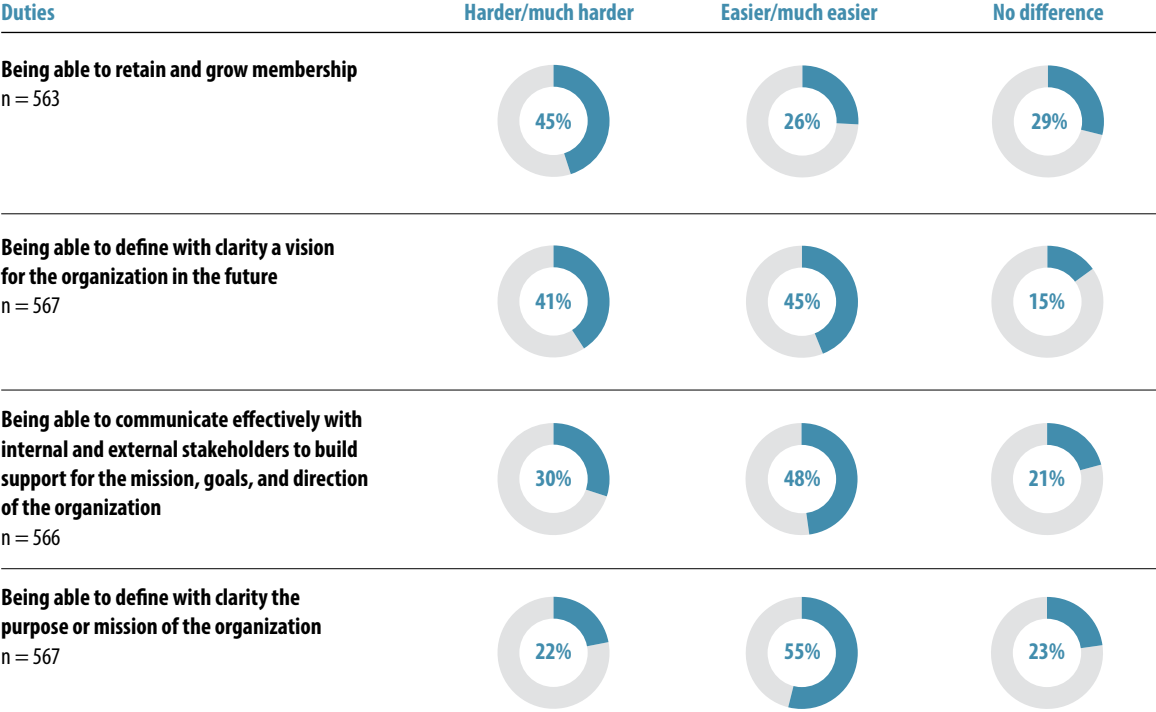
Today’s associations are becoming more like multinational corporations. They recognize that to be effective they must focus and narrow their scope—meaning that some otherwise important activities will be left out of the agenda. The CEO must therefore be an active part of setting the organization’s vision and mission. She can say “no”—and she’s expected to do so. As such, associations must continue to scale up, evolve, and constantly rethink their approach in order to improve. Against this backdrop,

more than 40% of respondents say it's becoming more difficult to define a vision for the organization in the future; 30% say it's harder to communicate effectively with internal and external stakeholders to build support for the mission, goals, and direction of the organization; and 22% say that it has grown harder to clearly define the purpose of the organization (Figure 2).

The second-most cited focus area for association CEOs is membership outreach and retention. Again, we find that the traditional role of the association is being challenged, particularly given the tendency of millennials to support specific causes and issues rather than organizations.² Whereas associations used to be driving forces in a fairly uncluttered landscape, today the cacophony of voices offering specialized information, services, and advocacy is overwhelming. Our connected world means that potential association members are bombarded with offers and messaging, and they can often get the information they need for free. And yet leaders must continue to build their fundamental resource—members—by driving membership growth and retention. Association CEOs are aware of the stakes, and 45% of respondents say that retaining and growing membership is harder than before (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
Membership retention and clarity of mission among top challenges

Question: As your tenure as CEO at the association continues, please indicate if each of the following aspects of your position have become easier, harder, or have remained about the same, given the greater uncertainty.



Note: Figures may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

² *A Generation for Causes: A Four-Year Summary of the Millennial Impact Project*, Achieve and the Case Foundation, Millennial Project, in partnership with Achieve and the Case Foundation, 2014, themillennialimpact.com/research.

International matters are top of mind

When asked about key focus areas, many association CEOs wrote in responses related to international matters. Indeed, globalization has greatly influenced US associations. Some have saturated the domestic market and are thus pursuing international growth. Others have members who do business with international partners, which pushes their associations to engage more directly in global trade matters.

These results show that association CEOs acknowledge the challenge of articulating their value proposition as well as the changing nature of the association's role in the lives of members. People don't join associations just for personal networking anymore; now they seek a demonstrable return on investment, either as a company or as an individual. To demonstrate that value, CEOs must increasingly nurture their relationships within the membership. Indeed, many CEOs shared that they avoid being blindsided by uncertainty or change through constant contact with their members: "I spend

as much time with members as possible to get a better idea of what is going on in the profession," one CEO wrote. Another suggests "continual interaction with members via visits and phone conversations, as well as frequent survey exercises." A third wrote that she works to "engage members about the evolving challenges of the field and their thoughts about strategies to address the challenges." A fourth CEO wrote, "The goal is to frame issues and be sure that buy-in continues to exist."

Other top focus areas highlight the unique attributes of associations

The third top focus area for CEOs involves the way they are governed: board management. Today's association board members are more engaged than ever before; given the scrutiny placed on nonprofit tax exemption, they feel an increasingly intense fiduciary duty to ensure the organization stays on track. (For more, see "A unique relationship," on page 16.)

But the board isn't alone in paying heightened attention to financial matters; the fourth-most cited focus area among association CEOs is financial oversight. As associations have professionalized, the CEO is increasingly expected to keep an informed eye on the organization's finances. It is no longer acceptable, when running a conference call with top executives, board members, or shareholders, to ask the chief financial officer for the answer to a financial question; this knowledge must reside with the CEO himself as well. Several association CEOs noted that financial matters were a particular challenge to them when they took the job.

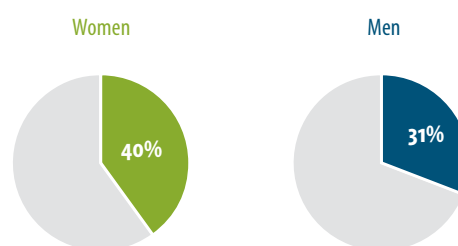
People don't join associations just for personal networking anymore; now they seek a demonstrable return on investment

Tied for fourth among priorities cited by association CEOs is advocacy—a critical benefit of association membership. Indeed, advocacy is arguably the most vital service offered to members and the common value proposition of all associations, from lobbying the government for funding to ensuring regulations won't adversely affect member companies. According to the American Society of Association Executives, more than 3,000 associations are located in Washington, DC.³ The credibility and “ear of Washington” held by associations may be unavailable to individuals and companies in any other capacity. This benefit of membership is one of the core reasons why associations have continued to grow and proliferate; every industry, particularly those that are highly regulated, leans hard on its associations to get involved in sensitive issues, from taxes to compliance to worker safety. In fact, it could be said that as long as associations continue to advocate on behalf of their members, their utility will never dissipate.

Between the lines: Women are more focused on sector and reputation building

According to our survey, female CEOs are more likely than male CEOs to declare “sector/reputation building” as a top focus area. While we don't know the exact reason behind this disparity, it may be a reflection of the fact that it is harder for women to get to the top role of an organization. Thus the women that *do* become CEOs are more aware and proactive about building up their own reputations—and that sensitivity translates to their work as a recognition of their association's brand awareness within the sector. For more examples of where association CEOs' responses diverged along demographic subgroup lines, see “Between the lines: Differences of opinion by gender and tenure,” on page 18.

Percentage of association CEOs who say “Industry or sector/reputation building” is an area of greater focus, by gender:



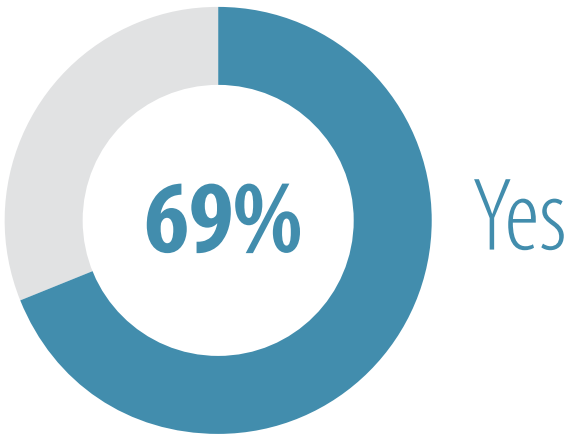
³ *The Power of Associations: An Objective Snapshot of the U.S. Association Community*, The Center for Association Leadership, updated January 2015, thepowerofa.org.

The role of the individual is changing

Just as the association world is changing rapidly, the role of the association CEO is also experiencing a renaissance. More than two-thirds of association CEOs report that their role and responsibilities have changed in the past three years. This result reflects the findings of *The CEO Report*, in which more than 75% of private-sector CEOs said their role has changed over the past decade (Figure 3).⁴

FIGURE 3
The changing role of association CEO

Question: Have you personally seen a change in your role and responsibilities as CEO in the last three years?
n = 618



Technology has played a significant role in this change. Members and other stakeholders now expect greater access to the association CEO, including through social media—a burden that almost half of these leaders dub increasingly cumbersome (Figure 4).

When describing the characteristics required of an exceptional leader, association CEOs overwhelmingly put “honesty and ethics” at the top of the list. Vision and relationship-building ability are also considered top traits of an exceptional leader (Figure 5).

⁴ *The CEO Report: Embracing the Paradoxes of Leadership and the Power of Doubt*, Heidrick & Struggles, in conjunction with Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford, January 21, 2015, heidrick.com.

FIGURE 4

The social-media challenge

Question: As your tenure as CEO at the association continues, please indicate if each of the following aspects of your position have become easier, harder, or have remained about the same, given the greater uncertainty.
n = 566

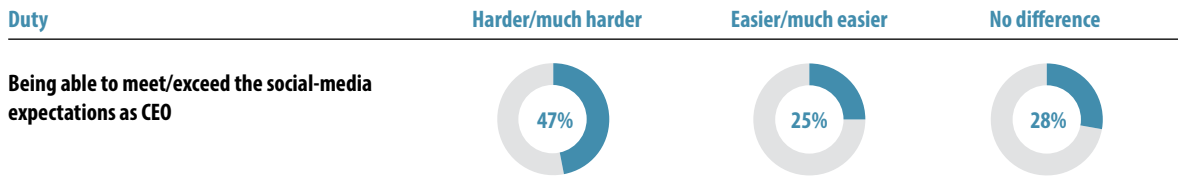
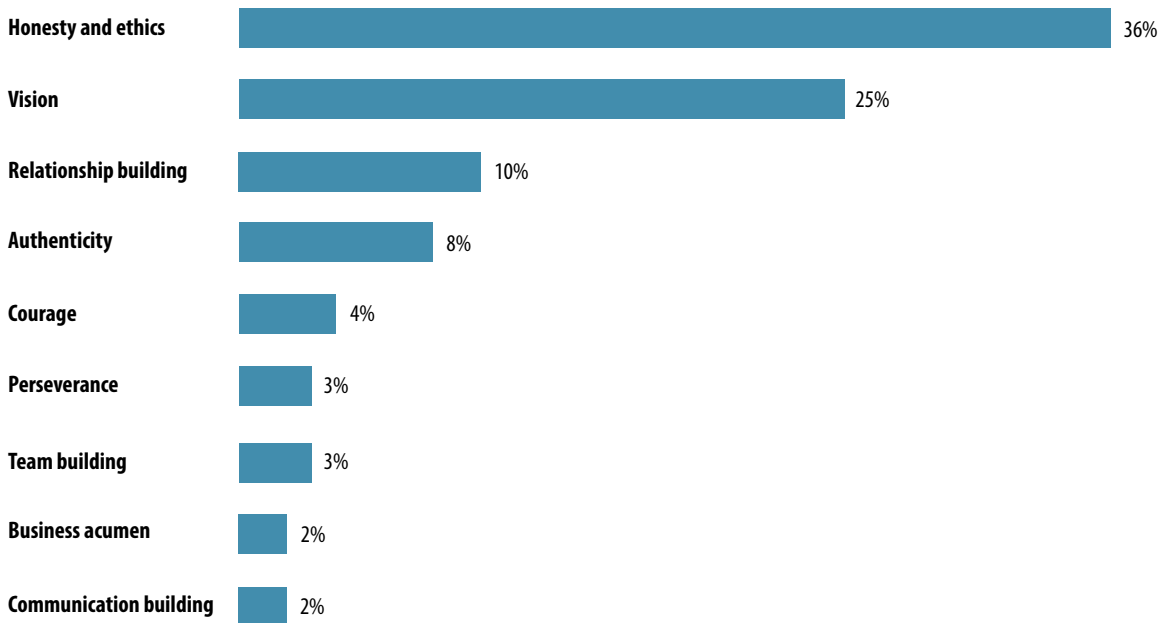


FIGURE 5

Most important leadership trait

Question: Leadership is a complicated and complex issue to define. From the list on the left, please rank the TOP THREE most important characteristics that you believe an EXCEPTIONAL leader must possess.
n = 603



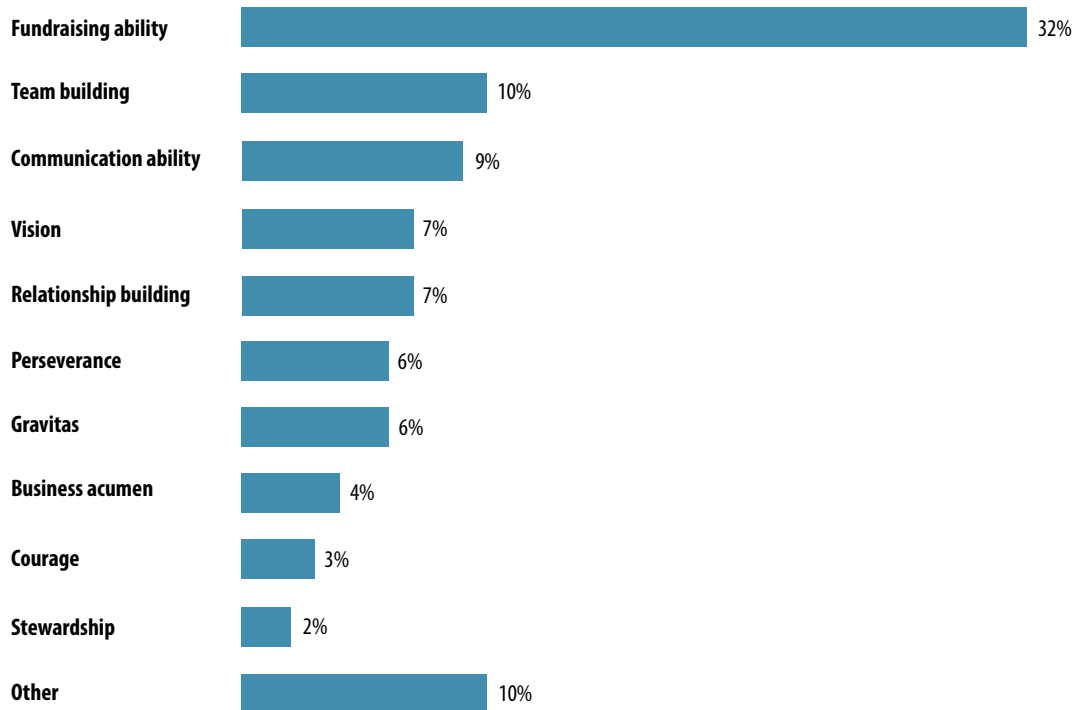
Note: Responses garnering 1% or less include experience, stewardship, conviction, fundraising ability, and gravitas.

But when describing the characteristic that is most challenging to them personally, association CEOs overwhelmingly cite “fundraising ability.” Given the importance of raising funds to support the association’s operation, this gap suggests that many CEOs step into the role without enough formal or informal training in this critical skill. Interestingly, this operations-oriented ability is low on the list of characteristics that CEOs classify as belonging to exceptional leaders—but those who develop these skills will clearly be ahead of the curve in the world of association leadership (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6

Most challenging leadership trait

Question: From the same list as the previous question, please indicate which SINGLE characteristic is the most challenging for you as a leader.
n = 534



Note: Responses garnering 1% or less include experience; conviction; authenticity; and honesty and ethics.

What do you wish you would have known before taking your current position?

How grey I would get.

I wish I would have known all the politics involved with being a CEO.

Not sure there's much that you could have been "told" that you wouldn't have been better off "learning"—as painful as that can be at times. Clear expectations are always helpful, but these jobs are often about succeeding in a world of ambiguity.

Not to sweat the small stuff. You cannot make every member happy.

The level of clerical work that I would be saddled with. (I am my own executive assistant.)

Exactly how insular my membership is and how hard it would be to keep them focused on making changes as needed.

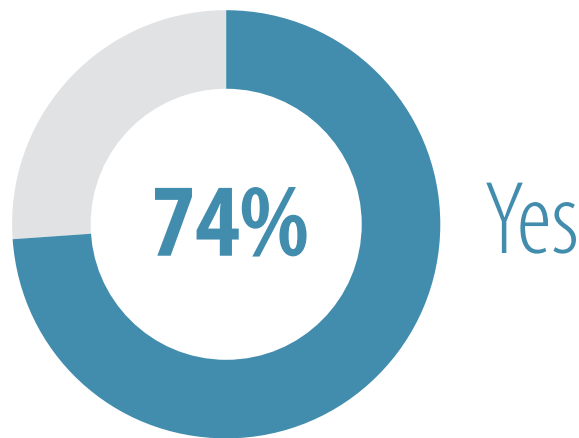
Making the tough decisions

Inherent to taking the top spot at any organization is having to make tough decisions. CEOs everywhere may be heartened by our finding that 74% of respondents admit they doubt themselves when making a major decision with a high degree of uncertainty and high stakes (Figure 7). This result mirrors the feelings of private-sector CEOs, 71% of whom said in another survey that they also have doubts in such circumstances.⁵

FIGURE 7

CEO self-doubt

Question: When you make a MAJOR decision as CEO in which there is a high degree of uncertainty and high stakes, do you ever doubt yourself?
n = 530



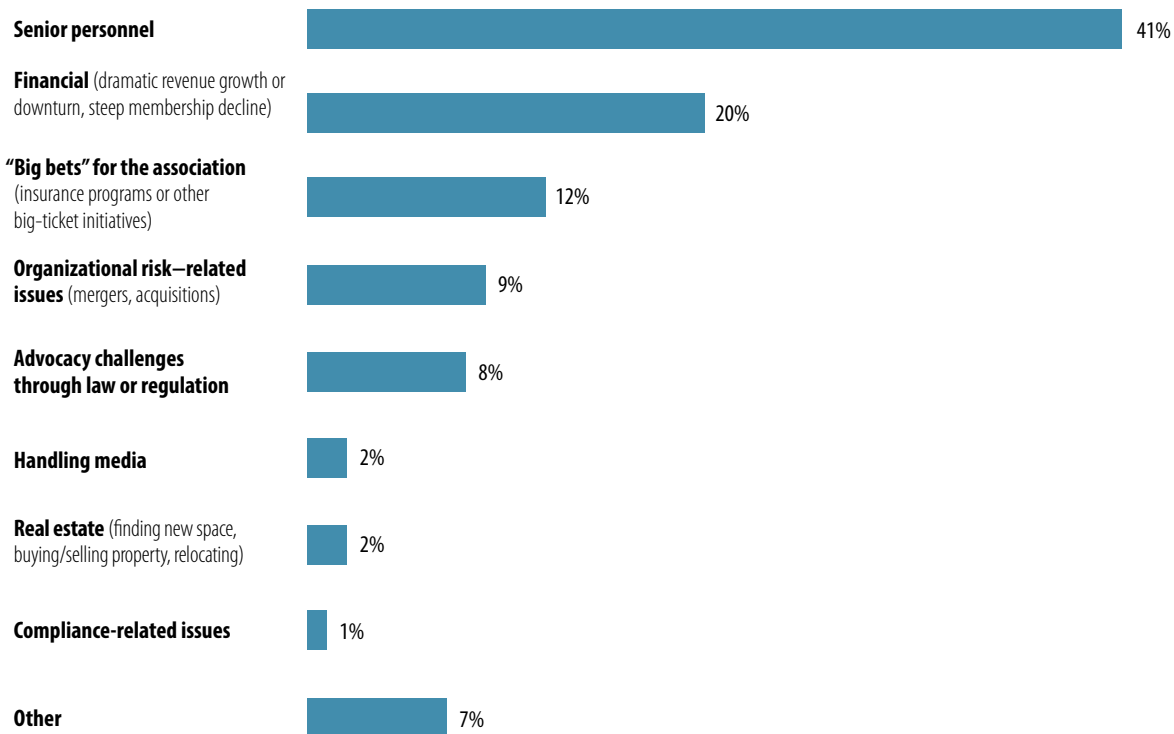
When asked what their toughest decisions have been about, the respondents describe a wide range of experiences, but the top answer is “senior personnel” (41%)—and many write-in answers focus on firing staff, from laying off a single person to shutting down an entire facility (Figure 8). Again, this result lines up with *The CEO Report*, which found that two-thirds of private-sector CEOs see “people decisions” as the toughest decisions they face. This correlation suggests that there is little difference in the type of organization you run; people are the engine no matter what, and the decisions CEOs face in regard to both top-level management and rank-and-file staff are therefore the most difficult. According to one association CEO, “I had to release two senior people. It was difficult to feel confident in the decision, know when to make it, and then let go of it and point forward. I learned to trust my intuition even more than I did [before].”

⁵ *The CEO Report: Embracing the Paradoxes of Leadership and the Power of Doubt*, Heidrick & Struggles, in conjunction with Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford, January 21, 2015, heidrick.com.

FIGURE 8

The toughest decision

Question: Every CEO has had to make tough decisions in his or her tenure. In which area have you personally made the SINGLE toughest decision?
n = 529



Note: Figures may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

How did your toughest decision affect you, and what did you learn?

My toughest decision was letting longtime (but ineffective) senior personnel go. They had deep, personal relationships with longtime members, and so the decision negatively impacted my reputation. I learned that it is important to do the right thing, regardless of the harm that comes to your reputation. Those that matter will be supportive.

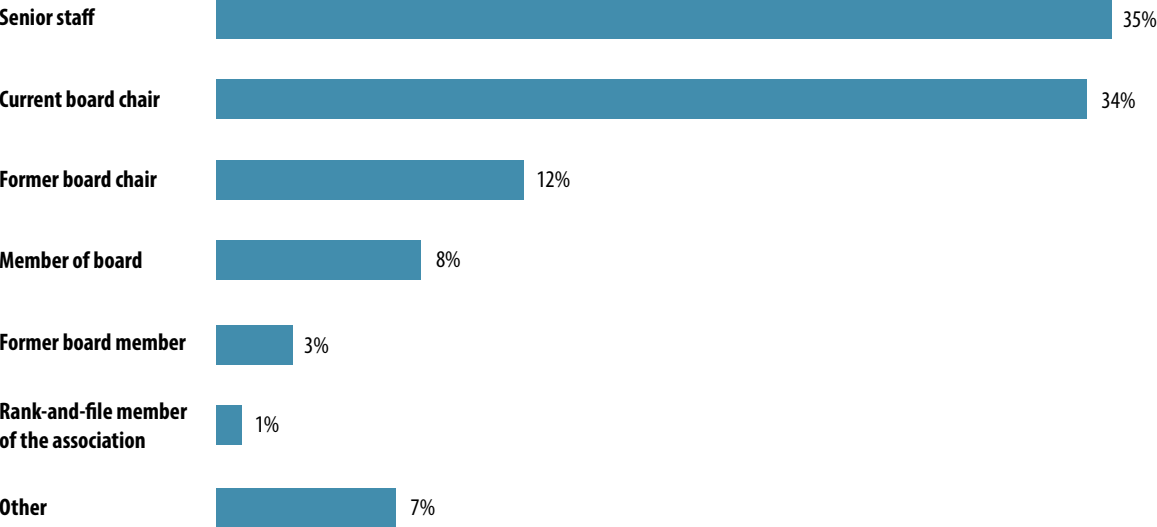
Very difficult for me to sleep. I should make personnel decisions more quickly than I do.

When making these tough decisions, association CEOs are clear about who they turn to first—their senior staff (35%) and their current board chair (34%). Their reliance on these trusted, internal resources reinforces the primacy of having the right people in the right places to help inform decision making (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9

Closest advisor

Question: Who is your “go-to person” in the association when consulting on a tough decision?
n = 526



Change management is incredibly hard and not for the faint of heart. I learned that you don't always win the popularity contest in these tough situations until the desired changes materialize—which isn't always immediate. I've learned to develop a thicker skin and to try to take better care of myself when tough decisions need to be made. A coach has helped.

When you terminate a high-profile person—there are a lot of questions and issues internally and externally. I focused on the outcome of creating greater senior-team cohesion and strengthening the commitment to the organizational goals. I saw the benefits of holding a senior leader accountable and the benefits of creating a strong leadership team.

What is the best professional advice you've been given?

Hire good people and let them do their job. And don't get too far in front of your board.

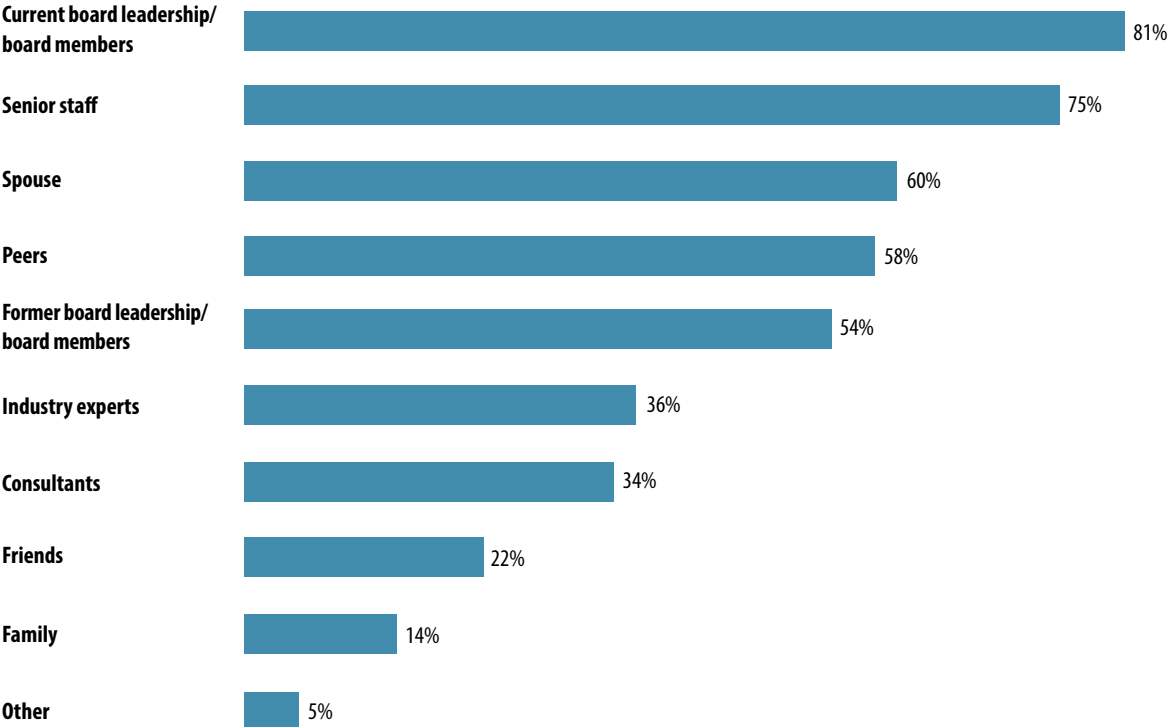
After ten years, think about moving on. By then the organization probably needs a major reset, and it can be difficult to change the things you created.

There is a difference between power and influence. If you are irresponsible with power, you'll lose your influence—and ultimately your ability to lead.

However, these sources are not alone in their influence over association CEOs. Survey respondents indicate they draw support from many sources; again, their current board (81%) and senior staff (75%) are their most trusted advisors, followed by their spouse (60%), peers (58%), and former board leadership or board members (54%) (Figure 10).

FIGURE 10
Sources of support

Question: When you have faced a MAJOR decision, where have you drawn source(s) of support? (Please indicate all that apply.)
n = 528



A unique relationship

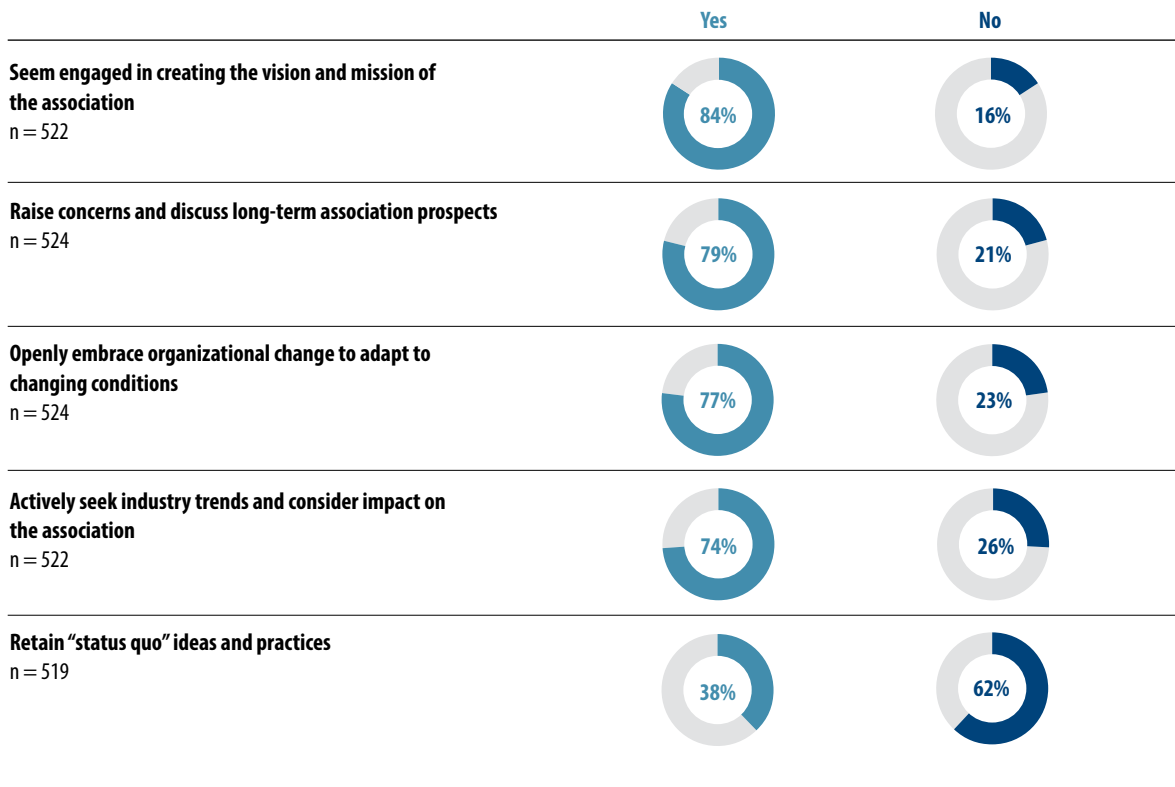
The board plays a unique role in associations, in part because the incentive to serve on an association board is different than in the private sector. Given there is often little to no money in association-board service, most board members join for one of three reasons: first, it enhances their personal reputation in their industry; second, it allows them to represent the interests of their day job; and third, it allows them to give back to an industry that has provided them with significant opportunities. This final factor is especially true of membership societies.

These dynamics may be the driving force behind why association CEOs overwhelmingly say their board is knowledgeable, engaged, and an active partner in problem solving. Approximately three-quarters of survey respondents had positive things to say about their board in almost every realm (Figure 11).

FIGURE 11

Board management

Question: In your opinion, does your current board of directors:



Of course, this rapport does not come automatically. Given the nature of volunteer boards—most members serve a three-year term—CEOs must be aggressive in building relationships with board members, even as one-third of the board turns over each year. This process is constant and requires flexibility and superior interpersonal skills. Moreover, it can't be delegated; the one-on-one relationships between CEO and board member are essential.

What key pieces of advice would you offer your successor?

Get to know your member-company CEOs.

Always do what is in the best interests of the association and don't succumb to the intense noise that comes from vocal minorities.

Delegate more than you want to. Lean on the board to support fundraising and development efforts. Move quickly with HR issues—don't be afraid to fire people.

Change is hard, so don't try to tackle too much at one time. The core segment of the membership is change resistant.

Know that each member has an agenda, and make sure that association work isn't hijacked by a personal agenda.

You cannot motivate others; you can only stimulate them.

Our association represents a set of professionals with similar training and job roles, but not a single industry or level of expertise within companies. To be effective, the association (with board leadership) will have to focus on particular industries and/or worker level. It cannot continue to try and be all things to all people in the field. If it does, it will not be effective at serving any of them.

Between the lines: Differences of opinion by gender and tenure

For the most part, the CEOs' responses exhibit a normal distribution across demographic subgroup profiles; men and women CEOs, for example, generally gave the same responses. However, a few anomalies emerged that defy statistical odds.

Female CEOs more often head smaller organizations

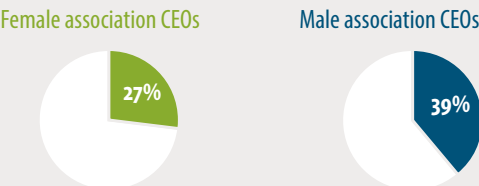
The male CEOs in our sample are more likely than the female CEOs to run the largest associations in the country, with revenues above \$10 million per year. This survey result demonstrates that the gender gap in top jobs at the largest associations remains an issue.

Question: What is the 2015 annual revenue of your association?

Response: Less than \$10 million



Response: More than \$10 million

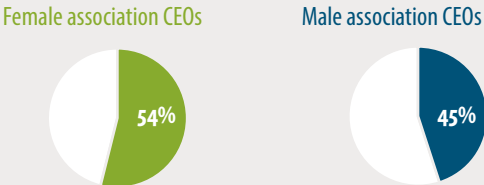


Female CEOs find three duties to be easier over time

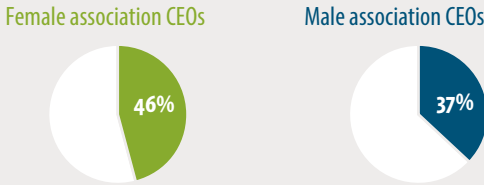
As their CEO tenure wears on, women are more likely to find it easier to execute three specific duties of the association CEO, whereas male respondents are more inclined to respond that those activities are relatively no easier or harder as time wears on. While it may be premature to draw qualitative conclusions from these results, their occurrence warrants further study.

Question: As your tenure as CEO at the association continues, please indicate if each of the following aspects of your position have become easier, harder, or remained about the same, given greater uncertainty. (% who responded "easier" or "much easier")

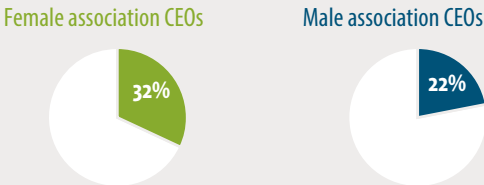
Response: Leading a process that establishes annual goals, strategies, and action plans that are consistent with the vision and mission



Response: Being able to anticipate priorities, and ensure management focus and accountability around those priorities



Response: Being able to meet/exceed the social-media expectations as CEO



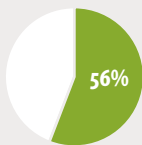
Male CEOs are less likely to turn to consultants and industry experts

The survey found that male and female CEOs may make different choices in who they turn to for support when making a major decision. Male CEOs are more likely than female CEOs to turn to their spouses, while the female CEOs are more likely than male CEOs to draw support from their industry experts, consultants, and families.

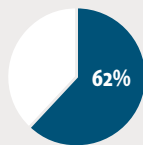
Question: When you have faced a major decision, where have you drawn sources of support?

Response: Spouse

Female association CEOs

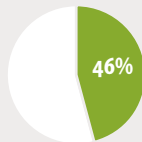


Male association CEOs

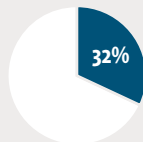


Response: Industry experts

Female association CEOs

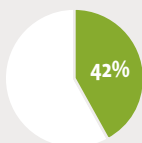


Male association CEOs

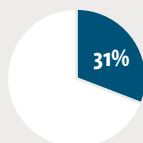


Response: Consultants

Female association CEOs

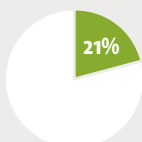


Male association CEOs

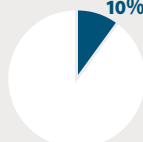


Response: Family

Female association CEOs



Male association CEOs



More experienced CEOs rely less on others' advice

When we analyzed the results by tenure, dividing the responses along the lines of how long a given CEO had been in his or her current job, we also saw a divergence in who CEOs turn to for sources of support. The dependence on senior staff is consistently high, but the results indicate something of a bell curve; CEOs with the shortest tenure and the longest tenure are least likely to turn to senior staff. Those with the longest tenure (more than 15 years) are much less likely than CEOs with shorter tenure to turn to family or consultants, while those with the shortest tenure are most likely to turn to consultants.

Question: When you have faced a major decision, where have you drawn sources of support? (by length of CEO tenure)

Response: Senior staff

<18 months



18 months–3 years



4–6 years



7–9 years



10–12 years



13–15 years

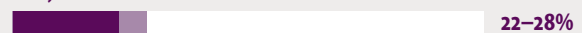


>15 years

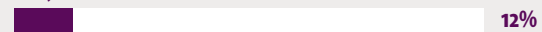


Response: Family

<15 years

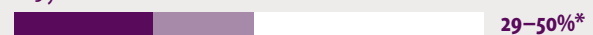


>15 years

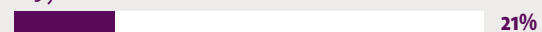


Response: Consultants

<15 years:



>15 years

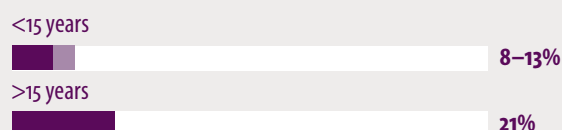


*Association CEOs who are newest to the job (tenure of less than 18 months) are the most likely to turn to consultants, at 50%. The next-highest rate of consultant support (42%) is sought by association CEOs who are still relatively new to the job, at 18 months to 3 years.

However, CEOs with the longest tenure are outliers in terms of their “go-to” person. Those who have been in the job 15 years or longer are the most likely group to seek out counsel from a former board chair, likely reflecting the lasting relationships that are so key to association leadership.

Question: Who is your “go-to” person in the association when consulting on a tough decision? (by length of CEO tenure)

Response: Former board chair

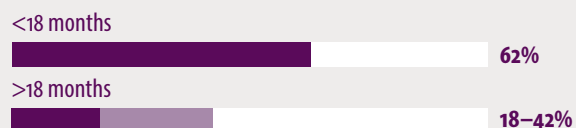


Areas of association CEO focus evolve with tenure

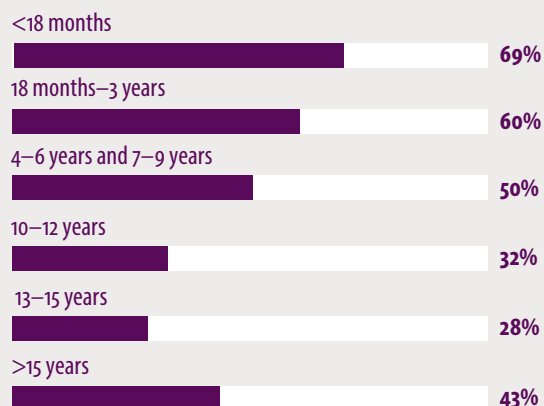
When asked about their areas of greatest focus, association CEOs respond differently, in some cases, according to how long they’d held the job. Those newest to the job are most likely to be focused on team building (as might be expected). We see a gradual lessening of focus on board management as CEO tenure increases—but it shoots up again when CEOs have served more than 15 years, possibly due to succession concerns as the longest-tenured association CEOs look to move on or retire. Finally, association CEOs with shorter tenure generally spend the least time engaging grassroots around public-policy issues, likely because they are still getting their feet under them in terms of staffing, board management, and so forth before reaching down into the membership and engaging.

Question: Since you have seen changes in your role and responsibilities, what areas NOW have your greater focus and attention? (Please select all that apply.) (by length of CEO tenure)

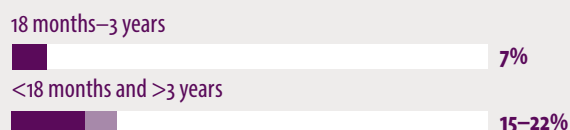
Response: Team building



Response: Board management



Response: Engaging grassroots around public-policy issues



Conclusion: Today's association CEO is adaptable, networked, and confident

More than 90% of association CEOs report that defining moments have helped to shape them as leaders. Some of these moments were positive—a great mentor, military service, the birth of children, succeeding in a high-risk opportunity. Others were crises—personal health issues, getting fired, gender discrimination, laboring under poor leadership. “I’ve had several defining leadership moments,” one CEO wrote, “including the mentors and previous bosses who led by example and whose example I try to emulate. I have also had negative moments in my career that served as reflection points on how to respond differently.”

Regardless of how they got to where they are today, the experiences of each of these leaders offers a snapshot into the realities of running a modern association. And indeed, association CEOs are an evolving breed. They must adapt to an increasingly combative political backdrop while contending with shrinking membership, competition for resources, and tough decisions. They must serve as the organization’s visionary, not just its operational manager. They lean hard on the guidance of their senior staff and volunteer board—which means that, like private-sector CEOs, they often see personnel issues as the most challenging.

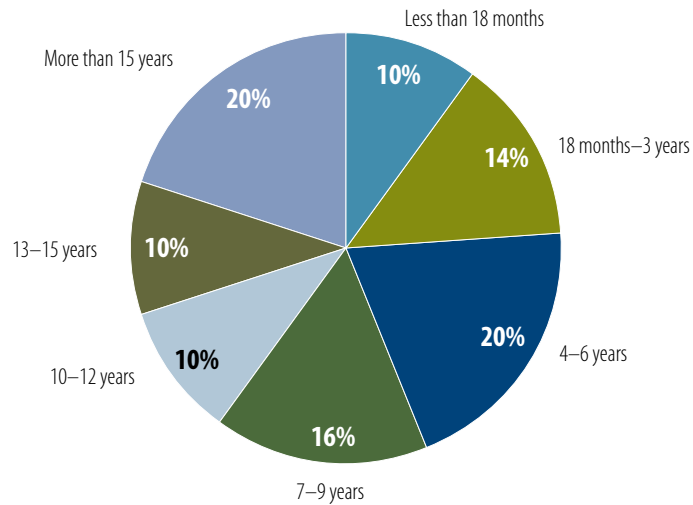
As these CEOs lead their organizations further into a VUCA world, their ability to operate confidently in the face of uncertainty will become ever more important. They read constantly. They keep a finger on the pulse of the board, of the industry, of Washington, DC, and of their members through open, frequent communication and networking. They carefully choose who to trust. And regardless of what comes their way, they stay true to and continue to believe in their core values and the primary mission of the association. ■

Appendix: Survey respondent profile

APPENDIX FIGURE 1

Tenure

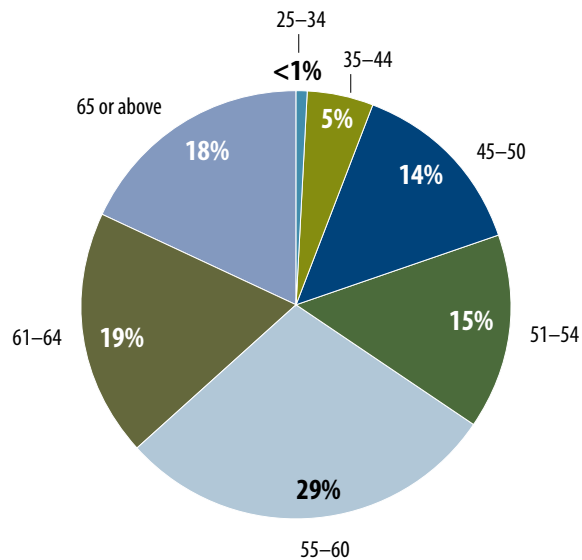
Question: How many years have you held the position of CEO of your current association?
n = 624



APPENDIX FIGURE 2

Age

Question: What is your current age?
n = 523

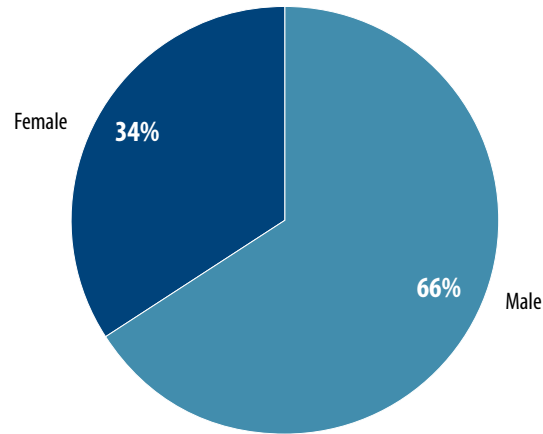


Note: Numbers do not sum to 100% because of rounding.

APPENDIX FIGURE 3

Gender

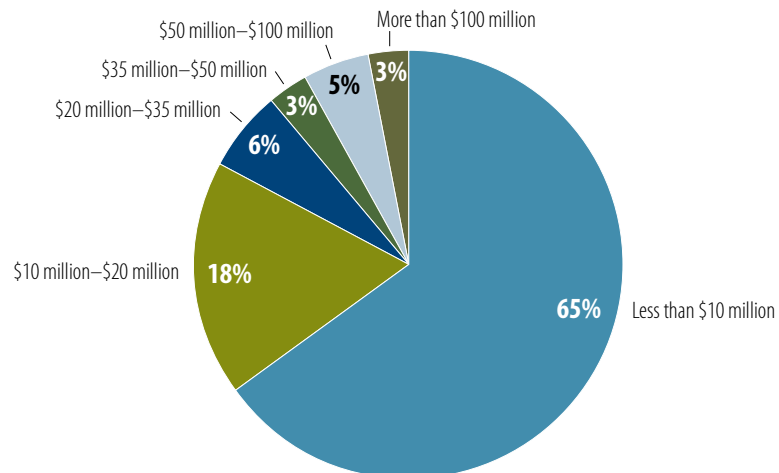
Question: What is your gender?
n = 525



APPENDIX FIGURE 4

Annual revenue

Question: What is the 2015 annual revenue of your association? (If you do not use the calendar year, please use your last complete fiscal year's revenue.)
n = 525



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