

ARTICLE

CEO succession focus: Succeeding as a first-time association CEO

CEOs of professional and trade associations need to adopt a unique perspective on the mindsets, skills, and capabilities that help CEOs in other types of organizations succeed. We spoke with 22 association CEOs in the United States to unpack the complexities of association leadership and the key drivers of success.



Association CEOs operate within a unique and intricate framework that is fundamentally different from that of the private sector. While many of their challenges are similar, the unique context requires specifically tailored approaches to leadership. Fundamentally, association leadership teams are tasked with advancing the interests of an entire industry or profession. This means that while their corporate counterparts focus on driving profitability and shareholder value, association CEOs must focus on driving revenue growth and defining or reinforcing membership value.

Delivering on this mandate, however, means balancing the interests of a broad membership base ranging from multinational corporations to small businesses and individuals, each with often-competing priorities. Leadership in this context requires a deft hand in coalition building, diplomacy, and long-term vision, all while responding to growing external pressures as well as increased demands from members.

Leadership is further complicated by governance structures. Most association boards are made up of volunteers with limited-term mandates—often just three years—while chairs may rotate every one to two years. This creates challenges in balancing short- and long-term priorities and increases the demand for stakeholder alignment.

Associations today are also undergoing a significant generational shift.¹ “There’s a huge leadership turnover happening right now. Some of it is driven by demographics, but some of it is driven by associations needing a different skill set in their leaders,” one association CEO explained. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, proving that a more human-centered leadership style—one that prioritizes empathy, authenticity, and adaptability—can be both effective and necessary in an increasingly polarized environment.

We spoke to 22 professional and trade association leaders in the United States, both newly appointed and long tenured and representing a wide spectrum of sectors and professions, to better understand the biggest challenges they are facing in managing the complexities of their role and what it takes to be successful.

The context for the modern association CEO

Operating within a unique leadership framework requires association CEOs to think carefully about their approach to advancing their mission and the long-term sustainability of their organizations.

Balancing continuity and leadership

Providing an association with sustainable leadership involves balancing multiple, often-competing, demands. Association CEOs have to manage a new set of stakeholders in addition to their traditional ones, with new media, activists, donors, and funders increasingly demanding more results, accountability, and leadership from associations. At the same time, the traditional levers of influence—mainstream media, established policy channels, long-standing governance models, and traditional workforce dynamics—are changing. CEOs must address the growing influence of independent media, the rise of activist lobbying, evolving board composition trends, and new expectations of a multigenerational workforce. These complex demands often leave leaders questioning what to advocate for and how best to serve their profession, as one CEO succinctly described: “There is a lot of pressure on CEOs. You can switch from great to existential dread pretty quickly, and I think we are a microcosm of what society is going through.” The public policy landscape is also in flux, forcing association leaders to adapt as traditional approaches lose their efficacy. “Anybody who is coming from a policy landscape over the last two or three decades, and is used to advocating in one particular manner, needs to understand that will change,” explained one leader.

¹ Ellen Maag, Tonya Muse, and William O’Leary, “CEO succession: How industry and professional associations are strengthening their leadership planning,” Heidrick & Struggles, June 20, 2024.

Beyond these changes, the sheer pace and scale of emerging challenges—including artificial intelligence, new ways of working, and geopolitical uncertainty—are testing associations' ability to respond effectively: "We now have to confront new issues in ways we haven't had to before, and a lot of associations haven't evolved to know how to deal with those issues," said another CEO.

Adding to the challenge, associations are now expected to go beyond industry protection to directly support individual organizations. As one CEO explained, "Associations used to be asked only to protect the brand of our industry, but now we are also called upon not just to help take incoming fire but to help businesses on a range of issues, such as bad press or unwanted policy."

Rethinking governance to serve members effectively

Amid all this disruption, many CEOs acknowledged that their governance structures are outdated and hinder rather than support their organizations in making progress. As one CEO emphasized, "From rules of engagement to elections and policy adoption, governance was seen in the past as bureaucracy. It's important to understand how to use a modern form of governance as an empowering and inclusive force rather than as a bureaucracy that creates walls and barriers and therefore complexity. Governance should be a tool for adaptability. We have to ask ourselves, 'How do we lower barriers? How do we create inclusion? How do we create engagement? How do we become more adaptable? How can we be more strategic in advancing our mission and achieving our goals?'"

To remain relevant and effective, associations must modernize their governance frameworks to foster agility, inclusivity, and engagement. "I like to think of governance as the central nervous system of an organization," advised an association leader. "If you don't get governance right, nothing else is going to work, regardless of how financially stable an organization is. Every time you have a new cohort of board members, you should review the governance." The difficult part is that, for many associations, governance reforms occur only when a new CEO assumes the role. A silver lining here is that many organizations have already demonstrated that, with the right impetus, governance can become more agile. As one CEO pointed out, "It was interesting that when Covid hit, even really large and slow-changing governance bodies became really nimble and fast, because they had to."

Another executive pointed to the need for creative ways to future-proof association governance models and board composition: "Things are finally shifting. You don't always have the traditional governance model representation, with X number of board members who serve a certain period of time. There are some associations that are getting creative in how they allocate board seats for underrepresented groups. One association I led had a board seat reserved for a student and one for a postdoc trainee. We need to do this for the next generation; get them in the room and help them shape the association. Other associations are bringing in external directors, people who are not from the profession or sector, who bring in broader perspectives and new ways of thinking about the business."

Board composition is also evolving when it comes to the professional backgrounds and experiences boards are seeking. While traditional criteria—such as geography, demographics, and company size—remain important, associations are gradually shifting toward a competency-based model, similar to corporate boards. In doing so, association CEOs need to ensure leadership stays true to the organization's core mandate to serve members and the industry or profession. "It's really important to keep that tie and closeness to the specialty of the association, because it is possible for leadership to drift away from where the members are, and that would create a lot of other issues," cautioned a seasoned CEO.



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The need for more transparency surrounding board member appointments was also raised as a pressing concern in our conversations. For many CEOs, a more transparent and inclusive succession plan—and governance framework in general—is critical in building trust with their key stakeholders.

A unique challenge for association CEOs is to educate some of their board members on the value their organization creates for their members, as board members with a business background do not always understand the intricacies of professions such as medicine, accountancy, or electrical work. Investing time to make sure each board director understands the mission, responsibilities, and impact of the organization is critical in establishing effective dynamics between the board and the association leadership and their members.

Calibrating ambition with restrictive business models

With these growing expectations, associations are being asked to operate with the efficiency of a corporation while managing the financial constraints of a nonprofit organization. Boards are increasingly emphasizing the need for financial sustainability and operational efficiency, highlighting that nonprofit status does not exempt associations from sound financial management and healthy revenue generation. As ambitions for associations increase, so too will the need for additional funds to invest in their organizations' ability to create future value for their members, in a context where the definition of that value keeps changing. One association leader emphasized that, "it's really time to do some thinking about how we make revenue to keep the organization functioning."

The resource question is ever present in this sphere, and some association CEOs are concerned about declining membership growth. This decline is due to a number of reasons, including, among others, a perceived lack of value, mergers and acquisitions, and new competitors. With many associations relying heavily on membership fees for revenue, uncertain membership growth prospects are a major cause for concern. "There's more competition for our members' eyes and ears from other organizations that are trying to offer the same thing," one leader told us. The challenge, therefore, is demonstrating clear value to members. As one executive explained, "A lot of our members are part of multiple associations, and they have limited bandwidth. So, you have to ask yourself how to make it worthwhile for them to want to spend time with your organization." Some CEOs also worry that in the longer term they might face a potential existential threat due to overall shrinkage of the profession or sector they represent and therefore a natural reduction of their membership.

This challenge is often compounded by rigid business models that limit the ability of associations to provide additional value with constrained resources, particularly when it comes to talent. Associations compete with the private sector for top talent, yet they often cannot match corporate salaries or career progression opportunities. Instead, they attract professionals who are motivated by purpose and who seek broader industry impact.

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Stepping up as a first-time association CEO: Advice from seasoned CEOs



Really understand your own landscape, what you're in charge of, what you're responsible for. Really make sure you understand how the association is run, and understand the industry, the biggest players, and biggest supporters."

Insights from CEOs experienced in navigating this world highlight several key pieces of advice that can shape a new association leader's effectiveness.

Recognizing their own purpose and motivation

Unlike corporate executives, the association CEO role is not about authority or personal recognition—it is about serving members and advancing the association's mission. Before stepping into the role, potential CEOs should critically assess their motivation, to help ensure they are a match with the association's long-term needs. Leaders who thrive in these roles tend to have a strong affinity for the industry or profession they represent and a strategic vision for its future. As one CEO noted, "The most effective association leaders are those who make an intentional choice—one where their skills and values and the organization's direction were in sync."

Understanding the structure—and limitations—they are working within

Association CEOs must quickly learn how decisions are made, how finances work, and what key stakeholders expect. This can look quite different from what they have seen in the corporate world—and even leaders promoted from within may encounter unforeseen complexities in their new position. It is particularly important to make a thorough assessment of the association's financial position before assuming the role, as the CEO might inherit long-term funding and resource allocation challenges that can shape strategic priorities. One CEO advised: "Really understand your own landscape, what you're in charge of, what you're responsible for. Really make sure you understand how the association is run, and understand the industry, the biggest players, and biggest supporters."

Embracing change leadership—and bringing others along

Association CEOs need to assume a different vantage point than that of their members on how their industries evolve. As they need to be adept at navigating change within an industry or profession, association CEOs require a keen awareness of external factors, such as regulatory shifts, economic disruptions, or technological advancements. Unlike corporate environments where leadership mandates can be executed through hierarchical structures, associations rely heavily on consensus building and taking their stakeholders along on the journey, as one CEO pointed out: "Of course I have a vision, but I need to avoid being just a man without any followers, just a guy out for a walk. You want to bring people along, make the vision something that they're a part of." This can be exhausting but rewarding work. To drive transformation in this context, the CEO should act as both a facilitator and a change agent, showing up with patience while taking a proactive approach to member engagement. This balanced style of leading is critical for helping these organizations adapt while preserving alignment among diverse stakeholders.

Overcommunicating with an intricate web of stakeholders

Effective stakeholder management is a defining capability for association CEOs. As one association CEO described it, “I don’t report to just one board—I report to hundreds of members, each with their own perspectives and priorities. The ability to manage those relationships is essential.” This is in stark contrast to corporate leaders who report to a single board.

And that’s not all: To be successful as an association CEO means navigating an intricate web of relationships that also includes regulators, policymakers, donors, and industry partners. Managing these different interests requires a disciplined approach to communication and trust building. One CEO explained that he achieves this by “talking to every single board member and every single executive committee member before every meeting—to walk through the agenda, hear their concerns, and talk about controversial topics.” The watchwords here are overcommunication, transparency, and a commitment to active listening. To build durable, trust-based relationships, it is essential to make sure all stakeholders feel heard and valued. One CEO said, “As an association CEO, you have to be transparent with your stakeholders: your team, your workforce, the board, and your external stakeholders.”

Finding the right talent by thinking outside the industry box

As with any organization, the strength of an association is closely tied to the caliber of its leadership team. CEOs who are new to the role should surround themselves with talent that complements their strengths and improves the impact of their organization. Given today’s tight labor market, building the right team might require exploring nontraditional talent sources by proactively positioning association leadership as a viable career path for professionals outside the traditional membership base or industry. Organizations can expand their talent pipelines by articulating the unique career advantages of association work, such as access to broad industry networks and policy influence. One association CEO noted that associations must also work to raise awareness about careers in associations early in individuals’ lives: “Associations need to do two things to find good talent. First, they need to do a better job in positioning themselves as a career choice for people who may not consider themselves association professionals. And secondly, associations need to start planting that seed early on, at the college level or even earlier in someone’s life.”



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Establishing a strong support system early on

Leadership can be an isolating experience for any CEO,² but association CEOs often face a particularly narrow peer network given the unique nature of their role. Unlike corporate executives, who can often turn to counterparts in similar organizations, association CEOs may need to be more deliberate in building relationships with leaders in adjacent industries or regions. One executive explained: “When I became an association CEO, I wanted to take a fresh look at everything, not just from my perspective but also from the point of view of people with this specific experience, beyond my predecessor. I wanted to talk to CEOs who are really owning the moment, capitalizing on their roles, and it was essential for me to have association CEOs with whom I can bounce ideas or even ask for resources.”

Seeking out trusted advisers—whether through peer networks, industry forums, or executive coaching—can provide invaluable guidance, and CEOs should start building their own support systems right at the beginning of their tenure.

² Alice Breeden, David Peck, and Laryssa Topolnytsky, “CEO well-being: Four steps top executives can take to maintain peak performance,” Heidrick & Struggles, August 1, 2024.

What are the leadership skills and capabilities for association CEOs today?

“Leadership is leadership everywhere, but the context is really different in associations,” one CEO observed, encapsulating a key theme from our discussions. While the leadership capabilities required of association CEOs closely align with those of their corporate counterparts, the nuances of their role demand additional adaptability. Balancing strategy with execution, communicating with authority, and essential personal attributes—such as authenticity, humility, intellectual curiosity, common sense, and patience—are all called out as critical in leading associations.

“Steer, don’t row”: Balancing strategy with hands-on execution

Many association leaders operate with leaner teams than their corporate peers and thus must seamlessly transition between strategic vision and operational execution. This requires a strong grasp of business strategy, foresight, and the ability to make decisive choices while managing a hybrid workforce and engaging with the board. Succinctly put by an association leader, the role requires “more steering versus rowing. You can’t make 50,000 people all happy at one time, and that shouldn’t be the intention. The intention should be keeping your eye on the organization as a whole and getting input from everyone.”

Communicating with authority in the face of heightened scrutiny

Association CEOs must be decisive, inclusive, and confident in their leadership, and they need to master communication skills—active listening, public speaking, media engagement, and the ability to facilitate discussions. While all CEOs require executive presence, association leaders often serve as the voice of an entire industry or profession, subjecting them to heightened public scrutiny. Success requires ensuring that decisions reflect the diverse interests of the membership base. As one trade association CEO noted, “You cannot be a successful association leader if you spend all your time communicating decisions you’ve already made. With a broad membership—including large corporations, small businesses, niche interests, and expansive priorities—you must bring people together to align on a shared vision.”

Association CEOs also need to act as thought leaders, positioning their sector within the broader economic and social landscape. “You need to understand trends and movements within and beyond your industry. Thought leadership is critical in shaping your profession’s role in the wider ecosystem,” one CEO emphasized.

Leading with authenticity, humility, intellectual curiosity, and patience

Other qualities that underpin effective leadership in an environment characterized by diverse stakeholders with often-competing interests are common sense and humility. As one CEO put it, “Rely on something as basic as common sense. You don’t have to pretend you know everything. You want to be confident in what you’re doing, but you don’t have to be someone that you’re not. If you’ve got a question, ask the question, rely on one of your staff, and give them that credit.” Another CEO agreed on the value of listening as a way to both understand the profession and build a rapport with members: “Ask really good probing questions, and listen to your members, board, executive team, and wider organization. I received some very good advice when I started leading an organization without firsthand experience in the profession: just go in and honor what they do; be interested.” Patience was also highlighted as an essential quality, and one that doesn’t always come naturally, as one CEO pointed out: “Patience is an important skill, because some associations are known for not moving fast in making decisions or getting things done. I like to do my research, assess the data, decide, and move on to the next thing, but it doesn’t always happen that way. Sometimes you need to take a step back and let leaders kick the ball around a bit and assess scenarios, and that can be unnerving.”

Mastering advocacy and lobbying

In an increasingly polarized environment, research highlights an additional skill set that association CEOs can leverage: leading across boundaries and divides.³ This skill is particularly important, as two areas of expertise that are very specific to this role are advocacy and lobbying—both of which require leaders to work across many ideological affiliations and competing interests. Building relationships and negotiating influence are critical, and this takes time to master, as one CEO explained: “Advocacy has become so very important that you have to allocate the appropriate time, the appropriate strategies, the appropriate financial resources to make sure that you’re doing what’s best for the profession.” Some CEOs only fully recognize the importance of this skill set after taking the job. “I hadn’t realized how important advocacy is for this role,” revealed one CEO. “That was a huge learning curve for me, because even though we had a lobbyist, the CEO before me hadn’t placed enough emphasis on it. But I realized how important it is for your industry to generate that enthusiasm that comes from being perceived as influential on the Hill.”

Ultimately, the effectiveness of association CEOs is not defined by their ability to command but by their capacity to unite, advocate, and adapt. The role requires a unique blend of strategic vision, diplomacy, and resilience in an increasingly complex landscape. While this leadership position has its special challenges, it can be incredibly enriching for those who enter the role with clarity of purpose, a deep understanding of their organization, and a commitment to collaboration and advancing their sector. Those who do will be well positioned to drive meaningful impact.

3 “Route to the Top—Today’s CEO: The growing importance of character, learning, and leading in a contested world,” Heidrick & Struggles, February 28, 2024; Jeremy Hanson and Jonathan McBride, “Leading across boundaries and divides,” Heidrick & Struggles, November 8, 2024.

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