

STRATEGY: PATHS FORWARD

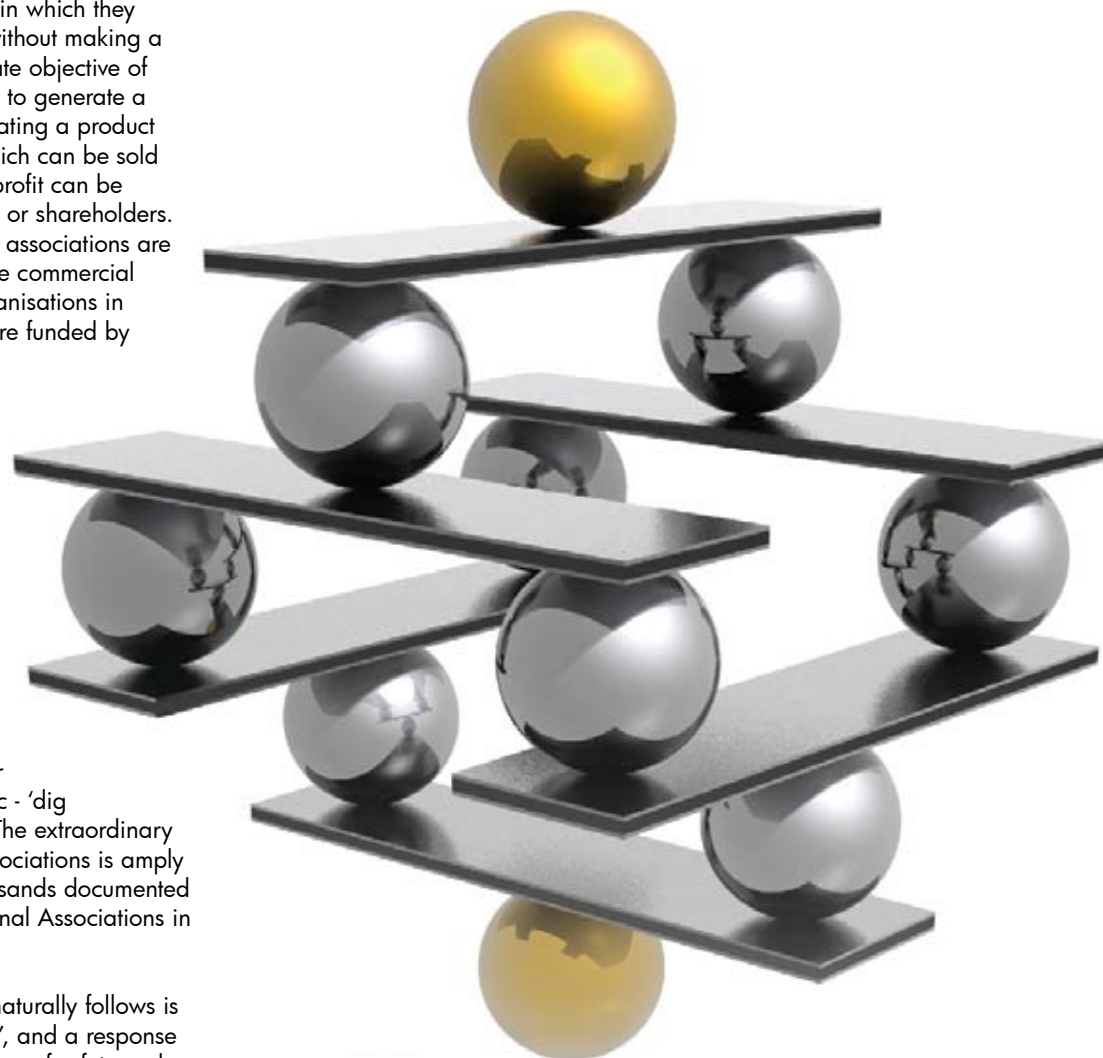
BOTH NON-PROFIT ASSOCIATIONS AND BUSINESSES NEED TO BE EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE IF THEY ARE TO SUCCEED. ALTHOUGH THE PRINCIPLES FOR WHICH THEY ARE FORMED DIFFER FUNDAMENTALLY, THE METHODS BY WHICH THEY FUNCTION HAVE MANY SIMILAR FEATURES.

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The purpose of an association is for members to pursue an agreed aim in which they all have an interest, but without making a financial profit. The ultimate objective of a commercial company is to generate a profit, by means of fabricating a product or supplying a service which can be sold to customers, so that the profit can be distributed to the partners or shareholders. Non-profit or not-for-profit associations are thus distinguished from the commercial sector, and also from organisations in the public sector, which are funded by governmental authorities.

An association's objective is stated in its foundation statutes or charter. A non-profit association must never be a disguise for a commercial enterprise. The purpose can be encapsulated in a mission statement, which may be broadly aspirational - 'Save the world' or 'develop our industry' - or more specific - 'dig 100 wells in the desert'. The extraordinary range of international associations is amply demonstrated by the thousands documented by the Union of International Associations in its Yearbook.

The next question which naturally follows is 'how do we achieve this?', and a response has to be sought in the form of a future plan or strategy, by deciding how the objectives are to be pursued in practice.



The leader of an association will certainly have an impression of the capacities of the staff and impact of the activities undertaken, but setting aside a specific time for detailed analysis of all the various aspects in turn and noting the results will be enlightening. Using some of the techniques of business management is a valid approach, tailoring and adjusting them to the scale of the association.

Financial limitations will probably prevent the engagement of commercially oriented management consultants, but association managers can learn from books, by trawling the internet, and by attending seminars and networking sessions in order to select systems and ideas best suited to their own situation, which is unique and individual to their organisation.

A basic analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) will bring into focus the methods the association is using and the personnel available. Enlarging the analysis to cover political, environmental or social considerations will probably prove unnecessary, as these will either have appeared as initial objectives or be scarcely relevant to the operation. Assessment of resources and activities should then open the door to the elaboration of a plan for the near future, with an effort to make a reasonable fit between the available and the aspirational, as a gross mismatch will lead to frustration.

Engaging one or two new members of staff or finding volunteers with particular qualifications, perhaps sending a staff member for training in a new skill, may be a practical possibility, whereas doubling the number of staff is not a realistic proposition. Planning around currently available resources is more likely to lead to success than an ambitious but

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unrealistic scheme. In order to increase the potential scope of the future programme, all means of generating ideas are valuable, from calm reflection to a free-for-all brainstorming session, for the development of activities which will lead the association towards its goals. As a plan emerges, steps which can be taken concurrently can be identified and distinguished from those which have to be constructed in stages.

It will usually be the responsibility of the association leader or manager to propose the draft plan to the board; board members worth their salt should examine it with open minds, adjusting and appraising it in the light of their own experience so that a final version can receive general approval.

Once all concerned have settled on the strategic plan, it should be adopted for a suitable period, such as three years, maybe five. A twenty-year term is too long, engendering no sense of urgency and leaving too much opportunity for distraction away from the main purpose. The plan should then be reviewed each year, and although it should be kept in mind it should not become an obsession. A well-outlined plan should not be subject to constant modification of its details: as developments occur, they can be fitted into the plan or set aside for consideration during the annual review.

An essential consequence of designing and following such a programme is that progress needs to be measured, so

it is useful for a means of assessment and a definition of criteria to be included in the plan ready for use. Once again the scale should be proportionate to the resources at the disposition of the organisation: stages which can be reached with a certain effort are more likely to stimulate and to be achieved than overwhelming tasks which only serve to discourage.

If the aim is to dig wells, the wells can be counted, but if the avowed goal is to save the world, how are results to be measured? If the group's object is to support an industry, markers can be set out so that staff know that progress is being made and they can set their sights on the next. It is satisfying to see that events are offering the required degree of interest to attract participants or a publication is increasing in circulation. And what if the goal has been totally achieved? In this case, the association has to make a firm, if difficult, decision to disband or to re-constitute with new objectives.

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