

# THE DUTY OF FORESIGHT: FIVE YEARS LATER

BY JEFF DE CAGNA FRSA FASAE

*"In 2014, association boards, working in partnership with their CEOs and senior executives, have a 'duty of foresight' every bit as critical as their recognized legal duties of care, loyalty, and obedience."*

Five years ago, in the July/August 2014 issue of *Associations Now*, I published an article that explored the reasons for BlackBerry's extraordinary twenty-year rise and fall. To explain why the company's board should have done more to anticipate and prepare for a highly-plausible future that could (and ultimately did) destroy BlackBerry's dominant market position, I argued that boards, including association boards, have a "duty of foresight." Coining this term irrevocably shifted the way I think about what it means to govern, the role of boards and the work they do. It also altered the trajectory of my career as an association advisor by inspiring me to focus my attention on the complicated challenge of building

high-performing association boards through the intrinsic power of the duty of foresight.

## WHY THE DUTY OF FORESIGHT MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

Fast forward to today, and we are less than six months from the start of 2020 and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's third decade. These next 120 months, which I am calling The Turbulent Twenties, will be a period of accelerating and relentless disruption that will create profound societal upheaval and irrevocably transform our world, for better or worse. While various issues contribute to creating the turbulence we already feel and will continue to experience going forward, the three most serious challenges we will need to confront—artificial intelligence and automation, the climate crisis and economic inequality—will force us to ask and answer existential questions about what makes us human, the extent of our commitment to other

people and whether we are prepared to sacrifice to survive.

These unforgiving conditions make it crucial that association boards perform different work in a different way and at the highest possible level. The duty of foresight lives at the core of a more generative integration of stewardship, governing and foresight for three important reasons:

- **THE DUTY OF FORESIGHT BUILDS FUTURE LITERACY** – Boards must pursue intentional learning with the future to anticipate and prepare for a full range of plausible futures, including those that are unfavorable and unthinkable for their organizations, stakeholders and fields. The complexity of the issues before them, and the dynamic interactions among them, demands that association boards undertake a sustained sense-making process to create a richer and actionable understanding of the myriad outcomes that could emerge. Building future



literacy using the duty of foresight (and the work it requires) is essential to minimizing any fear of the future that might otherwise leave boards in paralysis.

- **THE DUTY OF FORESIGHT CREATES HUMAN AGENCY** – Among the many concerns created by the growing adoption of AI and automation technologies is a continued decline in human agency, i.e., our ability to choose and act to achieve the outcomes we want. Algorithms already exert outsized influence on our choices, including both routine items, such as where to have dinner and the driving directions to the restaurant, and highly intimate issues, including health and relationship matters. When it comes to making meaning around the human and ethical implications of the future, however, boards can use the duty of foresight to create the collective agency required to act with confidence on behalf of those they serve.
- **THE DUTY OF FORESIGHT STRENGTHENS DECISION-MAKING LEGITIMACY** – Throughout The Turbulent Twenties, as association boards wrestle with difficult questions, they will be called upon to make tough decisions that could radically reshape the future of their organizations in ways that will be detrimental for some stakeholders. Through the duty of foresight, association boards can strengthen the legitimacy of their decision-making in the hearts and minds of

these affected parties by ensuring those processes are open and inclusive of a variety of perspectives, oriented toward the future and primarily benefit their successors by advancing long-term rather than short-term interests.

#### THE DUTY OF FORESIGHT IS A CHOICE

In contrast to the mandated duties of care, loyalty and obedience mentioned at the beginning of this column, embracing the duty of foresight is a choice that association boards can and should make for themselves without further delay. The Turbulent Twenties are coming into view on the horizon, and associations are not ready. The duty of foresight will animate the more generative integration of stewardship, governing and foresight that all boards will need if they want to perform at the highest level and earn their associations and stakeholders an opportunity to thrive over the next decade. ➤

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