

THE INTENTIONAL ASSOCIATION CAREER

How to design a career with care and purpose

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EMERGING PROFESSIONALS SESSION



THE PROBLEM

NOBODY PLANS TO WORK IN ASSOCIATIONS

Most of us arrive here by accident, not by design — and then advance by taking on responsibility rather than by strategy.

SHOW OF HANDS

Who planned, at 22, to work in the association space?

Christina's hot take.

Associations are the BEST place to build an intentional career.

Raise your hand.

Experiment. Leverage AI and other new skills.

You can get experience even if your boss sucks – Associations West, ASAE, board service.

THE PROBLEM

MOMENTUM ISN'T THE SAME AS DIRECTION



Responding to opportunity

Motion in every direction. Real progress, no destination.



Building toward a goal

The same effort, pointed at something you chose.

Is your current trajectory taking you where you want to go?

TODAY

THREE MOVES



01

See the pattern

What association C-suite leaders are actually hired for.



02

Map the pattern

How to build those skills from where you sit now.



03

Build your plan

One concrete next step you walk out with.

THE PATTERN

I WENT LOOKING FOR THE PATTERN

Not a study — an experiment in getting ready for this session. I read the job postings I could find and looked for what repeated.

“Shred the RFP.”

WHERE I LOOKED

Open CEO and executive director listings on ASAE Career HQ and CEO Update.

FOR COMPARISON

A handful of VP-level postings, one rung below the top job.

WHAT I DID WITH THEM

Stripped out the industry specifics to see what every listing asked for.

THE PATTERN

9 THINGS EVERY POSTING ASKED FOR

Different industries, different budgets, same nine requirements.



01

Board Partnership



02

Strategy + Execution



03

Member-Centricity



04

External Voice



05

Revenue Diversification



06

Change Leadership



07

**Cross-Stakeholder
Consensus**



08

Credentials



09

**Leading Through
Influence**

THE PATTERN

TWO THINGS I DIDN'T EXPECT

01 **Data fluency is a VP requirement, not a CEO one**

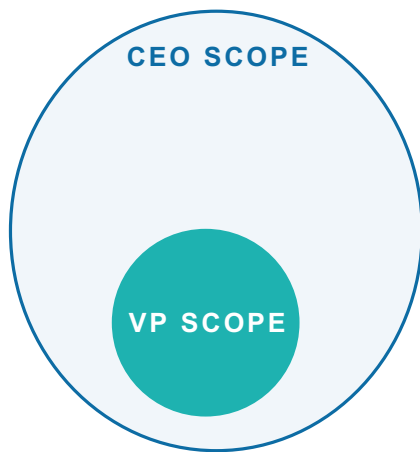
Systems and analytics language showed up more explicitly one level below the top. CEOs delegate it. VPs are expected to own it directly.

02 **Consensus-building is a named, evaluated competency**

Not an assumed soft skill buried in a culture paragraph — written into the requirements and scored in the interview.

THE PATTERN

NOT A DIFFERENT SKILL SET AT THE TOP — A WIDER SCOPE



VP-level postings show the same nine patterns — tied to one function or department.

CEO sets enterprise strategy

VP translates it into operational plans

CEO owns the board relationship

VP briefs the board and finance committee

Quick cul de sac...

By the way, not everyone should be a CEO.

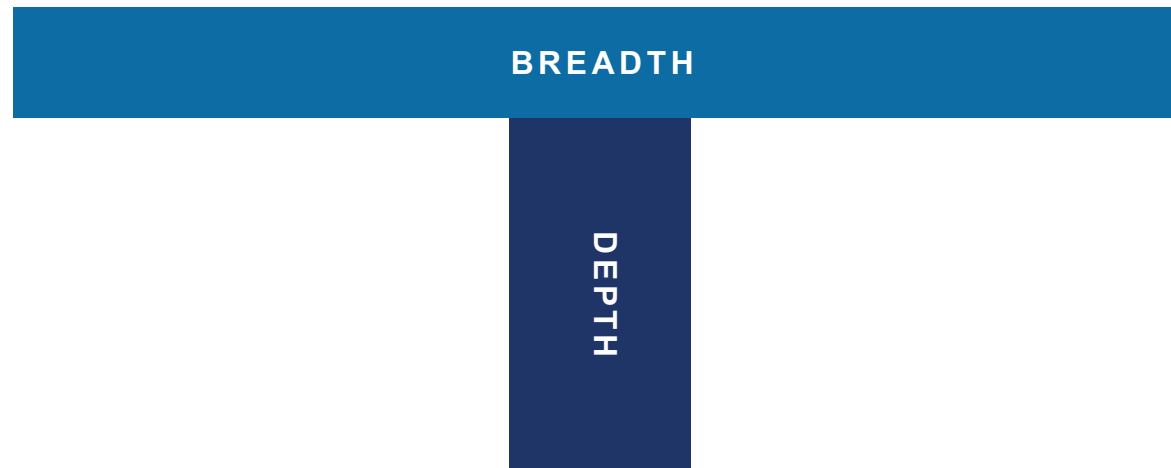
Influence in your vertical.

Expand your voice.

Give back to your community.

THE FRAMEWORK

THE T-SHAPED CAREER



VERTICAL BAR

Deep expertise in one function.

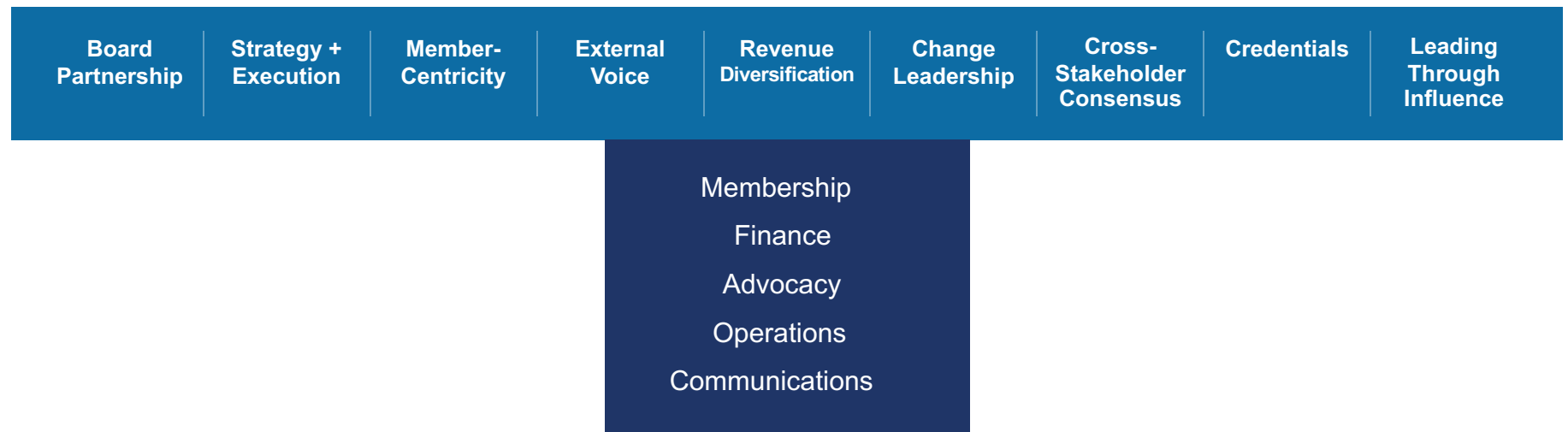
HORIZONTAL BAR

Breadth across collaboration, leadership and influence.

Concept popularized by IDEO's Tim Brown, building on David Guest's 1991 framing.

THE FRAMEWORK

YOUR VERTICAL IS YOUR FUNCTION. YOUR HORIZONTAL IS THE NINE PATTERNS.

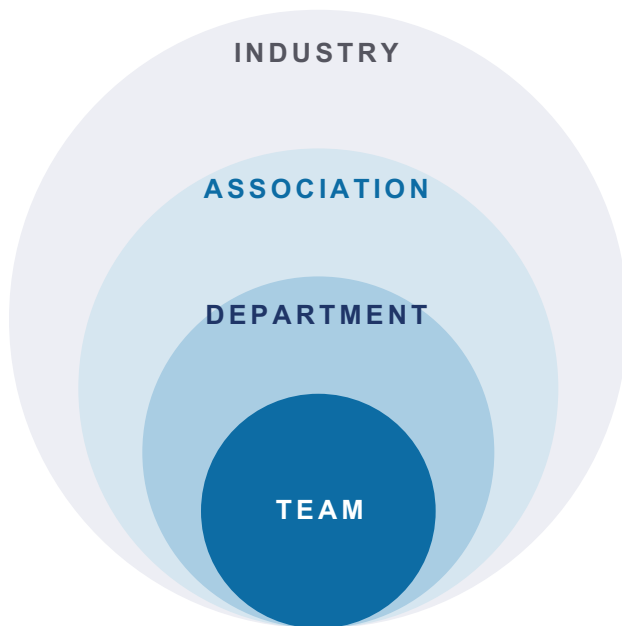


Pick your lane and go deep enough that people come to you for it.

Then build the nine across the top — they belong to every function, not just the corner office.

THE FRAMEWORK

SAME SKILLS, EXPANDING SCOPE



The nine patterns don't change. The size of the room you're using them in does.

Which means you don't wait for the title to start practicing. You practice at the scope you have, and the scope grows.

BUILD YOUR T

FOR EACH PATTERN: EARLY CAREER, MID-CAREER, HABIT

EARLY CAREER

Something you can start this month, at your current level, without permission.

MID-CAREER

The next rung up — where you own the outcome, not just the task.

HORIZONTAL-BAR HABIT

The standing practice that keeps the skill alive once you've built it.

Nine patterns, grouped into three clusters. You are not doing all nine — you're finding the one that needs you most.

YOUR TURN · 3 MINUTES

WHERE ARE YOU RIGHT NOW?

Be honest. No one is grading this but you. 1 = never done it, 5 = I do this well today.

01 Board Partnership

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

03 Member-Centricity

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

05 Revenue Diversification

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

07 Cross-Stakeholder
Consensus

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

09 Leading Through Influence

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

02 Strategy + Execution

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

04 External Voice

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

06 Change Leadership

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

08 Credentials

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

GOVERNANCE & STRATEGY



Board Partnership

EARLY

Staff a committee. Take the board minutes.

MID

Present to the board yourself. Join a small nonprofit board.



Strategy + Execution

EARLY

Write a one-page "why this matters" before every project.

MID

Own a full project cycle end to end.



Change Leadership

EARLY

Ask why about "the way we've always done it." Document what you learn.

MID

Lead one modernization project. Bring the skeptics along.

CLUSTER 2 OF 3

PEOPLE & VOICE

PATTERNS 03 · 04 · 07



Member-Centricity

EARLY

Sit in on member service calls. Read the logs.

MID

Own a member satisfaction metric and report on it.



External Voice

EARLY

Ghostwrite talking points for someone senior.

MID

Represent your team at an external meeting or panel.



Cross-Stakeholder Consensus

EARLY

Seek out projects where the interests compete.

MID

Facilitate a meeting with visibly different viewpoints in the room.

MONEY, SYSTEMS & CREDENTIALS



Revenue Diversification

EARLY

Learn how non-dues revenue actually works at your org.

MID

Pitch and pilot one new revenue idea.
Track its P&L.



Credentials

EARLY

Attend a sector conference before you "need" to.

MID

Pursue the CAE once you're eligible.



Leading Through Influence

EARLY

Manage volunteers or interns.

MID

Lead a cross-departmental initiative
with no direct reports.

YOUR TURN · 2 MINUTES

TURN AND TELL SOMEONE

Share your one action with a neighbor. Say it out loud — that's what makes it real.

CLOSE

PROBLEM, PATTERN, FRAMEWORK, PLAN

01

The problem

Most association careers happen by accident. Momentum isn't direction.

02

The pattern

Read enough C-suite postings and the same nine things keep showing up.

03

The framework

Go deep in your function, wide across the nine, at whatever scope you have.

04

The plan

One pattern, one action, ninety days — written down.

Your map looks different.

Take control of the journey you want to take.



THANK YOU

Questions? Let's talk.

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