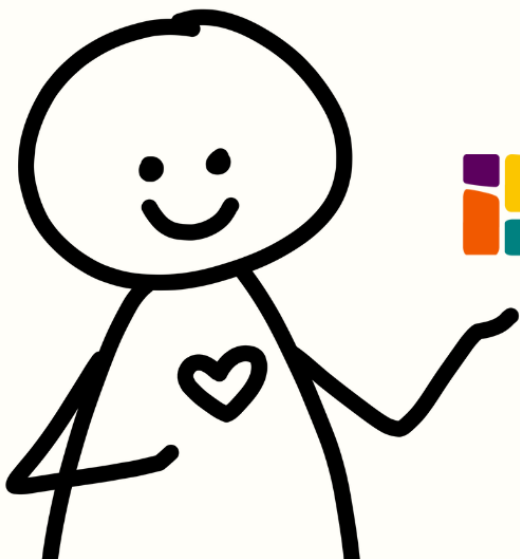


The Human Side of Engagement



Stories, Strategies, and
Science from the
FSAE Foundation
Think Tank



by
 **Amanda Lea Kaiser**



Chapter 1: Let the Engagement Begin Before the Program Starts

We opened the Think Tank with crayons.

Yep! Literal Crayola® crayons.

Before we dove into research, frameworks, and fixes, we wanted to open everyone's creative, playful, and curious brain. Research shows that drawing (for me it's doodling) before problem-solving helps people become more creative and think more flexibly.

We doodled what exclusion feels like. We sketched what trying something new feels like. We drew what belonging and connecting feel like.

The drawings conveyed something powerful without a single word. Exclusion felt small, dark, and scary. Belonging felt open, happy, and colorful.

Being new in a group of strangers who seemingly know each other is scary. So, we discussed psychological safety (see [Amy Edmondson's work](#)). Because when people feel psychologically safe, they lean in. They risk raising their hand. They try something. They ask the question. They participate. They might even share something everyone is dealing with, but no one wants to admit.

There are things we can do to open our members' minds to creativity and create safe spaces, allowing them to share and connect freely.

Think about the times when you've walked into a room and felt instantly at ease. Or joined a breakout and felt like the group was already cheering for you. Or posted in an online community, and someone responded right back with generosity.

Most of the time, those aren't accidents. Those experiences are designed.

And when associations design for positive experiences, engagement flourishes



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Chapter 2: Today's Worries About Engaging New Members

It's the most common worry about new members; specifically, the large number who join but never use their benefits, according to 71% of the participants in the New Member Engagement Study. New members join with good intentions, but then nothing seems to happen. Silence. Emails go unread, no logins, and certainly no registrations or renewals.

The problem is that unengaged new members don't just keep it to themselves. They tell their friends, and we don't just lose out on that one member's potential future contributions and thought leadership; we also can lose their network of colleagues.

During the 2025 FSAE Think Tank, participants shared their most pressing new member engagement challenges, and several clear patterns emerged.

Challenge #1: Communicating Value

Every association believes it offers excellent value — but new members don't always see it. Participants described a frustrating pattern: long-time members narrowly define value by a single benefit, while newer members often don't understand what the association can do for them, or even what an association is.

The challenge isn't always about creating *more* value — it's about clarifying and communicating the value that already exists. Try helping new members connect their existing problems with the association's solutions.

Challenge #2: Retention

Disengaged new members don't renew. Or maybe they renew once but fall off after two years. The churn is worrisome for many association professionals.

We discussed the neuroscience behind first impressions because, as humans, we are first impression-making machines. Take note of all the moments when new members may be forming their first impression of your organization.

[illegible]

Challenge #3: Onboarding

83% of the Think Tank participants said they did none, not very much, or some onboarding. According to the New Member Engagement Study, onboarding programs have been shown to increase retention rates.

Response	Percentage
None	4%
Not very much	29%
Some	50%
A lot	8%
A whole lot!!!	8%

Take the [New Member Engagement Study](#) to learn how peer associations successfully engage their new members.

Chapter 3: Design Thinking in Action — Turning Problems into Possibilities

At the Think Tank, we didn't just discuss problems; we designed solutions to address them. Using a design thinking framework, groups moved through empathy, ideation, and experimentation to uncover what's truly behind disengagement.

Across five breakout teams, a pattern of solutions emerged:

1. Clarify the Value Proposition and Creating New Value

Members can't value what they can't see.

The team suggested:

- Conducting "listening tours" to understand what matters most to members.
- Teaching board members to be ambassadors who share real stories of value.
- Personalize communications and try more marketing tactics to see what works.

2. Competing for Members' Limited Time

Today's members are time-poor and overwhelmed. They aren't necessarily disengaged — they're just being selective. Competing professional associations, family obligations, and the daily grind all pull at their attention. One participant summed it up perfectly: "The level of busyness is so great that the time it takes to engage new members is hijacked by more urgent tasks."

The team suggested:

- Figure out how to offer solutions, volunteer opportunities, education, etc., that answer what's keeping them up at night, and that is "worth" giving their time to.

3. Communication Overload (or Underload)

From emails to social media to newsletters, members are inundated with messages — and they're tuning out. Think Tank participants acknowledged that even their best content can sometimes get lost in the noise. The group consensus: communication needs to be clearer, shorter, and more fun.

One team offered a creative solution: label your communications by time commitment, such as "1-minute read," "2-minute read," or "5-minute read."

More ideas:

- Quick "pulse polls" that allow members to respond instantly and feel heard.
- Maybe AI, but that could be good or bad. And that may detract from the personal experience they are seeking.
- Going over and above to become memorable.
- First impressions go a long way.
- Investing in training and continued education.
- Call members and ask, "Has anything changed?"
- Be more active on social media - spotlight new members, highlight member segments, award winners, and more. Member of the month.
- **And video! Video popped up over and over again in conversations as something participants wanted to do more of.** Use Look to respond to members individually and show them where resources are in your site. Film personal or your CEO welcoming all new members welcome videos.

4. Deep Dive into Engaging New Members

You can't have long-time engaged members if you don't engage them as new members first! New members might feel like an organization is unwelcoming or overwhelming. They want to make new friends and business contacts and have a bunch of unmet business needs, but it is hard to gain traction.

The team's ideas:

- Bring a friend for free
- New member checklist
- Use heat mapping to identify what the majority wants
- Ask what you are looking for now (ask at dues renewal)
- Committees - 1st year - learning and meeting, 2nd year - what you're doing, 3rd year - preparing for the next person to take over
- Try Handwrytten – for notes that look hand-written
- Send an iron-on logo

5. Too Much Data, Too Little Insight

Many associations collect engagement data, but few act on it. Members are asked to complete surveys but never see results or follow-up actions. Staff feel overwhelmed by the data they collect and lack the necessary tools to translate it into actionable insights.

AND. Survey Fatigue! It is REAL!

The team's ideas:

- Dive beyond the surface data to find out the "Why" so that you can ultimately fix the problem.
- Micro responses are easy to collect.
- Perhaps get a college intern in the data analytics realm to dive deep into your data and assist staff members with understanding the data. A data internship would be interesting and easy for any association to make happen since it's digital.
- More training for association staff on the data analytics piece.

Chapter 4: Engaging Volunteers

Members want to contribute, but they just don't have the time to spare. "Micro-volunteering," or as Amanda calls it, "Little v volunteering," was a favorite concept of the day. Think task-based opportunities that take minutes, hours, or weeks, not years.

Examples and ideas for little v volunteer roles:

- Become a webinar chat ambassador.
- Write a two-sentence testimonial.
- Share an event on LinkedIn or other social media ambassador.
- Welcome a new member to your online community.

Each small act builds connection and momentum. And remember, members think of volunteering as more expansive than most association staff. To members, speaking, writing, being interviewed, stuffing bags, and working at registration are all considered volunteering to them.

Develop a host of little v volunteering opportunities; they are like volunteer internships, so you can start cultivating the big V volunteers of the future.

Chapter 5: Your Turn!

If you're reading this, you're already shaping the next era of member engagement. Every conversation you start, every idea you test, every moment you create a great member experience—you are creating real engagement.

So, what is next? What engagement experiment do you want to try?

Bonus Idea: The "Tiny Test" Method

Big plans can stall or launch with less-than-stellar results, which uses up precious resources. But small experiments create momentum and reduce risk. That's why we closed the Think Tank with "Tiny Tests" — simple, low-risk ways to test new ideas.

Here's how to run your own:

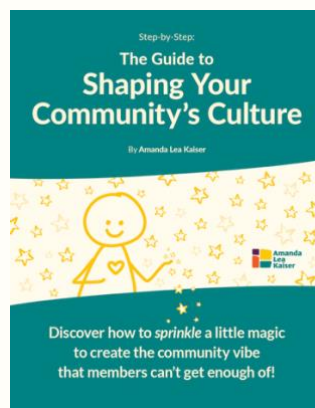
1. **Brainstorm** a bunch of solutions to a problem (preferably more than 20 ideas, because 20 okay ideas might lead to 1 good idea).
2. **Underline three ideas** that excite you.
3. **Circle the one** that takes the least time and money. Can you scope the idea down even further?
4. **Try it.** No perfection, no permission required.
5. **Observe and adapt.** What happened? What surprised you? What will you try next?

Small tests spark big change because they lower the risk of innovation and raise the speed of learning.



Want more?

Discover more ideas for creating a safe space for your members to connect, collaborate, and share in [this complimentary guidebook](#).



About the Author

Amanda Lea Kaiser is a keynote speaker, engagement strategist, researcher and author of *Elevating Engagement: Uncommon Strategies for Creating a Thriving Member Community*, which you can find in online bookstores worldwide. You can find Amanda at www.AmandaLeaKaiser.com



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