



Getting the Insight You Need to Thrive in a Downturn Economy

By Lori L. Silverman

Some experiences stay etched in our brain forever. And so it was on September 17, 1990, at the [Spa Resort Hawaiian](#) in Japan. As I sat on a large floor cushion, in the midst of a small group, eating some of the finest Japanese delicacies, I listened with intent to Mr. Yamada as he talked about his organization which had won the Deming Prize two years earlier. One sentence stood out among all the others: “The Spa Resort Hawaiian was born from the Joban Coal Mining Company.” I immediately sat up. My brain started firing questions to my conscious mind. “How could this be? How could a coal mining company transform itself into an award-winning resort and indoor water park, the first of its kind on Japanese soil? And, why would it need to do so?”

The impetus for the change actually was quite simple. As leaders looked toward the future that their children’s children would embrace, they realized there eventually would be no more coal to mine. Deciding to capitalize upon the hot springs that sprung up from underground – a real issue when mining – and the vast amount of land that it owned, it transformed itself — with the same staff that had been working for the company in other capacities.

What about your organization? Do its leaders and staff take the time to immerse themselves in the future that their children’s children might face within your walls? Or are they mired in the immediacies of the issues that confront them? Let’s face it, times have changed. It’s easy to get consumed by the ever-increasing challenges — from the board, your members, your financial institution and other constituents — that you face on a daily basis.

But if you continue to do what you’ve always done, you’ll continue to get what you’ve always gotten — and in this economy, it’s likely that your organization’s key metrics will spiral downward at a good clip — or, at best, maintain themselves. Even good strategic planning approaches often neglect the most important precept of strategic thinking: First you must immerse yourself in the future — the long-term future — to be able to grasp insights on how best to respond in today’s world. You need to figure out how to create meaning from all the uncertainties, trends and postulations that are on the horizon but in reality have already begun. And stop analyzing and breaking apart the data and learn to synthesize the thousands of pieces of information about the future into breakthroughs that will catapult your organization forward.

While extrapolating today's data toward the future might get you a few incremental improvements, it won't get you the sort of innovations that are needed to survive and thrive during the next 15 to 20 years. And investing today's hard dollars in new member services, branding initiatives, marketing activities and the like may get you some immediate gains, but if they are grounded in current ways of thinking they too will wane over time.

If you really want your organization to succeed, so your children's children and those of your current members may enjoy its benefits, then you need to find a way to get the board and your members to engage in strategic thinking activities. Can you afford to delay this work any longer?

As a strategist, Lori L. Silverman has helped numerous associations and association management firms achieve success through strategic thinking initiatives. View her work at <http://www.partnersforprogress.com>. She may be reached at (800) 253-6398 or lori@partnersforprogress.com. To learn more about strategic thinking and to spread the message about its importance, watch Silverman's vodcast on the Forum's YouTube Channel [here](#).