

# Rebound!

*"In the long-run, members will judge their organization for how it responded."*

**Bob Harris, CAE, May 2020**

I asked an elected president of a large association how she felt about serving during the pandemic. She answered, "This is a great opportunity. It takes real leadership by our team to get through this and make the organization even better. We are ready!"

Her example should influence America's 150,000 associations and 7,000 chambers of commerce.

Most organization's report they are surviving and even thriving. Though a few have reported bankruptcy.

Associations are adapting, evolving into new organizations. They have rallied the forces to position themselves as *indispensable partners to members and trusted resources*.

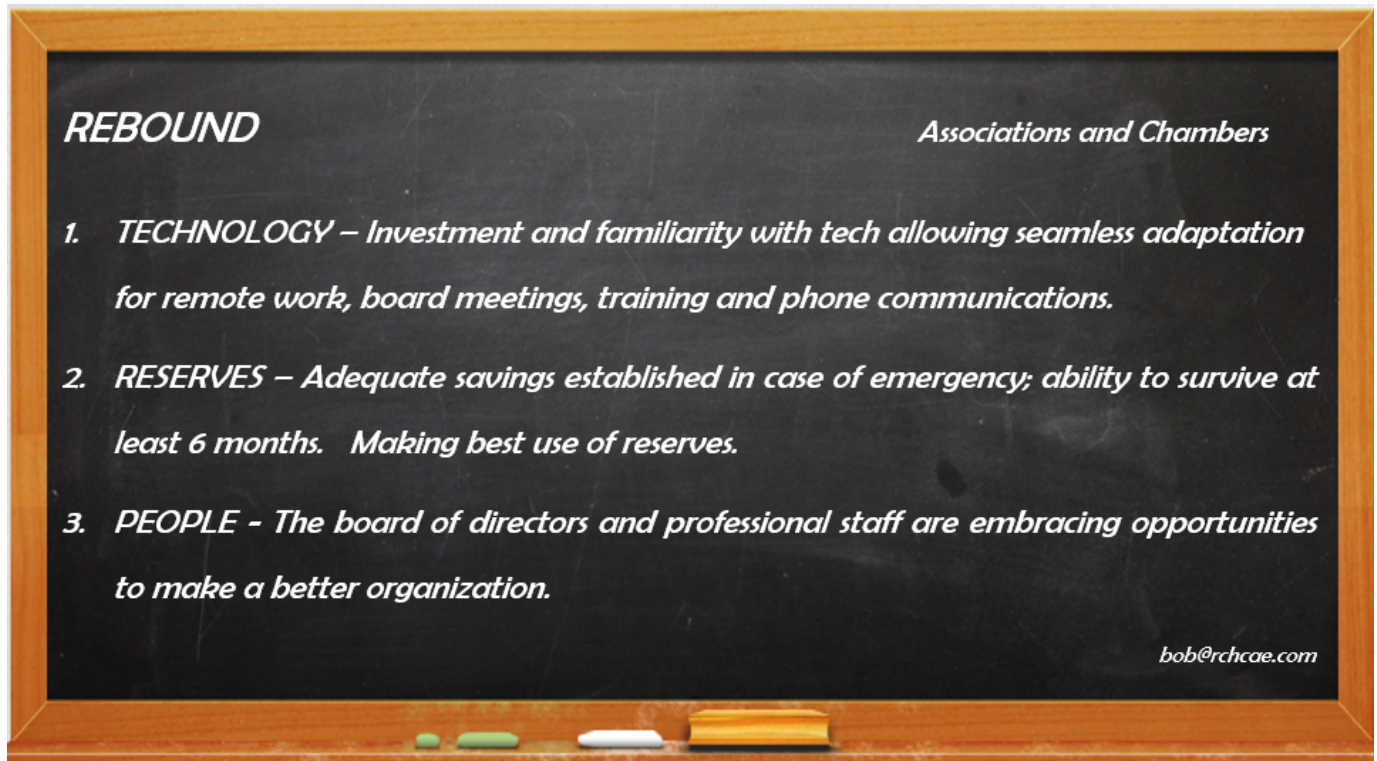


## Success Formula

I analyzed the success of the organizations that were well positioned at the onset of the pandemic. Three principles are obvious:

- ✓ **TECHNOLOGY** – They had already invested in technology. They had familiarity with the technology and platforms, allowing seamless adaptation for remote working, board and committee meetings, training, and communications. They were prepared for the challenge.
- ✓ **RESERVES** – The association built enough savings to survive for at least six months if an emergency occurred. As programs and income was postponed, the leadership knew they could tap the reserves without damaging the organization and the strength of its staffing.
- ✓ **PEOPLE** – The volunteer leadership stepped to the plate. They saw the opportunities to position the organization, serve the membership and better the organization. Staff worked hard, remotely, to maintain an effective association. The board of directors and professional staff are embracing opportunities to make a better organization.

## Rebound Plan



Rebound is a verb meaning to recover from a setback or frustration. It requires a process to rebound.

Approach recovery systematically. Coordinate the team of staff, board, and committees. Establish a short-term mission of sustaining the organization while delivering value to members. Chances are the association will undergo lasting transformation for the good.

The crisis has resulted in making association improvements, some necessary and others natural. For example, traveling to quarterly meetings and the associated costs may be reduced with remote governance, achieving similar results. Dropping under-performing activities to redirect resources to what members need the most.

Create a document, a program of work or “battle plan.” Muster the people and the resources. Inform stakeholders how the organization is taking positive steps for a rebound.

## LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

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**Board Meetings** – Most boards meet quarterly. Determine if more frequent and focused meetings are needed at this time. Empower the executive committee and authorize the executive director to make decisions within their purview. Revamp meeting agendas to be shorter by foregoing the lengthy reports. Rules of order may have to be relaxed or emergency rules adopted.

**Document Decisions** – In urgent situations, decisions may have to be made without the full board present. Document all decisions and rationale to be transparent with members and the board of directors. It may be easier to ask for forgiveness than to seek permission during a crisis.

**Efficient** – You do not have to be first, but you must show progress. Members will find other resources if they don't have confidence in the association.

Delaying recovery efforts in hopes that "things will be better next month" is a bad tactic. Don't let the pandemic paralyze the team. Position the



association as the trusted resource for recovery. The delivery of information and responsiveness to members become a valued member service. Maintain a speed that demonstrates the association is working diligently.

**Triage** – To triage is to determine the best treatment options for the seriousness of the situation. For example, budgeting may be more important than publishing. As a team, set the priorities and continually evaluate.

**Advocacy** – The association knows best the pain and needs of members. Government relations should continue. You may have to advocate for tax relief, incentives, relaxation of laws and being designated as "essential." Be the members' primary advocate. Find innovative ways to get your message to lawmakers during times of quarantine and a lack of public meetings.

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**Leadership** – Unite the team, everyone will have a hand in the process. Decide which teams are best for varied projects, for example the treasurer will study



finances to write a contingency budget while the technology committee will enhance meeting capabilities. Be strategic and innovative. The board will prioritize objectives with the executive director, while committees tackle specific areas. As always, staff will manage. The pandemic does not open the door to micromanagement by

volunteers. Set a clear vision of outcomes, timeline, and responsibilities.

**Committees** – Revamp the committee structure. Appoint strike forces and quick action teams for urgent tasks. Enable and rely on them to supplement board and staff efforts for recovery.

**Bylaws** – The bylaws and polices frame board processes. They may have to be relaxed for a period. For example, elections will be delayed, the nomination process interrupted. Current directors may need to serve an extended term. Find leadership by calling on past presidents. Prescribed dates for nominations, budgeting and the annual meeting should need to be adjusted. Work with legal counsel and know your state statutes.

## MESSAGING

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**Public Relations** – Identify who speaks for the organization. Avoid misinformation and rumors spread by volunteers or staff. An association should summarize and recap how information applied to members. Decide on frequency of messaging. Do not regurgitate news of the virus. By now the position on the website for virus updates should change from a website front-page flashing banner to simply a resource tab. Revise the organization’s “elevator speech” describing its founding, purpose, impact and how it is helping members and the community.

**Collaborate** – Position the organization to have a seat at the table for recovery phases. Because associations are good conveners and know all the stakeholders, this is the time to lead and develop a comprehensive recovery plan.



**Publications** – Use all channels of communication to reach audiences. This may be the time to transition from printed to digital publications. It can be difficult to eliminate publications because some members prefer printed copies. Let this be a catalyst to review and revamp the impact of publications.

**Polling** – Poll members and stakeholders about challenges. Identify who is lead recovery efforts. Share the resources and best practices. Reach out to other organizations to coordinate more powerful advocacy and recovery.

**Communicate** – Members want to rely on their association as their credible source. Set up webinar updates, virtual town halls, breakfast meetings and “happy hours” to encourage members to share and empathize. Transform webinar meeting from boring talking heads or PowerPoint presentations to platforms for dialog and hope.

## BUDGETING

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**Contingency** – Review the approved annual budget. Adjustments will be made for cancelled programs or sponsorships effected. Maintain a positive outlook, this is not a slash and burn exercise. Create a contingency budget to monitor the second half of 2020.

**Reserves** – The general principle for reserve savings is to maintain an amount equal to half of the annual budget. This is the time to use reserves. When one executive offered to cut back the staff, the board said “No, we should use the reserves to ensure the association’s most important asset remains intact.”



**Repurpose the Foundation** – If there is a subsidiary foundation focused primarily on education, ask its board to add “pandemic recovery” to their mission. Inform members that the foundation has expanded to serve their needs with grants, waivers, and support. Some associations have used their foundation to collect resources to offer employee hardship resources.

**Stimulus** – Government stimulus packages may provide varied means of support. Associations and chambers, and their foundations, are often good administrators of programs. Be vigilant and ask your CPA to monitor availability from local, state, and federal officials.

**Purposeful Abandonment** – To control expenses, identify activities, events and services that may no longer have value. Programs that no longer aligned with the mission, and those usurping the resources of time, committees, staff, and funds, should be scrutinized.

## MEMBERSHIP

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**Dues** – Anticipate member hardships. Be proactive about extending dues, offering added value, providing grants and waivers. There may be supplier members willing to “gift” a 3, 6, or 12-month extension to members struggling for survival. Position the association as the indispensable resource --- in turn improving member recruitment. Do not let the crisis dismantle years of building a successful membership. This could be the best time for membership recruitment in some organizations.



**Value Proposition** – Communicate the association’s value. Members must be assured the association is strong and the programs remain in place. If the value proposition is weak, use this time to assess programs and better communicate the return on dues investment through a dues’ value calculator. Don’t let programs such as education and member support suffer because 100 percent of the team is focused on recovery; maintain a balance of programming for members and recovery.

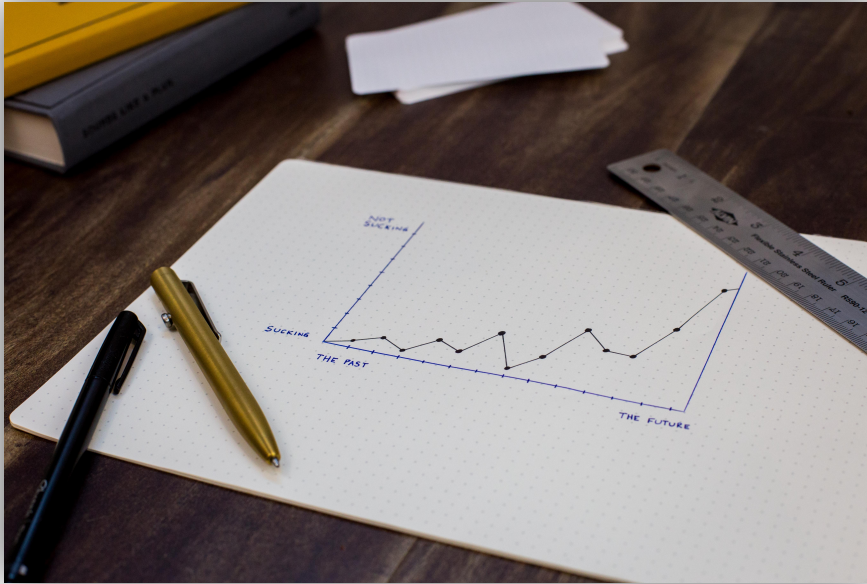
**Opportunities** – Listen closely to member needs, questions, and postings. Transform their challenges into opportunities. For example, they may need a guide to “socially remote” customer service, or information how to improve on-line sales. The association has the expertise and resources to transform challenges into member benefits.



## STRATEGIZING AND PLANNING

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**Strategic Plan** – The existing plan covering several years may need to be put on “pause.” While a board should remain strategic, setting a vision for years ahead, during the crisis they will have to think short term (2020.)



### **2020 Plan of Action** –

While pausing the longer-term strategic plan, create a plan for 2020's pandemic and economic recovery. The immediate needs will include finances, staffing, management, governance, membership, technology, etc. Create

a template to track assignments, timelines, and performance. It may become your “battle plan” during the crisis.

**Pandemic Impact** – Some associations have “themes” that impact every part of their strategic plan, for instance technology or diversity. You can expect that “pandemic response and readiness” will be a theme woven into your future strategic plans.

## OPERATIONS

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**All Clear** – Wait for the government all-clear signal before returning to meetings and the association office. Take abundant precautions to protect people. You may need to purchase face masks and a non-contact thermometer as part of your meeting tools. Listen to government authorities for guidance on the number of people allowed in a group or safe practices. Be prudent about protecting the association staff and members.

**Assess Damage** – Damages may be in the form of cancelled conferences, sponsor abandonments, slowed dues, resigned board members, etc. Assess the impacts and find solutions. Rely on the counsel of your insurance, legal and accounting professionals.

**Restart** – While working away from the office, processes such as maintenance contracts, cleaning services, consultant agreements, website renewals, and government filings may have lapsed. Review what must be restarted to return to an efficient organization. Some contracts may need to be adjusted or repurposed.

**Staffing** – Staff may have suffered; remote work and fear of job loss is awkward. Tend to their well-being. Offer support to get them reengaged and comfortable in the new work environment. Expect changes in office layouts and operating hours. Update the personnel manual as needed. Flexible work arrangements should be discussed. Search for financial assistance to prevent layoffs.

**Risk Management** – Now is the time to review association risk. There may be claims made for damages. Ask insurance counsel about upping coverages where it may have been lacking. Consider pandemic impact; does the association have sufficient coverages, written policies, and safeguards?

## RECOVERY

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**Lessons Learned** – Recovery has required creativity. Capture the lessons learned for future preparedness. Create a platform for sharing successes with allied organizations that have struggled.

**Social Responsibility** – Let the association be a platform for sharing, promoting, and capturing the impact of good deeds by members and the organization. The positive impact of the social responsibility will benefit advocacy, public relations, and branding in the long run.

**Celebrate** – Be sure to celebrate milestones and victories. Do not lose sight of the goal of returning the association, and its membership, to a prosperous position. This process will be tiring, be sure to take care of yourself.

Remember, *“In the long-run, members will judge their organization for how it responded.”* This is the time to demonstrate leadership and create a better association.



**Note:** Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at [www.nonprofitcenter.com](http://www.nonprofitcenter.com) (bob@rchcae.com).

Bill Pawlucy, CAE, is president at [www.associationoptions.com](http://www.associationoptions.com) (wpawlucy@associationoptions.com).