

Association Learning Strategy (Sample)

The Foundation of Our Strategy

Our Goals

Association Learning has three main goals that guide its strategy.

1. Raise the baseline knowledge for a large number of organizations so that they can better achieve their mission within a network of nonprofits working together to strengthen their capacities and build connections that solve their communities' most critical issues.
2. Be efficient and effective in covering the vast geography of our state, using local advocates and technology to leverage our resources and partnerships.
3. Demonstrate ASSOCIATION's value both to members and funders through our relevance and innovation.

Our Reality

ASSOCIATION operates within a reality that further defines its strategic choices.

- Our state has 30,000 nonprofits, many of them small without professionalized staff needing nonprofit basics.
- Our state has an unequal distribution of "experts" with most in one part of the state. We are still identifying the "experts" in other parts of the state.
- Many companies and consultants are trying to access nonprofits for marketing; the quality of these training opportunities varies.
- ASSOCIATION has a small staff, depending on technology and advocates across state to reach a broad cross section of nonprofit people.

Learning philosophy

The design of ASSOCIATION learning programs is based on adult learning research.

- Lessons "stick" better when knowledge acquisition is followed by application of that knowledge, preferably within a peer group or coaching experience.
- People are motivated to learn when they understand the learning outcomes towards which they are working and have a structure that guides their learning.
- Adult learners seek relevance in two ways. First, any training they attend must relate to their goals and interests, making an emphasis on application of knowledge important. Second, they want to see increased impact because of the training they invest in, highlighting the importance of pathways that connect nonprofit knowledge to the cause they care about.
- Lessons can be learned separately from the application of those lessons. Given limited time, the role of the trainer or convener can shift from teacher to facilitator as participants apply what they learn to their own situation.
- Modern technology can provide students access to all sorts of training that they cannot access in person within their community.
- Micro-learning can teach simple lessons in bite-size pieces.

What We Know About Our Audiences

ASSOCIATION designs its programs around the needs of typical nonprofit staff and volunteers.

- Most nonprofits are small, heavily dependent on volunteers (including board members), and most of these nonprofits have little to no professional development funds.
- At the same time, there are many mid- to large-sized nonprofits that need support to become more sustainable, particularly those in more rural parts of the state.
- Board members are key to a nonprofit's success, and board members are volunteers with limited time to focus on board work and nonprofit learning.

Design Priorities

Based on our reality and what we know to be true around our target audience and how best to educate them, ASSOCIATION is building a learning strategy that highlights these design priorities:

- High quality: ASSOCIATION will provide learning experiences that meet clear quality standards.
- Sequential content: ASSOCIATION will provide pathways that connect the needs of local communities with defined learning outcomes that help nonprofit staff and volunteers progress from basic to proficient knowledge. These pathways will lead small isolated nonprofits from an entry point (webinar? local training?) to a nonprofit network, and through collaboration between Association Learning and Public Policy, to opportunities to work collectively around an issue of community interest.
- Differentiated learning modes: ASSOCIATION will create and support learning opportunities that are multi-modal in nature, reflecting the different needs and realities of different nonprofit people. Recognizing that there is no cookie cutter approach and that people learn at different paces, ASSOCIATION will provide resources and recommendations for how to use them that can be used in ways that work for the user.
- Technology: ASSOCIATION will expand the appropriate use of technology in ways that expands access to learning across our state and builds out a library of content based on existing webinars and new grant-funded initiatives. We can re-purpose this content and use it in different formats over time.
- Networks: ASSOCIATION will expand its support of networks, re-purposing content to expand audiences and provide

Proposed Strategy

Association Learning Strategy

The structure of Association Learning's Strategy is based on six elements:

1. Solid Foundation: Knowledge about the state and its regions from research and regional dashboards
2. Defined Framework: Core curriculum and quality standards
3. Understood Audiences: Busy staff and boards of small to mid-sized orgs, primarily
4. Strategic partnerships: Key state-wide partners and local "gate openers"
5. Differentiated learning: 3 tiers that leverage networks and technology
6. Measured impact: Rubrics for learning and overall impact measures

Action Plan

Expanding on these six elements, ASSOCIATION has many of the pieces already in place to pull together in support of this strategy.

Building a Solid Foundation & Defined Framework

ASSOCIATION has created core curriculum on boards, finance, law, and strategic planning.

- Expand pathways that connect existing resources.
- Further refine and implement quality standards.

Understanding our Audiences

ASSOCIATION has participated in sector research, giving us some baseline data in the operations of nonprofits in our state.

- Implement surveys (sector survey, member survey, event surveys) that continue to keep us current on the needs and interests on nonprofit staff and volunteers.
- Gather qualitative/anecdotal stories during in-person events, telling these stories internally to strengthen our collective understanding of whom we serve.

Strengthening our Strategic Partnerships

ASSOCIATION has strong partnerships at the national, state, and local levels. Focusing on those key strategic partnerships that could leverage significant impact for ASSOCIATION is a priority moving forward.

- Focus on strategic partners with similar state-wide focus
- Focus on regional "gate opener" partners and learning "nodes": Community Foundations, local nonprofit networks
- Focus on key content partners in each subject area

Offering Differentiated Learning

ASSOCIATION generates a substantial amount of content through its programming. It obtains high quality resources from speakers, and it produces high quality talks through its webinar series. Most of these resources are never used after that event is over. Capturing this content and finding ways to repurpose it, with permission, will expand access, create

efficiencies, and eventually elevate ASSOCIATION into the go-to organization for nonprofit training.

- Capture existing on-line learning; archive it to open up opportunities for re-purposing (continued access, use within nonprofit networking events)
- Expand on-line learning options, particularly in core areas (board, finance, communications/advocacy)
- Implement in-person trainings in close collaboration with ASSOCIATION team to build networking, offer membership options, expand on-line communities
- Build out resources for nonprofit networks, using resources above.

Measuring Impact

ASSOCIATION lacks an evaluation system that measures whether its programs are having an impact over time. We lack a system for measuring influence. We stand ready to build those out into a simple evaluation tool that helps us to evaluate how our efforts lead to increased impact within communities.

- Create a pilot project that introduces evaluation tools (surveys, training assessment, rubrics, dashboards) that measure knowledge and skills gained through events, membership, nonprofit networks, and on-going training.
- Explore how to make an evaluation connection between Association Learning and Public Policy, namely how to connect the impact of trainings on changes in indicators related to policy decisions and eventually to community health.

Key Choices

ASSOCIATION has some key choices to make in order to implement this strategy:

- Prioritization of small to mid-size organizations and their boards in terms of program development and implementation
- Balance between small nonprofits who lack support and large nonprofits that bring in more general operating support through membership dollars
- Level of investment in technology
- Level of intra-organization collaboration or commitment to integration across program areas
- Investment in outside expert to produce effective evaluation tools for programs