

# What Kind of Change Does Your Chamber Need—a Revolution or an Evolution?



Over the last few years, we've heard countless rants about how chambers of commerce are becoming obsolete, losing relevance, and are seen as the archaic "old boys' club" of our grandfathers' time that has passed the time of glory. "We need to change" has been the mantra of the last decade.

Something Mick Fleming, President of the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE), stated in one of his holiday quick e-mail messages really stuck with me. He said something akin to, "Chambers don't need a revolution; they need an evolution." Mick has always said that relevancy wasn't really the industry's problem. And he's right that although all chambers are "relevant" to their communities, they are all not considered "essential." The markets we serve and the perceived value we offer determines our essentialism.

So enough of all the ranting about whether chambers are relevant; maybe we should focus on what kind of change is really needed. I have worked with several chambers around the country over the last three years as a result of "change" initiatives being directed by the Chairman of the Board or President of the Chamber. Much of the time, the initiatives are predicated by new leadership or concerns over shrinking membership and revenue. Our initial conversation may start off with, "We need to make some changes and take a hard look at what we offer—our membership model, our programs, and our internal structure." And then what follows is a deep-dive into evaluating the "As Is" before deciding what the Chamber "Should Be" or "Could Be."

Lately, I've spent some time thinking about what these executives are seeking. It's more than just "change" for the sake of it; it's almost a search for "What's Next for Us?" Maybe there's a tremor in the industry calling out for a revolution when all we really seek is evolution.

## Revolutionary and Evolutionary Change



With a change in leadership or members demanding more ROI for their investment—it certainly feels like a revolution is in order. If costs are out of control or the Chamber leadership or members think that the organization has "lost its way," then maybe revolutionary change is in order for now.

If external factors influenced by trends such as technology, generational values, and market preferences are driving the need for change, then maybe chambers should respond through evolution. But not the type of evolution that is imposed on us as

depicted by [Simon Kneebone's](#) illustration (*he really is a good illustrator who can capture themes*). We need to invest in 'strategic evolution' that is driven by the organization rather than one that is forced upon us.

## Strategic Evolution Occurs Through Foresight

Strategic evolution is the key to essentialism for the chamber industry and for-profit businesses alike. Yet, most organizations practice long-term strategic planning which fails to make them competitive. Long-term planning amidst constant external change is ineffective, as George Beaton pointed out in his [Business Review Weekly article](#). Strategic planning without foresight is meaningless.

Strategic foresight comes before strategic planning—[it is future-based rather than on current reality](#). Foresight requires a combination of *hindsight*, *insight* and *forecasting*. If you're familiar with scenario planning, you'll understand the correlation. Although environmental scanning is conducted as part of strategic planning (e.g., membership feedback, economic conditions, local/regional statistics and historical trends), it rarely encompasses megatrends or driving influences that impact at a macro level than just on the local economy. Much of the time, strategic planning is focused on the present environment which is projected forward in a 3-5 year document.

Foresight takes a very different approach by considering what the future environment may be like and then developing strategies to employ in the present time. You foresee what may be coming and plan for it now. Get a sense of how that works in Scott Yorkovich's article in [Leadership Advance Online](#).

So, how does your Chamber start practicing foresight? Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Continue collecting feedback from your members on their challenges, the value of the benefits you provide, what other resources they use, and “what’s missing” for them (*hindsight activity*)
- Reach out to non-members and learn how they perceive your organization, how they currently function without you (successfully or not), and “what’s missing” as accessible resources for them (*hindsight activity*)
- Study the evolution of macro trends and how they are changing the global business market and the community you serve (*hindsight and insight activity*)
- Ask Big Questions (a scenario planning tool, learn more and read the book, [A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas](#)) to help identify and solve constituents' problems, come up with game-changing ideas, and pursue fresh opportunities (*insight and foresight activity*)
- Conduct a Foresight Session with a diverse group of leaders to consider how macro trends will impact your area and how the Chamber might play a pivotal role in driving positive outcomes.
- Convene the next strategic planning session after these other activities are completed and create the Chamber's plan of action. Do these activities every three years. (*foresight activity*)

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