

ASSOCIATION
INSIGHTS
CENTER

Strategic Guide to Building and Sustaining Community for Association Success


How to Use this Deck

Use this deck as a strategic resource and guide tailored for CEOs and C-Suite executives, and by extension, staff and Board members. It serves as a tool to guide leaders in building and sustaining dynamic communities to drive association success and impact.

This deck is provided by ASAE in partnership with

 **McKinley**Advisors

What is the Association Insights Center?

A community of experts collaborating to face the increasingly complex environment and challenges ahead. In partnership with  **McKinley** Advisors the AIC provides critical, on-demand intelligence and tools to support association CEOs as they face the tough decisions yet to come.

The slides that follow provide a synthesis of the community's work in 2025 to support CEOs in leveraging community for strategic advancement.

2024 - 2025 AIC Thought Leadership Panel



Preet Bassi, CAE	Center for Public Safety Excellence Inc
Philip K. Bell, CAE	Steel Manufacturers Association
Sid Bhatnagar	American Society for Quality
Paul D. Bishop, CAE	Water Professionals International
Adonia Calhoun Groom, CAE	Renal Physicians Association
Wayne Chopus	Insured Retirement Institute
John E. Courtney, Ph.D.	American Society for Nutrition
Vicki Deal-Williams, FASAE, CAE	American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
Mike DePrisco	Institute of Management Accountants
Michael Desiderio	Executive MBA Council
Amy Schabacker Dufrane, Ed.D, SPHR, CAE	HR Certification Institute
James R. Flanigan, CAE	American Society for Clinical Laboratory Science
Tina C. Gordon, CAE	North Carolina Nurses Association
Melanie Gottlieb, CAE	American Association of Collegiate Registrars & Admissions Officers
Matt Haller	International Franchise Association
Terri Hinkley, EdD, MBA, BSN, RN, CAE	National Association of School Nurses
Jon Hymes	American Optometric Association

2024 - 2025 AIC Thought Leadership Panel



Sharon H. Kneebone, IOM, FASAE, CAE

American Academy of Pain Medicine

David Labuskes, CAE

AVIXA

Janice R. Lachance Esq., FASAE

American Geophysical Union

Denise A. LeDuc Froemming, MBA, CPA, CAE

California Society of CPAs & CalCPA Education Foundation

Adam Levy, CAE

American Cleft Palate Craniofacial Association

Michelle I. Mason, FASAE, CAE

ASAE

Patricia Montague, FASAE, CAE

School Nutrition Association

Bob Moore, FASAE, CAE

American College of Osteopathic Family Physicians

Brian T. Pallasch, CAE

International Institute of Building Enclosure Consultants

Mary E. Post, MBA, CAE

American Academy of Neurology

Denise Roosendaal, FASAE, CAE

Institute for Credentialing Excellence

Joe R Sapp, CAE

Talley Management Group, Inc

Jennifer M. Schlener

Association of American Medical Colleges

Angela Schnepf, MBA, CAE

LeadingAge Illinois

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, ICE-CCP, IOM, FASAE, CAE

Pediatric Nursing Certification Board

Cara Woodson Welch, Esq.

Public Sector HR Association

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Community Engagement as a Strategic Driver

ASAE's AIC research shows that 90% of association executives view community as essential to their mission, yet many leaders face persistent challenges demonstrating return on community investment, embedding community across organizational silos, and integrating it into a broader ecosystem of member engagement and value creation.

This guide provides strategic insights and actionable recommendations to help association CEOs and Boards:

- Quantify the value and impact of community investments
- Embed community leadership across organizational functions
- Position community as a driver of organizational ecosystems

The Business Case for Community Investment

“If a company can transition from simply delivering a product to building a community, it can unlock extraordinary competitive advantages” (Bussgang & Bacon, 2020).

Community Drives Strategic Outcomes

Strong communities contribute significantly to:

- Professional networking and relationships
- Membership engagement
- Retention and renewal
- Mission advancement

Bussgang, J., & Bacon, J. (2020). When community becomes your competitive advantage. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/01/when-community-becomes-your-competitive-advantage>

Why is Community Strategically Important?

- Membership growth and retention (frequently mentioned as primary ROI)
- Professional identity development
- Information exchange that advances the field
- Alignment on important issues and advocacy positions

Each of these are foundational for the overall success of the association.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”— Margaret Mead

The Cost of Disengagement and the Case for Community Investment

What happens when members, staff, or boards feel disconnected?

- Disengaged members are more likely to lapse.
- Disconnected staff lead to lower productivity and higher turnover.
- Boards that lack community connection may lose strategic focus.

Underinvestment is real—half of leaders say they invest too little, and only 30% of associations have dedicated staff for community. To prevent disengagement and drive strategic outcomes, community-building must be a funded priority, not an afterthought.

Building Sticky, High-Value Communities: Lessons from the Private Sector

While civic and association membership is declining, **the desire for community is thriving in new forms**. Leading companies like [Salesforce](#), [Harley-Davidson](#), and [Codecademy](#) are showing how strategic, purpose-driven communities can become core to growth, innovation, and sustainability. Associations must evolve from being service providers to being community platforms, where members co-create value and meaning. **Rather than viewing community simply as “engagement,” associations should treat it as a core engine for growth and value**—by creating low-barrier, high-value opportunities for members to connect, contribute, and grow together.

Modern communities are thriving, organized around shared purpose, identity, and value creation.

Business-led communities drive loyalty through emotional connection, mission alignment, and peer support.

Community “stickiness” comes from shared values, progress toward common goals, and a sense of belonging.

Community models support scalability by lowering acquisition costs, increasing retention, and enabling member-driven support and education.

Bussgang, J., & Bacon, J. (2020). *When community becomes your competitive advantage*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/01/when-community-becomes-your-competitive-advantage>

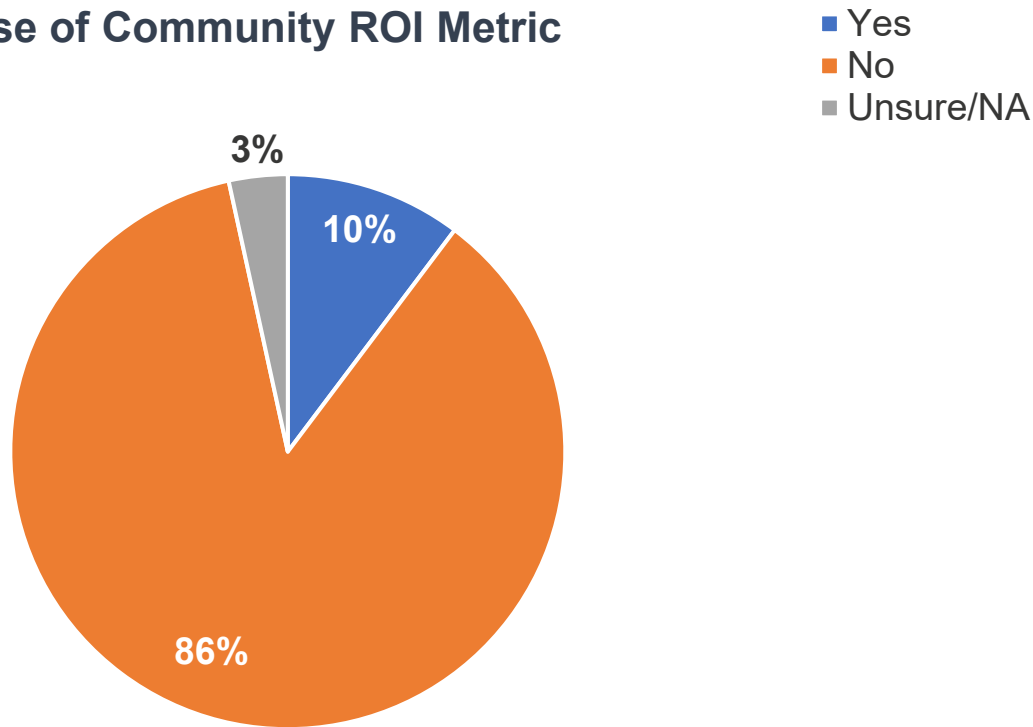
Strategic Priorities for Building and Sustaining Community

Strategic Priority	What to Do	Why It Matters
Reimagine Community	Define a clear, shared purpose and core values for your community. Embed these into everything from messaging to programming.	Shared purpose fuels belonging and loyalty—critical for retention and relevance.
Design for Co-Creation	Build easy ways for members to contribute content, lead events, mentor peers.	Members who co-create stay longer and recruit others.
Reward Meaningful Participation	Recognize and celebrate contributions publicly—through leadership roles, spotlights, and/or digital badges.	Recognition reinforces behavior and builds identity, pride, and a sense of ownership.
Embed Community Leadership Across the Organization	Create a community team or position to lead community strategy, operations, and measurement. Also, establish community leadership roles across departments (e.g., learning, advocacy, marketing) to integrate strategy and execution.	Community thrives when embedded into multiple touchpoints—this breaks silos and builds collective ownership. Community doesn't scale without operational support.
Quantify Community's Strategic Value	Measure impact in terms of retention, satisfaction, and business outcomes; report to the board regularly.	Boards fund what's measurable. Linking community to KPIs builds investment confidence.

How Association CEOs Are Measuring Community ROI Today

The vast majority do not have a way of measuring community's ROI. Those who use ROI metrics utilize surveys, NPS, and membership renewal.

Use of Community ROI Metric



Examples of ROI calculation (n=14) include the following:

- Score of annual surveys, participation in events
- Retention rates
- Net Promoter Score tied to community activities
- Membership, attendance at events, forum engagement
- Homes/families who we have helped is calculated
- Cost of community/number of members engaged
- Not just one metric - several outcome measures that attribute to a strong community. Membership recruitment and retention, event participation, levels and numbers of members willing to engage in leadership, financial
- Membership renewal
- Participation in community activities

How Should We Measure the Strategic Impact of Our Association’s Community?

What strategic outcome do we want to demonstrate?



Grow Membership



Deepen Member Engagement



Increase Revenue/ Value



Advance Mission



Can we compare this to a control group or benchmark?

Yes

No

Consider an experiment and use industry benchmarks

Use directional metrics that show trend over time

Goal	Directional Metric
Grow membership	New members attributed to community referrals
Deepen engagement	Active participation rate, satisfaction
Increase revenue/ value	Revenue from community-driven programs or retention
Advance mission	# of initiatives launched, policy impact, idea volume

Adapted from <https://www.feverbee.com/perfect-community-metric/>

Proposed Metrics for Measuring ROI on Association Community Investment

Member Growth & Engagement

Measures how the community drives participation and member retention.

Member Retention and Growth

- Tracked by: Active users, repeat visits, member referrals, and new sign-ups
- ROI Signals: Sustained participation and increased membership

Enhanced Member Engagement and Participation

- Tracked by: Event attendance, discussions, shared resources and content
- ROI Signals: Rich peer interaction and meaningful member contributions

Increase Revenue and Value

Reflects how community drives learning, growth, and professional opportunity.

Resource Sharing and Professional Development

- Tracked by: Peer mentoring, learning exchanges, content contributions
- ROI Signals: Scalable, member-led learning and professional growth

Business Development and Professional Opportunities

- Tracked by: Professional referrals, networking outcomes, event visibility
- ROI Signals: New leads, career exposure, and partnerships

Advance Mission

Measures how community fosters shared identity and amplifies collective influence.

Professional Identity and Collective Purpose

- Tracked by: Alignment in conversations, peer recognition, shared language and values
- ROI Signals: Strengthened sense of belonging and clarity of role in the profession

Advocacy and Unified Voice

- Tracked by: Member-driven initiatives, coalition-building, aligned policy messaging
- ROI Signals: Greater field visibility and increased policy influence

Discussion Questions for the CEO When Assessing Community Investment

CEO questions focus on strategic execution, measurement, and organizational leadership.

How well are we currently resourcing community-building efforts (e.g., across staff, budget, and technology)?

What metrics or ROI signals do we currently track to assess the impact of our community? What's missing?

Are we leveraging community to advance core strategic goals—like member growth, retention, revenue, or mission impact?

What barriers—cultural, structural, or technological—are limiting engagement or scalability in our community efforts?

How are we preparing to evolve our community model for hybrid, digital-first, and next-generation members?

Discussion Questions for the Board When Assessing Community Investment

Board questions focus on strategic oversight, investment prioritization, and governance

Do we believe community is central to advancing our mission? If so, are we funding and prioritizing it accordingly?

What are the risks if we underinvest in community, especially in terms of member disengagement or retention loss?

How do we stay connected to the voice of our members and the communities we serve?

How do we know if our community investments are working? Are we asking the right questions around impact?

What would success look like if we double down on community over the next 2-3 years?

Community Strategy and Leadership

Community leadership requires more than management—it demands vision. From Boards to frontline staff, a strategic mindset is necessary to move from 'managing engagement' to 'driving transformation.' When community is treated as an investment, not an activity, it shapes retention, innovation, and organizational culture.

“We’ve seen a precipitous decline in participation in civic organizations in recent years; membership numbers are down for religious groups, labor organizations and non-profits. A cynic could interpret these trends as a sign that we have all become digital hermits, with our noses buried in our highly personalized screens. **The reality is that powerful communities are not just alive and well but also booming. They just look different than they did 50—even 20—years ago.** They are organized around businesses and brands and providing profound opportunities for companies around the world.”

Bussgang, J., & Bacon, J. (2020). *When community becomes your competitive advantage*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/01/when-community-becomes-your-competitive-advantage>

From Valuing Community to Operationalizing It

The AIC survey reveals that while associations clearly value community, many are still working to:

1. Develop formal strategies and metrics for community development
2. Find the right balance of in-person and virtual engagement opportunities
3. Create specialized communities while avoiding fragmentation
4. Right-size staff involvement to support community without overtaking it
5. Integrate community goals into broader strategic objectives

Operationalizing Community as a Shared Responsibility

Responsibility	CEO Role	Board Role
Strategy	Position community as a core driver of organization strategy. Embed it into planning as a function that advances mission and member value, and shape structure, staffing, and resources to support it as a strategic asset.	Reinforce community as a strategic imperative. Champion its role in long-term planning, structural decisions, and budget priorities. Ensure the board consistently evaluates how community contributes to mission delivery and future growth.
Investment	Allocate staff and budget. Designate a dedicated team or cross-functional leads to build and sustain community. Ensure operational resources—platforms, tools, and staff time—are in place to meet goals.	Approve and champion strategic funding. Support multi-year investment in community infrastructure (not just one-off initiatives). Use the budget process to reinforce that community is a priority, not an afterthought. Actively advocate for investment with fellow board members.
Measurement	Track ROI and engagement. Set clear metrics (e.g., participation rates, referrals, retention, satisfaction). Integrate these with other KPIs and report regularly to the board. Translate qualitative insights into strategic learnings.	Review community metrics quarterly. Hold staff accountable for progress and use data to inform future investments. Look for community's impact on strategic goals (e.g., mission advancement, financial health). Ask smart questions about what's working and what isn't.
Culture	Lead internally. Embed community-building into staff culture—reward cross-department collaboration, encourage experimentation, and model transparency and listening. Create a safe environment for member-driven innovation.	Model externally. Demonstrate commitment by participating in member events, storytelling, and listening sessions. Encourage a culture of connection across leadership. Help bridge strategy with grassroots engagement by staying visible and accessible.

What Boards Can Do to Champion Community

Embed Community-Building in Strategy & Budget Decisions

Ensure community is prioritized alongside membership, education, and advocacy. Allocate resources to support platforms, staffing, and programs that foster connection and engagement.

Ask Impact-Driven Questions about Community Investments

Probe how community contributes to retention, referrals, innovation, or mission advancement. Challenge the team to clarify ROI, not just activity volume.



Review community performance metrics regularly

Include member participation, satisfaction, and contribution data in board dashboards. Track trends over time and link to strategic priorities.

Demonstrate visible support for member community experiences

Attend events, spotlight member contributions, and listen actively. Reinforce a culture of trust and connection through board presence and actions.

Direct and Indirect Revenue Generation via Community

- Event-Based Revenue
- Sponsor Integration
- Value-Added Community Access
- Project-Based Participation
- Content and Educational Offerings

The AIC survey data suggests successful monetization isn't just about charging for community access but rather creating differentiated value within community experiences that justifies additional investment from members, sponsors, and other stakeholders. The most successful associations appear to balance free community offerings that foster broad engagement with premium experiences that generate revenue while delivering enhanced value.

However, **it's worth noting the survey data also reveals that many associations view community primarily as a driver of membership value and retention rather than as a direct revenue source, with monetization being a secondary benefit when it occurs.**

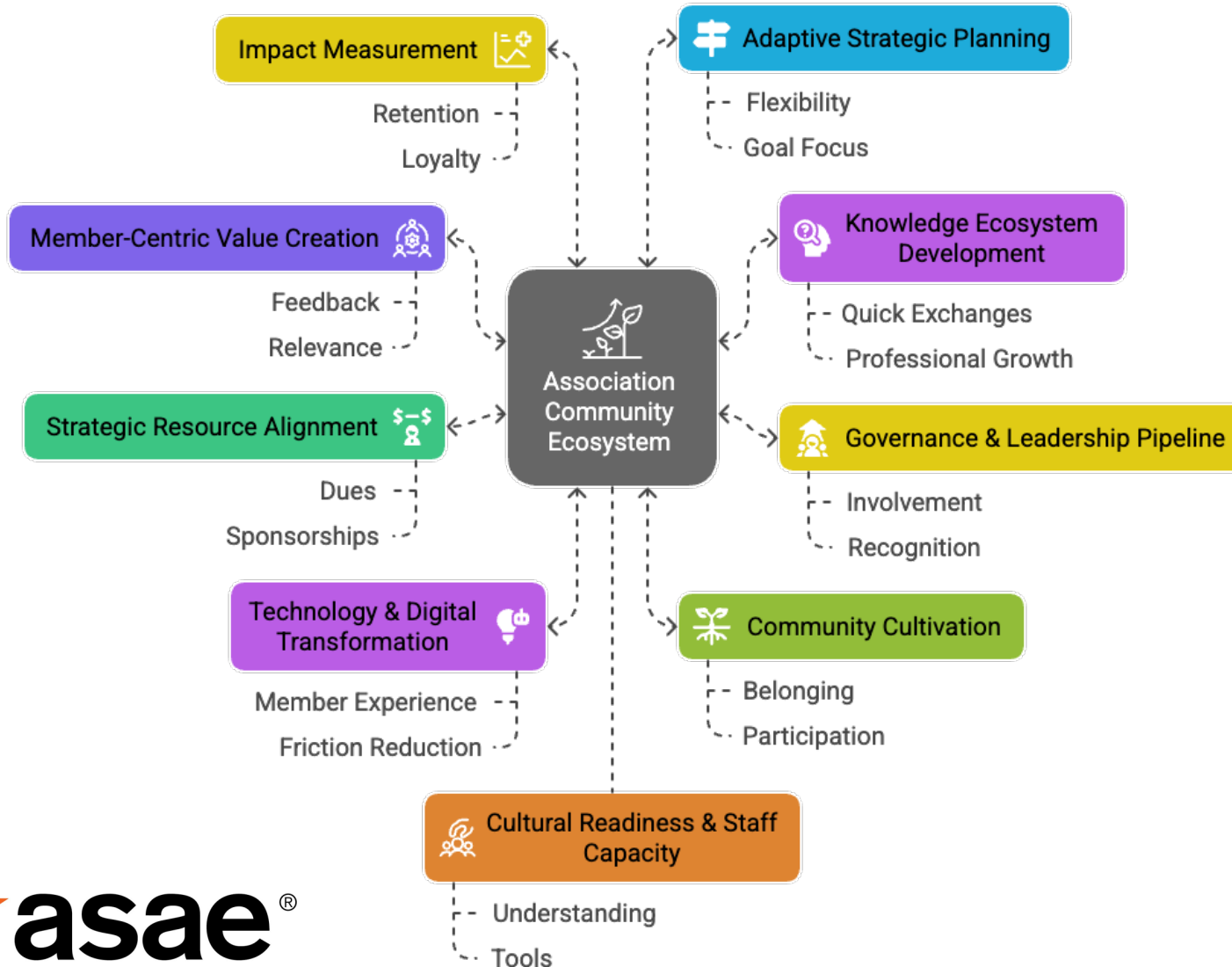
Creating Sustainable Community Growth

Building resilient communities means thinking beyond events and discussion forums. Sustainable growth happens when community is woven into the organization's infrastructure—supported by technology, talent, governance, and culture.

Associations that thrive over time treat community as a living ecosystem:

- Continuously evolving with member needs
- Fueled by data and feedback
- Tied to mission outcomes and strategic goals

The Ecosystem of Sustainable Community Growth



Discussion Questions:

1. If we were to invest in one community initiative this year that directly supports our organizational strategy, what would it be?
2. How can we ensure leadership alignment and resource allocation for its success?

The Ecosystem for Sustainable Community Growth

The most effective associations integrate community functions into a cohesive ecosystem rather than treating them as separate operational silos. This integration enables sustainable growth that strengthens both the organization and its community simultaneously.

- **Member-Centric Value Creation:** Design community experiences that evolve with member needs. Use regular feedback to ensure what you offer is relevant, useful, and rewarding.
- **Knowledge Ecosystem Development:** Create ongoing opportunities for members to learn from one another. Communities should support both quick exchanges and deeper professional growth over time.
- **Governance & Leadership Pipeline:** Give members clear pathways to lead. A strong community includes systems for involvement, recognition, and leadership development.
- **Strategic Resource Alignment:** Treat community as part of your core budget—not a side project. Fund it through your main revenue streams like dues, sponsorships, and special programs.
- **Technology & Digital Transformation:** Use scalable tools that make community easy to access and use. The right tech should improve the member experience and reduce friction.
- **Community Cultivation:** Help members connect in meaningful ways. Build a sense of belonging by designing experiences that make it easy to participate and contribute.
- **Impact Measurement:** Go beyond clicks and pageviews. Track outcomes that matter—like retention, learning, loyalty, and contributions to the field.
- **Adaptive Strategic Planning:** Stay flexible. Community needs change quickly, so your planning should allow for ongoing adjustment while staying focused on your goals.
- **Cultural Readiness & Staff Capacity:** Community success depends on people. Make sure staff across the organization understand their role in supporting community and have the time and tools to do it well.

Overcoming Engagement Barriers

Core Strategies:

- *Flexible Engagement Approaches:* Offer tiered levels of involvement to accommodate diverse schedules and preferences.
- *Adaptive Technology Use:* Leverage familiar, mobile-friendly tools; reduce friction with single sign-on or app integrations.
- *Targeted Strategic Incentives:* Align rewards with meaningful contributions and member values.
- *Organizational Flexibility:* Evolve structures and workflows to support member-driven engagement.



Multiple Entry Points

Offering diverse engagement pathways for varying time commitments



Quality over Quantity

Focusing on meaningful and impactful engagement opportunities



Meeting Members' Needs

Integrating with existing platforms to ease access



Respecting Time

Designing activities that accommodate members' time constraints



Continuous Building

Committing to ongoing community growth and adaptation

Strategies for Managing Community Behaviors



Review the AIC resource on [Navigating Divergent Belief Systems](#) for additional strategies.

CEO & Board Discussion Guide

Use this guide to align the Board and leadership team around shared community priorities.

1. How does our current strategy prioritize member community?
2. What are the most meaningful community experiences we offer?
3. How do we define and track the value of community?
4. Do we have the staff, technology, and budget to support sustained engagement?
5. How is community integrated across functions (e.g., events, education, advocacy)?
6. What high-impact opportunity could we address through community this year?

CEO & Board Discussion Guide

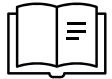
Use this guide to align the Board and leadership team around shared community priorities.



How does our current strategy prioritize member community?



What are the most meaningful community experiences we offer?



How do we define and track the value of community?



Do we have the staff, technology, and budget to support sustained engagement?



How is community integrated across functions (e.g., events, education, advocacy)?



What high-impact opportunity could we address through community this year?

Strategic Community Roadmap for Associations

1. Start with Strategic Alignment

A. Ask the Right Questions

Use the CEO & Board Discussion Guide (slides 16-17) to assess your current state:

- How does community support our mission and strategic priorities?
- What are the most meaningful community experiences we offer?
- Do we have adequate staff, tech, and budget to sustain it?

B. Define Your “North Star” (slide 14)

Select one top-line strategic outcome (e.g., retention, engagement, mission advancement).

3. Equip and Execute

A. Build Capacity Across the Org. Ensure all staff understand their role in community support. Provide tools and time.

B. Use Scalable, Member-Friendly Technology. Prioritize tools that lower friction: SSO, mobile access, integrated platforms.

C. Create Feedback Loops and Adapt. Regularly gather data, assess ROI with metrics like engagement, retention, peer exchange.

2. Prioritize with Purpose

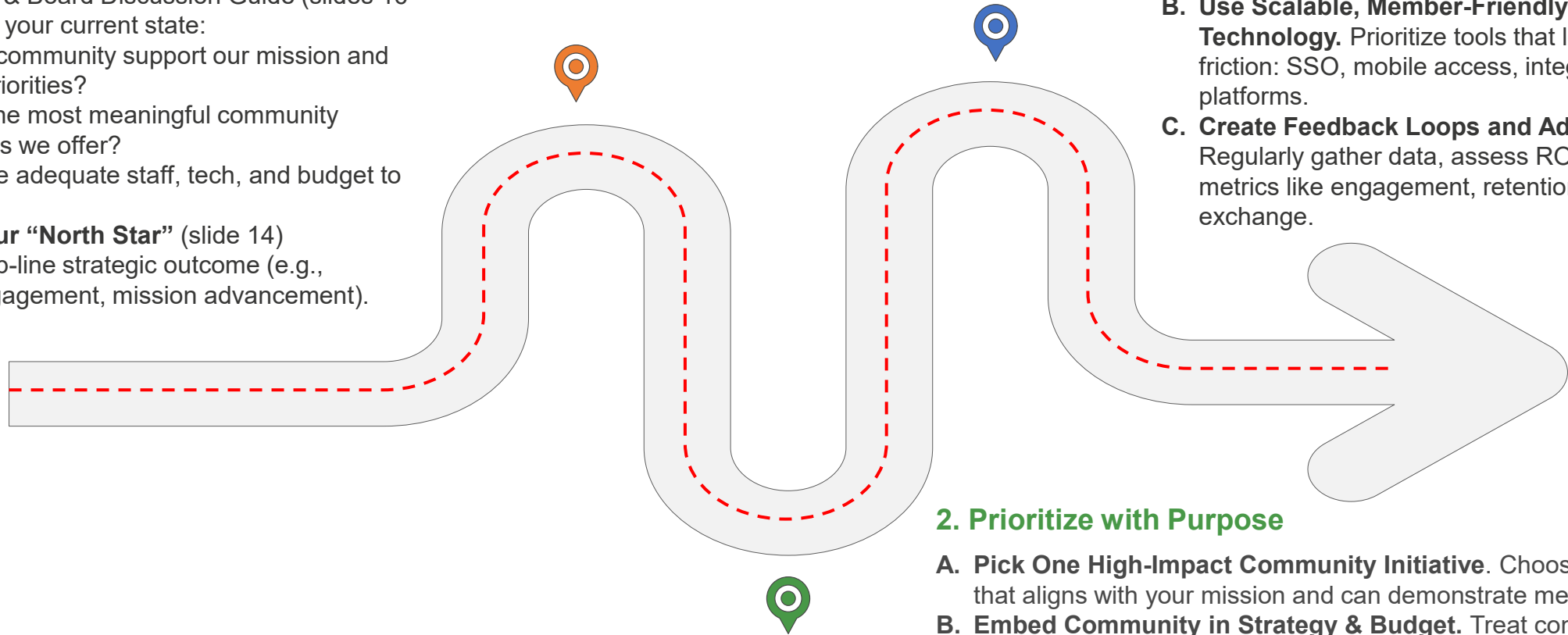
A. Pick One High-Impact Community Initiative. Choose a pilot initiative that aligns with your mission and can demonstrate measurable results.

B. Embed Community in Strategy & Budget. Treat community as core infrastructure—fund it like membership or advocacy.

C. Identify Key Levers. Focus here to maximize early traction:

- Shared purpose and values
- Low-barrier value creation and consumption

D. Recognition and incentive systems



7 Key Elements of Successful Communities

Adapted from Harvard Business Review, [“When Community Becomes Your Competitive Advantage,”](#) Jan 2020.

1. **A shared purpose and values.** Every community needs a clear “why.” Members should easily understand the mission and what brings them together.
2. **Simple, easily accessible value consumption.** Members should immediately see what they get—resources, support, and tools—organized in a way that’s easy to find and use.
3. **Simple, easily navigable value creation.** It should be straightforward for members to contribute, whether that’s sharing ideas, offering help, or creating content—with fast, visible impact.
4. **Clearly defined incentives and rewards.** Recognize and celebrate members who add value and lead, helping create a culture of appreciation and belonging.
5. **Carefully crafted accountability.** Use fair, transparent review systems so members help shape content and quality, boosting collaboration and community growth.
6. **Healthy, diverse participation driven by good leadership.** Empower inclusive, principled leaders to set the tone, keep the space positive, and bring out the best in everyone.
7. **Open, objective, governance and evolution.** Let members have a say in how the community runs and evolves—this builds trust, ownership, and long-term commitment.