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# Flexible association in the 1,5 meter society

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# Introduction

The Covid 19 crisis has almost all countries around the world in its grasp. Many trade and professional associations are badly affected too, both in their daily activities and in their expectations for the (near) future. Especially now, all hands are needed on deck and the work organisation is under heavy pressure. What do our members need right now? What interests do we bring to which tables? What can we connect differently? These are just some typical questions that need our immediate attention. At the same time, we are facing the problem that the income from contribution and fees is under pressure. If the members get into financial trouble, that will also affect the association.

A group of four experienced association professionals and advisors joined forces to assist you as a trade or professional association on this sticky wicket. We address the executive committee and management of professional associations and foundations.

Using a chart (sheet 4) showing four different future scenarios (quadrants), we will ask you some questions to help you on your way towards future-proofing your association. These questions relate to:

- your sector/professional group
- your members
- the association itself.

We do not pretend to know it all. Every association is unique, and you are the one who knows the situation best. That is why we will not give you general answers and advice. Instead, we will give you food for thought. See it as a sort of checklist. We do this in the form of a PowerPoint so that you can get started right away, without too much reading.

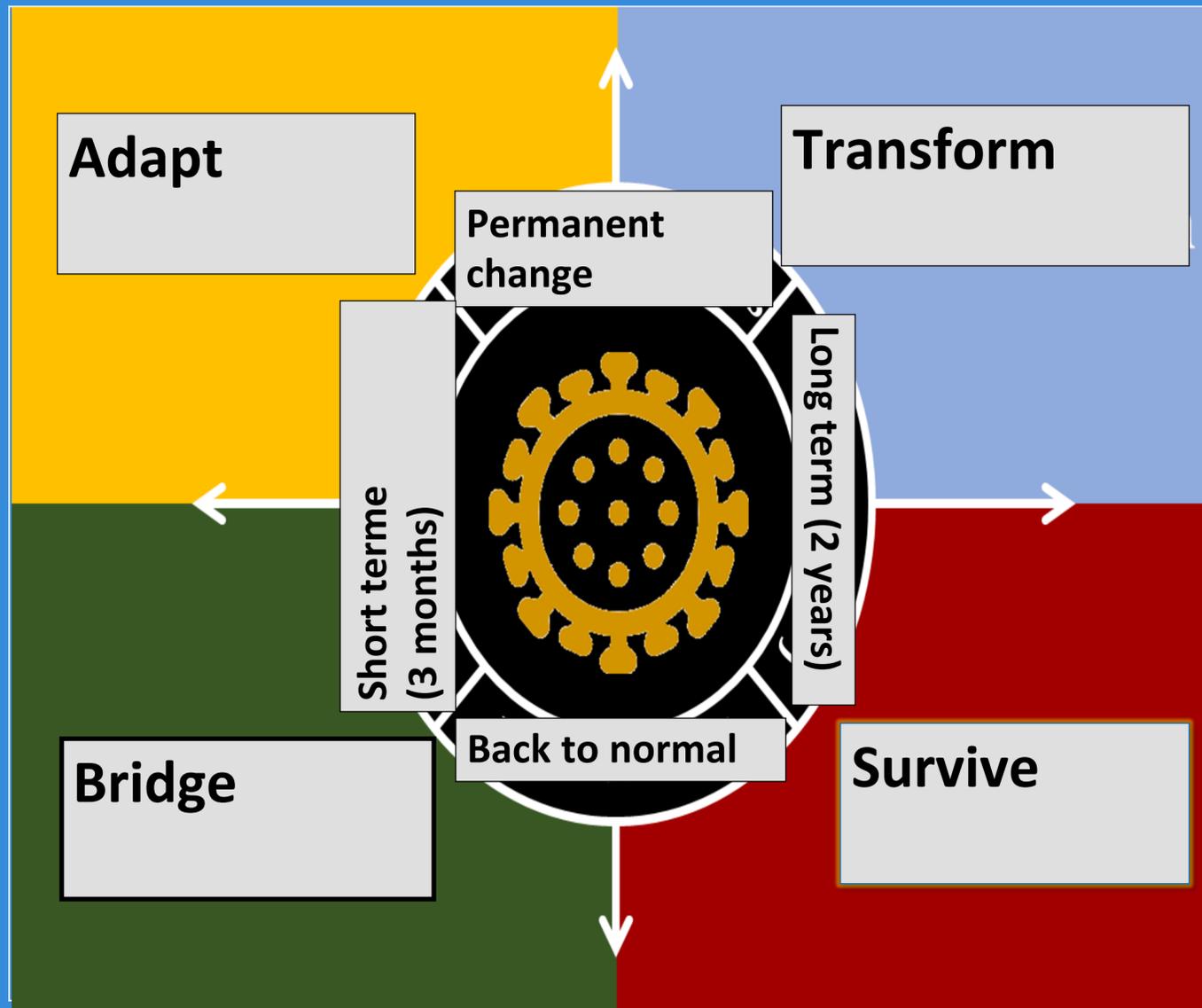
Working together is what we do. Sharing knowledge helps us to advance. We call on you to share your ideas, understanding, and experience with each other, so that all of us can get smarter in association-land. Good luck!



# Where do we stand now?

- We are now in the **crisis management stage**, aimed at safety
  - Next (if all goes well and everyone follows the guidelines), we will proceed to the **economic management stage**: restarting, structuring, or rebuilding economic life and earning power. How do we design a 1.5-meter economy?
  - **stage** will follow shortly after or even simultaneously: how do my members and I fit in this design, now and in the long run?
  - At some point, the **electoral management stage** should also start up again. Eventually, politicians will go back to normal as well, or at least argue in favor of doing so. Elections are scheduled for March 2021.
- Each stage has other requirements for trade and professional associations: *strategic, tactical, and operational*
  - During the aforementioned stages, which can have a different duration and intensity for each association, we, as association professionals, will operate the **'1.5-meter association'** in a way that is understandable for members and employees. This is only possible if certain operational requirements are met regarding manpower, digitalization, member relations and communication, cashflow management, etc.
  - And more fundamentally: do we add **'selfless social effort'** to associations' 3 classic tasks (lobby, services, and meeting, see Tack's propeller model) in the post-corona period?

# Four scenarios of depth and length of the Corona crisis



No one knows how long the Corona crisis will last and how drastically it will change our society. For a while, we hoped that the crisis would only be temporary and that we could go back to normal by summer, a matter of **bridging**, but then came the fear: what if it takes longer? Will we *survive*?

By now, society is **adapting** by working digitally and by maintaining a 1.5-meter distance. The longer this situation lasts, the bigger the chance that the world will **transform** and will never be the same after the crisis. What that world will look like depends on the action we all take now.



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# Scenario 1: Bridging (quickly back to normal)

## Points of special interest for..

### The sector:

- What are the core risks of the crisis for your sector?
- What lobby does the sector need to survive the crisis in the short term? Vital sector?
- Are you sufficiently visible (appealing) in the public fight for attention?

### The members of the association:

- How can you help your members improving their liquidity? (some options are postponing the collection of contributions, government support, etc.)
- Are there any possibilities to reduce collective costs? What do all members need right now? Collective procurement?
- How can you keep your members connected during this crisis? (more information and communication?)

### The employers' organisation:

- Especially now, your members need personal attention. How will you give it to them? (personal contact, help, etc.)
- Can you postpone investments and reduce costs?
- Is the frequency and intensity of management engagement adequate?
- Do you give enough attention to your employees now that everything is so different?





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## Scenario 2: Surviving (slowly back to normal)

### Points of special interest for..

#### **The sector:**

- Is any help needed for consolidation?
- Who are the core stakeholders that you want to maintain good relationships with? (stakeholder management)
- Is it necessary to set up an emergency fund?

#### **The members of the association:**

- Is it necessary to conduct a member study to get an idea of their expectations of the collective?  
(importance of monitoring and data)
- Does the association play a role in a possible reorganization of the sector?

#### **The employers' organisation:**

- Are there other associations that you could cooperate or merge with?
- How could you adapt your work organization to the new reality? (More focus and less people? Outsourcing?)
- Is it possible to design a new vision for the association?
- Is diversification an option? Other type of members in a new segment?



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## Scenario 3: Adapting (quick permanent change)

### Points of special interest for..

#### **The sector:**

- How can you further develop your sector or professional group in a new direction? (collective innovations, new business models)
- What do the new competences look like and can you create order in them? (competence profiles)
- What are your new core issues and what does the stakeholder network look like? (new alliances)

#### **The members of the association:**

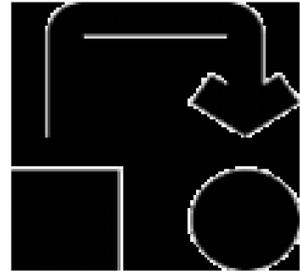
- Will the membership profile change? What members are sufficiently capable of adapting?
- How can you offer help to your members to make the required changes?
- Does the association need a new vision and mission? How do people feel connected in the new context?

#### **The employers' organisation:**

- How will you implement the changes in the association's new portfolio of strategic services?
- How can you digitalize your internal (consultation) processes?
- Are there consequences for the association's design problem? (manageability, democracy, regulations)



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## Scenario 4: Transforming (slow permanent change)

### Points of special interest for..

#### **The sector:**

- How does the new business model look to your supporters? How will your members' context change?
- Repositioning: How can you build a new position in the changing social context? On what issues?
- Could transformation also be a desired scenario for your association and how could you use this crisis to your advantage?

#### **The members of the association:**

- Will you continue with memberships or could you/do you want to connect your supporters in a different way?
- What does the transformation mean for new supporting services? What strategic choices are you going to make?
- What are you going to ask your members in return for your added value? What is your new revenue model?

#### **The employers' organisation:**

- From association to digital community? Can you reinvent your association?
- What is your organization's new strategic cycle? (vision, mission, strategy, policy, and action plans)
- Do the old office competences still fit in the new situation? And how will you organize the management?



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# Where do we seem to be headed ?

At the moment, it looks like the crisis will require patience and some of the changes will be permanent. Many publications speak of more 'State', more digitalization, less globalization, more autarky, etc. We expect that the corona crisis will cause temporary or permanent changes for the categories Market, State, Civilian, and Employee:

**Revaluation** of certain norms/values, functions, and certainties (such as complaisance or the health care worker). Is health the new durability?

**Recalibration** of mutual tasks, responsibilities, authority, and budgets between the different parties. What will happen, for instance, with the debts that governments are forced to run up now?

**Rearrangement** of institutions and mechanisms such as the EU, IMF, WHO, but also of production and distribution chains, inspection authorities such as the RIVM (State Institute for Public Health and the Environment), etc.

**Repositioning** countries, industries, and professional groups.

Shifts within these categories lead to opportunities or threats for the position of industries and professional groups.



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# Solid actions/no-regret options

- Difficult as it may be, find time to get together with managers and employees to think about what is happening here. What went well, what went wrong, and where do we stand? Once the dust has settled, carry out a '*Corona evaluation*' and - if possible - appoint someone now to organize that.
- In any case, much *time and mental power* will be required of managers in the time to come. Is the association (and is the chairman) prepared for that?
- Maintain *active, open lines* with your supporters and stakeholders: make sure you know what really happens within these target groups. Stakeholders are or will be in motion.
- Begin thinking about which '*pre-Corona darlings*' you are going to stop. The scenario of quickly going back to normal is getting more and more unlikely.
- Make sure you recognize the signs of a threatening '*Zombie association zone*': confusion, no time, no motivation, no meaning, no money. And raise the alarm.

**And remember: An association is not an end, but a means!**



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# Sent by:

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**Paul de Ruijter and Renate Kenter** work at De Ruijter Strategie and are committed to strategy projects for governments, companies, and trade and professional associations. Both are teachers at different universities and write about their field of expertise, e.g. the book 'Vereniging met toekomst' (Association with prospects)

**Jos Wesselink** works from BrancheWerk and helps trade and professional organizations with their strategic development as an advisor, (acting) manager, or independent chairman. In addition to his practical work, he works for AVVM as a teacher (since 2001) and programme leader (since 2017)



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