

THE
PROFESSIONAL
ASSOCIATION
STRENGTHENING
PROJECT

MODULE 4

Functions of a Professional Association

survive  ***thrive***

professional associations, private sector and global health scholars
saving mothers, newborns and children

Acknowledgments

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Functions of a Professional Association

Throughout this module the term professional association (PA) refers to a group of people in the same profession who come together to form a professional organization called an association or a society. The creation of this organization is purposeful and is meant to facilitate the achievement of very specific objectives, especially in providing service and enhancing the careers of the professional members.

This module describes the functions of a PA, including each key function and sub-function. It describes how to ensure that the association is able to successfully perform those functions and what to do if gaps are identified. To get the most out of this module, readers should look at each function and compare the information to their own PAs. If a PA is not already in place, the functions described can be used to help anticipate what structures to put in place and what resources are required for each function to be fulfilled effectively.

It is important to note at the outset that for any of these functions to be fulfilled, the PA must have healthy, strong leadership.

Objectives

- To describe the roles of a professional association (PA).
- To discuss management practices of a PA and their effect on the work of the PA.
- To share interventions to deal with common pitfalls regarding the function of a PA.

Pioneering

A successful PA performs the following pioneering functions:

Gives a Common Vision and Goal to the Profession

When this vision is shared among all members, the PA has a common purpose and outlook regarding the provision of care to the population(s) served. A common vision unifies the profession. By creating a shared vision and goal, the PA inspires its members and promotes commitment and motivation. When the vision and goal are understood, members feel responsible for accomplishing their duties, and they develop a sense of ownership for what they do. To learn how to create a vision, see Module 2 Creating and Nurturing an Organization.

Aggregates Efforts, Thoughts, and Ideas of Members

A PA aggregates the thoughts and ideas of the members and provides them with a sense of belonging and a voice. The PA provides a platform to collect and collate the thoughts and ideas of the individuals who constitute the profession. That way, the profession can establish a common view point and an agreed upon stance regarding specific issues of practice and policy. This creates a model unique to the profession that in turn results in certain expectations from the government, policy makers, and other stakeholders regarding that profession. This common frame of mind regarding the provision of care, behaviour, and personal conduct enhances a sense of identity and belonging among the members. Within the PA, members can gather to share knowledge, findings and experience about the profession; ideas can be exposed and discussed; and plans can be put into action. The PA becomes an information repository and powerhouse of professional expertise and knowledge from which stakeholders can obtain information and direction.

Gives Voice to the Profession

If a PA already exists

- Co-create and/or update the vision, mission, and strategic directions with members and share them with all new members.
- Host participatory meetings and workshops on different topics. Ensure that all members get the opportunity to participate and give their input; they will feel their opinions matter. Motivation and commitment will be increased.
- Develop a way to share good news and success about the PA with members as they contribute to this success.

If there currently is no PA, use the information in this series to create one.

Gives Power and Credibility to the Profession

When members of a profession are organized into a PA, the PA gives power and credibility to the profession. The voice of one member represents a synthesis of the thoughts of a group of individuals. The opinion of one individual may not be heard, but a PA can help to accomplish what an individual cannot accomplish alone. The PA becomes a power base and a visible representation of the existence of the profession in a specific country and a legal entity with the right to mobilize resources (human, financial, and material) to implement activities and reach goals. The PA can approach donors.

It is important to strengthen the PA in a focused and systematic way by assessing strengths and weaknesses to ensure that all departments are functioning well. A sample assessment tool, the Member Association Capacity Assessment Tool (MACAT) from the International Confederation of Midwives, is provided in Module 2. Based on the results of the assessment, develop and implement interventions to address identified gaps. The MACAT includes other strategies to increase professional visibility and power and promote effective communication and collaboration with the public, donors, press, media, and the government. The positive image of the PA will have a direct effect on the credibility of the profession.

Share and promote the PA's expertise with the public and stakeholders. Utilize expertise effectively and strategically

in different activities and ensure the association has core funding to be financially sustainable by implementing a membership structure. For information on resource mobilization, see Module 8.

Legal Function and Visual Identity

To legally and autonomously function, PAs must be registered according to the country's legislation. This gives the association legal capacity to enter into agreements or contracts, assume obligations, incur and pay debts, sue and be sued, and be held responsible for its actions. Registration ensures that the association is recognized by the government and gives legitimacy to the PA to represent, defend, and act on behalf of its members. The legal name, logo, and graphic design contribute to profiling the profession. With a strong visual identity, the PA will attract more financial, human, and social resources and build key partnerships. The visual identity and an attractive and informative web site are tools that will help the population recognize the PA. The PA becomes a trusted resource for information on the profession and what it has to offer to the public.

How to Make the PA a Legal Entity

- Create the PA with a vision and mission and develop a constitution and bylaws. For guidelines on how to develop a constitution, refer to Module 5 Governance and Fiscal Management.
- Choose a name, logo, and colour that illustrate who you are and will help people recognize your association and the profession you represent.
- Notarise the constitution, i.e., take it to a legal practitioner who will read it, declare that the terms in the constitution are legally acceptable, and sign it.
- Elect an executive committee, determine the address of the association, and open a bank account usually with three signatories.
- Study the requirements for registration and ensure that all those are in place.
- Take all the documents to the office that registers organisations. In most countries, PAs are registered as charities. Have the association entered into the register as an organisation. From this point on the association becomes a legal entity.

- The creation of a website is definitely a plus. It will make your PA accessible and reachable online from everywhere in the world.

Powerhouse of Professional Expertise

The PA should function as a conduit for professional development that introduces and manages professional change. The organisation scans the horizon for what is new in the profession and what is happening on the policy level that might affect the work of members.

The leaders and members of a PA have various backgrounds, experiences, expertise, and skills. This concentration of expertise makes the PA strong and powerful. When stakeholders require expertise, the PA becomes the go-to resource. The more members there are in the PA, the more expertise there is. Therefore, it is important to regularly recruit new members and to provide a favourable environment to retain current members.

The association can also actively create expertise through continuing professional education and development (CPD) programmes, research, knowledge management, and publications. In this respect, the PA needs to create a repository of information and resources, make it public, and make the association the preferred source of current information and innovation in the field.

Tips on Building a Powerhouse of Expertise

- Have a list of members, where they are located, and their expertise. The list should be regularly updated.
- Have a list of specialists in different aspects of the profession. Regularly update this list and make it easily accessible.
- Encourage research among leaders and members and collection of data and evidence to inform the profession. The association can actively source funds to conduct research in an area of need and commission expert members to carry out studies. If expertise does not exist in the association, the task can be outsourced if resources allow.
- Be involved with relevant stakeholders in human resources planning.

Advocate for the Provision of Quality Care

Another role of the PA is to contribute to the provision of quality care. If a regulatory body exists as the primary gate keeper of quality, the PA will work collaboratively with this body to guide and inform members about the provision of up to date, evidence-based care. It advocates for the development and implementation of regulations for the profession in order to support mechanisms that protect the public and ensure that safe and competent professionals provide high standards of care. The PA may also support, where appropriate, the enforcement of ethical practice and development of relevant sanctions to be applied when care provision is substandard. It also motivates new and experienced health care professionals to continually improve the quality of the care they provide.

Ways to Support Quality Care

- Take part in curriculum development and review. If not invited, offer your services and presence to such meetings.
- Have regular meetings with the school to share experiences on how students are doing, changes in clinical practice, and quality of care. These meetings could be once or twice per year. This strengthens the theory-practice relationship.
- Involve women and families as true partners in service provision, including planning, decision making, and civic activities. Invite women and their partners to annual meetings to learn what their perceptions are about the quality of care they receive from the professionals represented by the association.
- Participate in high level meetings and activities and influence maternal, newborn, and child health policy.
- Be the go-to organisation for new developments in care provision:
 - Create a repository of new information in the association,
 - Conduct or participate in research activities in which new knowledge is being created,
 - Closely monitor and evaluate care in the care provision sites,

- Establish or participate in the establishment of care provision standards,
 - Provide learning materials, procedure guides, and protocols for care providers to use in case of emergency or infrequent but life threatening events,
 - Advocate for adequate resources, equipment, and manpower in care provision sites,
 - Keep abreast of any changes in the country that have the potential to affect care provision and work with the Ministry of Health to ensure positive health outcomes for women, newborns, and their families, and
 - Keep data bases of best practices in different areas and share with care providers at regular intervals through staff development processes.
- During general meetings, co-create sanctions regarding the provision of poor quality care and unethical behaviour as well as guidelines on quality care provision and maintenance. Discuss support, mentorship, and coaching for newly qualified staff. If needed, conduct coaching and mentoring training among senior care providers who supervise others.
 - Have the profession’s code of ethics regularly reviewed by the members.

Resource to Keep Members Up to Date

Creating a powerhouse of professional expertise feeds into the next role of the association: keeping members up to date.

Conduit of Professional Development

The association is responsible for the education and professional development of members. It is the main channel through which members access Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities. To fulfil this role, the association should continually evaluate new developments in the professional field and how best to inform members about such opportunities. The PA should support interested members to take advantage of those opportunities. Additionally the PA should consistently make critical contributions to innovations in the field through its leaders and experts.

Preservice Education

The association is responsible to keep the schools informed of current practices in care provision so that the schools produce professionals who are fit to practice. As a result, the association should be involved in curriculum review and development to ensure that the education process is appropriate to produce competent professionals.

Continuing Professional Education and Development

The association is the gate keeper of quality care provision and therefore is responsible to develop a continuing education strategy for all qualified staff at different levels of performance. It develops frameworks for continued practice to ensure that professionals retain adequate knowledge and skills after they complete their professional education. It contributes to the development of professional standards for practice, education, regulation, and public safety. It has a coordinating and consulting role among the public, regulatory bodies, and policy makers, including the Ministry of Health and education institutions. The association works with regulators to set high standards for education. It provides data and evidence to improve service delivery. It ensures that a code of ethics is taught to students and works with other professional organizations to ensure that these standards are understood and adhered to. The PA will lobby for change if the standards are not met.

Tips on Creating a Conduit of Continuing Professional Development

- Call a general meeting, co-create a continuing development strategy with members, and inform policy makers of its existence. Follow the meeting format outlined in Module 2.
- Invite policy makers to contribute to the implementation of the strategy through their presence or through provision of resources to run short courses where needed. Ensure policy makers appreciate the value of keeping professionals up-to-date.
- Co-develop a roster of CPD activities at regular intervals and address different aspects of the profession. In some countries, some associations create CPD

committees whose responsibility is to regularly assess the profession's CPD needs.

- Co-create incentives and other mechanisms acceptable to members for the members to keep up to date, e.g., re-licensure requirements, etc.
- When conducting CPD activities, be inclusive of various roles of professionals, e.g., those in clinical practice, education, management, administration, research, and policy.
- Provide linking and learning opportunities for professionals to create an engaging, educating, and motivating environment in the association.

Provide Structure and Governance to the Profession

The governance structure of the association is the governance structure of the profession. The way the association is lead and managed reflects on the profession. A well organised, well run, and well led association gives the impression of a well organised professional group. Hence the association should be goal and result oriented with cohesion among members and leaders. The association should produce results. This raises the profile of the profession, which will result in consultations from community and ministry, invitations to high level meetings, and invitations to policy and decision making forums. This gives the profession identity and makes members eager to be associated.

Providing structure and governance includes management practices that address operational policies, strategic and action plans, financial management, and human resource management. Management practices also include representation, leadership and governance, volunteer and other ancillary personnel management, CPD, and re-licensure polices. It is crucial to establish a secretariat to ensure the effective implementation of time bound and measurable activities that are well monitored and evaluated with established polices.

The association is responsible to take the lead in professional matters and to express and interpret the needs and views of the members of the profession for the benefit of the community. It is an important bridge that connects health care consumers, policy makers, and health professionals.

To achieve this, leaders must be well informed and aware of current and emerging issues in their fields and to be the first to inform the government and other professionals of such developments. A proactive approach adds to the credibility of the profession and enables the profession to work collaboratively with other groups. When the government or another stakeholder requires services or an opinion, the PA as the representative of the profession provides professional leadership in national and international dialogue.

The PA serves as a voice for the profession and advocates for its members, women, and children to ensure the provision of quality care and safe practice environments. It becomes the gate keeper for the profession and takes responsibility for communication with the Ministry of Health and other various stakeholders.

Communication

The PA is responsible to communicate with different audiences to ensure that the PA is known and that the PA knows other stakeholders working in health. To be effective, the association needs a well-developed communication strategy (see Module 7 Visibility and Communications).

Communication with Government

One of the key reasons to have effective communication with the government is for the PA to have access to opportunities regarding policy making and policy influencing and to advocate for quality care provision. In most countries, the government is responsible for manpower planning, equipment provision, and infrastructure development, which affect the provision of care. Hence, it is imperative for the association to communicate in a way that emphasises its role as a source of professional expertise and current information in the field.

Communication with the government should be two-way. The government should inform the PA of policy and political issues that affect its target population(s). The PA should inform the government and local authorities about the situation in the field, the needs of the population(s) being served, and what is required for professionals to provide quality care. This will include negotiations for working environments that enhance the quality of care and supportive legal and policy frameworks. It is essential to build

collaborative relationships because the PA is a key player and should be given the opportunity to provide professional expertise and to contribute to policy decisions in its field.

Things to Remember When Communicating with the Government

The Association should:

- Identify contact persons, usually the president and the vice president, to be in regular communication with the government.
- Visit government officials, usually in the Ministry of Health, to introduce themselves.
- Establish mechanisms to regularly inform the government and other relevant bodies of activities and issues that affect members of the profession. This could be on a half yearly basis.
- Request the government and other relevant bodies to inform the association of issues that affect the profession and the recipients of care.
- Discuss the possibility of having representatives on key government committees and policy making bodies. Offer the names of experts. If these representatives must be elected, the association should prepare the experts and put them forward for the elections. It is critical to nominate/ elect people who are well informed, up to date, tactful, and politically astute. This is a relationship that needs nurturing and maintaining.

Communication with Media and Press

In order to educate and engage the public, the association needs to keep the public informed. The press and media will help the PA to achieve this goal; therefore, it is important to develop positive relationships with the media. By using channels such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, the association can reach a large group of people. These are tools to help demonstrate the success of the association's work, convey general information about the profession, and ensure people understand the relevant issues and how they affect women and families. Positive, well-articulated information may also create positive pressure and

the desire to do well among policy makers. If the association makes the media its ally, it will help create a positive image of the profession. The public and the government will trust the profession as it promotes awareness of public policy and advocates for quality health care.

Establish a communication committee (2 to 3 people) to complete the following tasks:

- Identify the association's audience: the general public, policy makers.
- Train committee members how to deal with the media and have 1 or 2 designated persons authorised to talk to media personnel or make public statements.
- Make a list of newspapers and radio and television stations with which the association would like to establish relationships. These will be the target media contacts.
- Do some preparatory work before each communication attempt in order to have valuable and relevant information at hand.
- Develop core messages that are clear and specific. If the association has a website, the media should be directed to it.
- Disseminate messages through social media channels.
- Keep the website active and fresh.
- Keep the social media active so that people find something new every day.

Communication with Other Stakeholders and Collaborative Relationships

It is in the interest of the PA to pursue strategic collaborations with relevant organizations, such as non-governmental organizations and other PAs that share common interests. Often the vision of the PA cannot be accomplished by a single organization. It needs to work together with NGOs and other partners to develop solutions to address areas of common interest.

Advocacy for and Communication with Members

The PA acts as an advocate for members and the public it serves through the following:

- Clearly defined communication strategy for internal and external relationships,

- Communication system, such as a newsletter and/or a website to communicate with all the stakeholders (members, women, donors, civil society, and government),
- Systems to facilitate advocacy,
- A mechanism to provide advocacy training for leaders and members (negotiation, public speaking, information kit), and
- Representation at key forums, especially at which policy is discussed and decisions regarding maternal, newborn, and child health care are made.

Increasing Membership

A very important role of the PA is to increase the number of its members, and recruitment activities must be on going. To make this easier, members should clearly understand the benefits of belonging to the association. Hence, the association should clearly articulate member benefits and the need for a PA in the country, and this should be communicated to members and non-members. To attract more members, regular membership drives should be conducted. The PA might also host events that cost less for members or create a members only page on the website to nudge non-members to join.

When an Association Does not Exist

If a PA does not exist, there is no focal point for the profession. It is difficult for members to contribute to policy and decision making, and it is difficult for the profession to be consulted in its own right.

Common Pitfalls

Sometimes PAs do not succeed because of personality differences. Organizations are as good as the individuals who constitute them. These individuals come from different backgrounds and social orientations that affect the way the organization functions. These differences and their effect should be recognized and acknowledged. Leaders need adequate social intelligence to realize when they are dealing with external issues and when they are dealing with human/personality issues. This is discussed in both Modules 1 and 6.

Another common pitfall is lack of capacity among the leaders.

Handling Common Pitfalls

When a new PA is created, it is always helpful to conduct a leadership development programme for the executive members (see Module 6 Leadership Development). Effective leadership usually leads to the solution of most of pitfalls. Therefore, leadership training is a must in most young associations.

Transparency and effective communication can reduce the effect of some of the pitfalls, and these can be complemented by relationship building among members and leaders. This will also reduce the perception that the same people always seem to enjoy privileges, such as attending meetings and workshops. Transparency will enable the right people to be elected or nominated into the right positions so that titles are matched with expertise and capacity of the individual. Effective leadership will prevent the development of an us vs. them situation between the leaders and the members.