

PURPOSEFUL LEADERSHIP REAL RESULTS

Designing Future-Ready Organizations
With Donté P. Shannon, FASAE, CAE

Executive Director

Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA)

We hear one question time and again from our non-profit and association clients, “How can we future-proof our organization?” Many that once relied on consistent revenue from flagship events, member-driven programs, or publication sales saw numbers dip during and after the pandemic. While most are trending upward again, there has been a dramatic shift in how members and stakeholders engage. To remain relevant into the next decade or longer, strategic innovation isn’t a choice. It’s a necessity.

Our hiring process is designed to help clients find leaders with fresh perspectives who can help them think about the work in new ways. When the Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA) came to us seeking a leader to propel the Society into its next chapter, one candidate’s vision stood head and shoulders above the rest.

Donté P. Shannon, FASAE, CAE, is an accomplished executive with over 18 years of experience in association leadership and board strategy consulting. To say he’s future-focused would be an understatement—it’s a trademark of his career. And with just over a year as Executive Director of IDSA, Donté is already making an impact. Thanks to his collaborative leadership style and unconventional approach to strategic planning, IDSA is set to launch four new focus areas that will reshape the organization’s identity for years to come. Future-ready, future-proof.

Donté graciously agreed to take time out of his busy schedule to share his perspective on preparing organizations for transformational growth. What follows are a few highlights from our conversation.

If You've Seen One Association, You've Seen One Association

In addition to his seven years in top leadership roles, Donté has served as an advisor and partner to over 25 nonprofit and for-profit boards, providing leadership and organizational management expertise in strategic planning, operations design, and more. We asked him to share his view on what up-and-coming leaders—and experienced CEOs transitioning to new industries or organizations—should keep in mind when leading the strategic planning process.

What Donté shared reflects his own leadership values. He is deeply intentional, includes many voices, and plunges into each new endeavor with curiosity and openness. He pointed out that while there may be similarities in how you approach the strategic planning process, you can't assume you know everything before you walk in the door.



“No matter how many times I step into a CEO role, I always remind myself: ‘If I’ve seen one association, I’ve seen just that—one association.’ I never assume that what I’ve experienced before will be the same in the next organization. I might notice patterns once I’m involved, but I never make assumptions. I approach each situation with an investigative mindset. That’s served me and the organizations I’ve supported well.”

He also noted that as a new CEO, you'll be the person who knows the least about the organization. Building credibility with the board and staff doesn't happen overnight. But you can more quickly establish relationships by being thoroughly prepared, communicating transparently at all levels, staying humble, and demonstrating that you're in it for the best interests of the organization, not for personal gain.

With these values as the backdrop, we explored his approach to what he calls “magical” strategic planning—when everyone involved understands where the organization is and creates a shared vision for how far it can go.

Redefine Value in the Turbulent Twenties

The “turbulent twenties” is a phrase Donté uses to describe the intersection of social, political, and economic factors reshaping industries and workplaces across the world. From political tensions and global unrest to generational differences in values and increasing numbers of newer generations in leadership roles, there is a constant push and pull, a sense of instability, as some hold onto the status quo while others embrace change.

And the fact is, this evolution of social dynamics is going to continue. That means the value proposition that served your organization over the last 20 years may not sustain you into the future.

To rethink your organization’s position through this period of instability, Donté encourages leaders to consider a broader stakeholder universe when determining who they want to serve and how.

Boards have traditionally focused on increasing value for members, but newer generations don’t necessarily seek out membership to organizations the way previous generations have. Traditional membership models are no longer the only—or even the best—path to success.

Think Beyond Membership



How can your organization be a leader in the field, not just a service provider to members? Stakeholders can be anyone who derives value from what you do. How could you expand that value to reach new groups or entities?

Amid the chaos of the turbulent twenties, clinging to what’s been done before can create a steady slide into irrelevance.



You want to tap the largest audience possible and create regular engagement from stakeholders other than your membership. **If you can get other stakeholders to participate in programs, attend events, or buy your products and services, that’s what makes your organization extremely relevant.** Your members, the tried-and-true folks, will benefit from that added value and influence.”

Lay the Pursuit of Comfort to Rest

At Staffing Advisors, we often nudge clients to get a little uncomfortable. In hiring, choosing candidates in your comfort zone (for example, those with more familiar career backgrounds or who share your alma mater) often means sacrificing the

diversity of thought that is proven to drive business results. Donté touched on a similar idea when it comes to strategic planning, “We CEOs and board members need to let go of the pursuit of comfort in our roles.”



One of the biggest challenges for boards and CEOs in strategic planning is the fear of change and coming to terms with what it really takes. You have to face what needs to stop, what needs to be reimaged, and what entirely new initiatives need to be launched. There are new audiences to reach, new demographics to engage—it’s enough to scare some organizations into staying where it’s comfortable.”

Leaders must set aside nostalgia for what an organization once was—and the type of leadership it needed then—to adopt a future-focused mindset that prioritizes adaptation and innovation. Because there is no going back.

Donté’s approach to strategic planning is grounded in the idea that leaders must actively seek opportunities to step beyond the familiar, looking ten years out or more. It’s not deciding whether to have two more webinars or conferences next year. It’s thinking about what the organization needs to be for stakeholders in the 2030s and beyond.

When strategic planning is done right, you’re going to explore bold initiatives that might take three, five, or even seven years to launch.

That’s where the board’s focus should be—and that includes evaluating whether you have the right CEO in place to drive that change.

Turn Fear Into Possibility

“If you had to tear down the organization today and rebuild it from scratch, what would it look like?”

That’s how Donté kicked off IDSA’s recent strategic planning retreat. This simple but powerful question transforms the concept of sweeping change, which can be charged with discomfort and fear, into an open conversation that invites excitement and possibility.



“As a CEO, you really have to self-assess and ask, ‘Am I the right person to lead this organization where it needs to go?’ It’s not easy. It takes a unique type of self-awareness. But it’s the right question to ask no matter where you are in your career, even if you’ve been successful in bringing the organization to where it is today.”

Bring the Right Voices to the Table

In many circles, more experienced voices are given greater attention and weight. Donté firmly believes that organizations should move away from that tradition if they want to ensure relevance and increase impact into the future.

To truly represent and connect with the communities they serve, organizations must also strive for diversity in board membership and intentionally invite a variety of perspectives to the strategic planning table.

Donté is thinking beyond demographics here—it’s about including differing viewpoints to break free from the vacuum of your own experience.

It’s about bringing in people who have visionary ideas and the skills to move an organization forward. You need individuals who will challenge each other to think and who understand oversight. To grow and evolve, you need these varied perspectives. Otherwise, you risk doing the same things you’ve always done.

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If you want your organization to be valuable, you have to listen to multi-generational voices to understand what kind of organization they will need. **There should always be respect for those who paved the way and made certain accomplishments in their careers, but their voices shouldn’t be valued any more than those who are starting out.”**

Don't Go It Alone

We asked Donté to share any final thoughts or advice for new, transitioning, or aspiring CEOs. He stressed the value of peer communities you can turn to for support. Donté is an active member of several diverse

communities of executives in addition to co-founding a peer group specifically for Black CEOs to discuss shared experiences, exchange ideas, and offer resources and guidance.



“In the Black CEO community, we can talk openly without needing to explain everything because everyone understands the racial dynamics and behavioral factors from boards or staff that may be creating challenges in our leadership journeys. **No matter how many years you've been a CEO, you need a community of other executives to engage with—especially now—because no CEO has led through times like these before.** Choose groups that are both familiar and unfamiliar. You need all of those viewpoints to develop as a leader.”

And for those who aspire to become a future-focused leader and drive transformation, Donté's advice can be summed up in one word: perseverance. There will always be naysayers; there will be those who came before you and are not yet ready

for the new. But keep sharing your ideas, no matter what people say or how many rejections you face. It may not be comfortable, but the uncomfortable is where the future is born.

“When someone voices an innovative thought, it can sometimes get dismissed. But you have to persevere. **If you know your ideas are great, don't let anyone stop you—whether it's because they can't be operationalized, there's no budget, or someone's afraid to try. None of that should keep you from continuing to generate ideas.** Eventually, you will be seen as the idea person, a thought leader, and one day, they'll come to you for more.”