



The (Re) Accreditation Process Made Me a Believer

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A little more than two years ago, I made the move from serving as a stand-alone association executive to the AMC owner world. Like many who make this transition, I spent the first 18 months just trying to keep my head above water/drinking from the firehose/dodging flaming arrows...insert your favorite appropriate analogy here. But for most reading this, I imagine you understand the challenges inherent in the AMC pace and the juggling skills we must acquire.



I knew from the beginning that our firm was “accredited” – in fact, this was part of the preliminary fact-finding discussion I had with my then would-be business partner. Early on, she explained often to me and others that our firm had set processes to guide staff in multiple areas of our services as association managers, as well as various aspects of the business side of things. She explained the differences in accreditation as “process-based” versus an individual credential, like the CAE, as more “knowledge-based.” She talked about the great value of being an accredited firm – both internally and externally.

On paper, all of this made sense.... AND then I jumped head first into the company. Soon, the day-to-day challenges of running a growing AMC hit like a ton of bricks - transitions, onboarding, complicated team structures, scopes of service, contracts – so much to learn and do! So, I seemingly pushed “accreditation” to the side and focused on the work. Except, I didn’t. In actuality, day after day was spent learning the process that had been set up around these things through accreditation. In many cases, I was able to add my own perspective and make improvements based on my experience in leading associations. In all, I was living and learning and working our team through our processes each day. But even in this effort, I still didn’t really make the connection between being “accredited” and doing the work. In my mind, despite being told otherwise, “accreditation” was something to attain and hold for outward purposes. It wasn’t until my firm began the re-accreditation process that I had my a-ha moment. And now, I’m a believer.

While the ultimate product you get to create and the designation is great, there are many additional benefits for a company. Here are three critical take-aways I experienced in the process.

1. People Support What They Help to Create

As a young student council leader, this mantra was woven throughout early training and experiences and shaped my leadership philosophy more than any other. So, imagine my delight when I saw this really come to life for our staff when going through the reaccreditation process. Our firm has experienced rapid growth over the last few years and our team has grown from eight to 19 in that time. Many on our team have less than one year with the company. Some have significant association experience, but little with the AMC model. Some are learning both concurrently. As we embarked on reaccreditation preparation, we made sure that every person on our staff contributed to the review and rewrite, if needed, of at least one service area. In most cases, each team worked on multiple areas and in many cases, some took on areas outside of their sphere of expertise. If a finance assistant wanted to sit in on the meetings team process, we welcomed that initiative and encouraged the curiosity. As a result, all of our staff contributed and is much more bought in to what they created than by simply reading or being told information during onboarding. And even better, each is now empowered to offer ideas, resources and insights to continually improve what we do and how we do it. The reaccreditation process then, regardless of firm size, has the potential to re-energize and empower your staff, especially if you let them have a “hand in creating.”

2. Home Base for Your Team

One of the more prevalent topics when discussing struggles with AMC owners and staff seems to be managing competing priorities. In this multi-client, multi-team model, it’s only natural that this would be a challenge. It’s

hard work to keep all the trains moving on schedule and without incident and often one great success with a client or team member can be followed by a seeming set-back with another. Without developed and expressed processes, staff may be re-creating the wheel over and over again in their silos. This negates two of the many benefits of the AMC model- efficiencies and shared expertise. Additionally, providing support to multiple associations with different missions, structures, and personalities can be exciting, but at times it can be disorienting to say the least. Going through the accreditation process and the end result of documenting what you do and how you do it actually provides a home base for your team. It's the place they can turn to guide their work and lean into each other and the efficiencies created in the model. They become more grounded and self-assured in their work and know that there's a place to turn to reference what is expected and what works. Most importantly, going through accreditation and establishing your processes ensures your team that there is a thoughtful and deliberate purpose to their work that has been developed, tested and adapted.

3. Stop to Smell the Strategic Roses

Everything moves so fast. This is not just a statement on AMCs, but life in general. Our "to-do" lists are never-ending – whether rote or extraordinary, mundane or engaging – there just never seems to be enough time to reflect and plan. This is especially true at work, as the urgent often supplants the important. Our team going through the reaccreditation process forced all involved to stop, focus, research, reflect and then strategically consider just about everything as it relates to association management and running a business. In fact, through this process I found myself wishing that I would have done similar work in previous stand-alone association roles. It was fun to watch our team ask questions, share information and have their own "a-ha" moments around association management best practices and the ways we serve members. For some, the knowledge gained from the CAE came to life; for others, their own experiences played out and still for others, their instincts kicked in. But for all, the experience forced us to stop and build time into our days to strategically dive into our industry and our craft in ways we might not have without accreditation. The result of doing this on such a broad scale, actually helped to build the muscle for our team to slow down and be more deliberate in their day, as opposed to simply powering through a checklist. In the end, the success experienced by slowing down to smell the strategic roses keeps our employees more engaged, improves our firm's services and allow us to move our client organizations' missions forward more effectively.

So, if you are new to the AMC world (or not) and are considering accreditation OR if you are already with an accredited firm but find yourself going through the motions and the accreditation feels like "extra" work, my hope is that this will serve as a motivation or reminder of the value of the process.