

CEO Perspective: YMCA of the USA's Kevin Washington on Evolving a National Network



Kevin Washington, President and CEO, YMCA of the USA

Over 10 years ago, YMCA of the USA set out to transform how the Y was perceived by the public. Market research had shown then-President [Neil Nicoll](#) that there was a big disconnect between what staff and leadership thought YMCAs were to the public—organizations changing people’s lives—and what members of their communities actually saw them as—places to work out and swim.

“Our rebranding work really helped us understand the adjustments we needed to make to solidify our perspectives around youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility,” said current President and CEO Kevin Washington.

Today, Washington is leading the next phase of the organization’s evolution in an effort to answer the question: How can the Y evolve to best help solve the critical social issues in its communities? “My sense has always been that as a collective, the YMCA’s power to do good things in this country is substantial,” he said. “Rebranding, and the internal change management work that has accompanied it, has unified our organization. We are in a much better position to address key social issues collectively across the country, and that’s what we’re committed to doing.”

Washington and his staff are navigating how to best guide this evolution. As a national resource office for the federation, how can it create a common vision? How much influence is the right amount of influence? How do you incorporate network voices into the evolution? In this Q&A, Taz Hussein, a Bridgespan Group partner and head of its Public Health practice, and Washington discuss how the YMCA of the USA will guide the network through this change.

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Taz Hussein: What is your vision and what specific changes will it entail?

Kevin Washington: Ten years ago, we started some signature programs, such as the Diabetes Prevention Program, and really began to understand how we could use our scale. Today, we're starting to use that scale more effectively. Additionally, our Brand 2.0 will build on the gains we've realized by changing perceptions and helping people understand the impact YMCAs make in communities as charitable organizations.

The trick is how do we get 900 independent 501(c)(3)s under the same banner to work collectively and more effectively together? There's a level of independence that each Y has as an autonomous 501(c)(3), but there's also a significant level of interdependence.

It's about finding that "sweet spot." How can we leverage both the great assets that we bring from a scope, scale, and size perspective and our ability to work together without pushing the needle too far on that level of autonomy that our communities tend to love?

What are some of the things you are pushing on to find that "sweet spot"?

We've been working on this project called Thriving Ys, Greater Impact. The focus of this effort has been two-pronged: 1) to strengthen Ys at the local level so that many more of them are not just surviving, but truly thriving; and 2) to identify and align on ways in which we can operate more seamlessly as a network and as a collective body.

One area we're pushing on is raising the qualifications it takes to be a member in our federation. For example, requiring that all Ys adhere to a common set of practices when it comes to issues like child abuse prevention or aquatic safety. In order to raise the qualifications for membership in this organization, the body has to agree to do it. We spend a lot of time listening, discussing, and building consensus to move the organization forward.

We'd also like to be much more proactive in supporting YMCAs before they fall into crisis situations by providing, for example, support from turnaround specialists. We also want to be more proactive about how we can collectively go after opportunities that will benefit all Ys. The environment changes so rapidly. Our ability to adapt has to be much more cohesive to respond quickly to challenges and opportunities.

What will be the biggest challenge in evolving the network?

One of the first things you come up against is, "What's in it for my association? What do I have to do differently? And what is it going to cost me?" As I lead this work, I have to be sure people understand what's in it for them. I also need to understand whether it's too onerous for them to take on. So that's the real issue. The benefit has to outweigh the effort. Everyone, from the smallest Y in Pennsylvania to the largest in California, needs to understand how changes at the federation level benefit each and every one of them.

Is it safe to say that great communication and outreach will be important in the process?

Absolutely. And that is a challenge, too, because, as a national office, we put out a lot of communications—e-mails, newsletters, you name it. We also host a lot of meetings. Because we're doing so many things, those things that we hope to be top of mind for leaders can get lost. We have to devise a communications strategy that will ensure that this work is top of mind and doesn't get lost among the other communications.

For example, at a recent Thriving Ys meeting, somebody said, "Well, I didn't see that," about a recent communication. It so happened that our executive newsletter had just gone out. I pulled it up and said, "Here it is, right here." But for some of the CEOs, because they receive so many communications, the information doesn't seep in. We have to find a more effective way to share our messages.

What role will the individual associations play in the evolution of the network?

One of the things that will be helpful is having champions. I know I'm not going to have all 900 or so Y leaders as champions, but I do need to find those 15 or 20 who are heavily influential and willing to champion this work, because when they reflect the key messages, that can bring along so many other associations. So, important for me is to establish and maintain relationships with those highly influential leaders. In a federation, one of the things I know is that relationships matter. My ability to nurture those can amplify the message, which helps the adoption process.

Before your current role, you spent 10 years as the CEO of the Hartford YMCA and then five years as the CEO of the YMCA of Greater Boston. This experience gives you a broad perspective on what change means to associations. Has this influenced how you approach your role as federation leader? Has it influenced your work with the associations?

One of the things that has been very helpful is that I have built, over time, a network of relationships at all levels. This gave me a level of credibility coming in the door.

It's also helped me create opportunities that help move the organization forward. I can call up any one of the association leaders I know and say, "What do you think about this? How would that change be received by your association? Who do you think in the organization would be absolutely opposed to this?" There is a feeling that, "Wait a minute, Kevin's one of us. What they're leading us through is something I'm sure Kevin would not do if he didn't think it was in the best interest of the organization." The other thing that it does, which I think is even more important, is that if X, Y, or Z person has an issue with something, more times than not, they'll pick up the phone and say, "Kevin, I have an issue with this. Can we talk about it?"

Diversity and inclusion were top of mind when you first became CEO of the national federation. What role does diversity and inclusion play in the organization’s evolution?

Still top of mind, and it is a process. One thing I’ve done is to elevate a strong and passionate leader with incredible diversity and inclusion expertise to be my senior vice president of diversity and inclusion (D&I). She reports directly to me. The department has also been given more resources to do the work—a bigger team and a bigger budget. We recognize that it’s a journey for all of us. For some communities, it’s a much more difficult journey. We also know that in the days and times in which we currently exist, our work in this area is ever more important.

One way we’re living this is that we’re working in New Americans Welcome Centers, giving new immigrants access to vital social services and helping them better integrate into their communities. We’re doing quite a bit of work with our associations, too, around serving the transgender community. So diversity and inclusion is still a major part of who we are as an organization and will continue to be.

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Are associations reaching out to the national office for help in navigating what diversity and inclusion looks like in their communities?

Yes, many of our associations have reached out to the D&I team. Recently, we had a meeting of local Y leaders in Raleigh, NC, where [House Bill 2](#) was discussed. We spent three hours having a conversation—facilitated by members of our D&I team—about what that meant to the organization. What came out of it was a courageous conversation about what it means to be transgender. There were different views in the room, but the recognition was that the Y, as an organization, is one that has to be for all, and understanding how to do that was why we were there.

What other steps are you taking to be more diverse and inclusive?

At the national office, we are educating staff about the origins of race and racism, to help inform our work to build cohesive communities. We’ve created a National Diversity Task Force at the national board level. We monitor our organization with what we call DIG Metrics: Diversity, Inclusion and Global Metrics. As we put together what we’re calling our dashboard for our Thriving Ys effort, diversity and inclusion will be one of the metrics, measuring whether or not you’re moving your YMCA forward. It is part of who we are, and what gets measured gets done. We also want to highlight those Ys that are bright spots so others can learn from them and engage with them.

Having been in the local CEO role, how do you perceive the national office adding value to the network?

First, when you’re leading local associations like Boston and Hartford you can say, “This is what we want to do and we’re doing it.” As the leader of the national office, it’s about building consensus. How do we leverage our scope, scale, and size to do good? My role and the role of the national office is to help develop that asset. Second, how do we take

advantage of great national opportunities from a partnerships, philanthropy, and cause marketing perspective? Third, I believe the role of the national office is to make sure that the great innovative work in the associations gets moved across the organization. How do we surface that expertise and then make sure that great best practices or great programmatic ideas get distributed throughout the network?

Our greatest role is not to do innovation, it's to stimulate it, because we have great minds out there working every day to solve issues and run great programs. As a national office, it's up to us to scale those great ideas. That's our role. That's the value we bring.

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