

THE THIRD SECTOR REPORT

Nonprofit Strategy 101: The Abundance Perspective

By Jeffrey R. Wilcox, CFRE

At some point, every nonprofit leader finds it difficult to resist the temptation to approach the subject of organizational strategic planning without some cynicism. After all, even the greatest of unsung heroes dedicated to helping others, forging social justice or advancing the arts can reach a point when mounting needs, inadequate resources, and imperfect processes feel like unending cycles of discussion.

Having spent a large portion of my career as a grantmaker, learning how to evaluate the strategic plans of nonprofit organizations was a necessary prerequisite for keeping the job. Surprising to many grant-seekers is the fact that what isn't contained in their plans for the future are as revealing as what is actually put into print.

An additional surprise is that a nonprofit's strategic plan usually reveals more indicators about its mindset and culture than its composers might have imagined. The tell-tale indicator is whether the strategies outlined in the plan paint a picture of an organization that approaches its future from a place of scarcity or from a position of abundance.

Recognizing the difference is not rocket science.

Strategic plans focused on scarcity view their futures as fixing what's lacking in a community, what's wrong with society, what's weak about the organization, what's deficient in its support, and what's the biggest threat facing the organization over the next few years. The strategies will be a series of incremental solutions to eventually resolve these liabilities. The primary driving force behind the plan will be money. After all, the laws of economics teach us that money eliminates liabilities.

When a plan is based on a perspective of abundance, however, it can be a refreshing read. These plans focus on what's working well, what's been discovered through experience and good results, what's strong about the organization and its supporters, and what's the biggest opportunity facing the organization over the next few years. The strategies will be a series of incremental steps to build on current successes to breed future successes. The primary driving force will be leveraging the current assets for a higher return. The laws of economics also teach us that building assets builds equity.

Abundant nonprofits choose to take a deliberately broader view of their assets. Consequently, their future plans have at least five unique attributes: The first is their plans give as much attention to cultivating people and their talents for the cause as is given to cultivating the money needed to fund it. The second is any new activities are born out of their documented experiences with other successful activities. The third is stopping what isn't working and redeploying people and money to something that is. The fourth is a marketing approach that engages people in what's successful rather than asking them to fix what's not.

And, fifth, the plan clearly states what “continued success” should look like in terms of impact, efficiency, and increased community equity in the cause.

The name of the game in strategic planning today is “sustainability planning.” Many nonprofits have completely walked away from the old definitions and deficit-based processes once closely associated with the former term. A sustainability assessment, for example, looks quite different from a needs assessment. Its results invite strategic discussions about investing more in what’s working, testing economies of scale, focusing on inefficient or ineffective activities that threaten long-term sustainability, and stopping activities that are neither sustainable nor central to the mission.

For those who find this proposition worth pursuing, there are two books that should be required reading before any retreat is called in the name of discussing a nonprofit’s future. The first is “*Nonprofit Sustainability*” by Californians Jeanne Bell, Jan Masaoka and Steve Zimmerman. The other is “*The Abundant Not-For-Profit*” by Canadians Colleen Kelly and Lynda Gerty. Not only do I have the privilege of knowing these colleagues personally, I also know the results that have come from their brilliance. The combination of these two books form the basis of my strategic planning work today.

The reality about this seemingly new strategic planning lens is that it really isn’t new. Virtually every successful nonprofit was started by a group people who treated what little they had at the time as “abundance” and they viewed their responsibility from day one as having to grow it.

(Jeffrey R. Wilcox, CFRE, is president and chief executive officer of The Third Sector Company, Inc. Join in on the conversation about this article at the Long Beach Business Journal website www.lbbusinessjournal.com)



PO Box 19796 – Queen Anne Station
Seattle, Washington 98109
(206) 457-4993