

THE THIRD SECTOR REPORT

The Necessary Evils of Leading Successful Community Organizations

By Jeffrey R. Wilcox, CFRE

Every job has unpleasant tasks associated with its completion. Most leaders advance in their careers with a certain amount of scar tissue resulting from painful lessons learned for having avoided distasteful details of their jobs that went overlooked for too long.

For those who lead community organizations, the most poignant example of an unpleasant leadership responsibility is firing a volunteer. When a board member becomes an on-going obstructionist to governance, a volunteer consistently bad-mouths the organization and everyone associated with it, or a life-long volunteer is clearly no longer able or capable of service, leadership is needed.

To avoid the “necessary evil” of ending voluntary relationships that are detrimental to an organization’s ability to advance guarantees an emotional spin cycle of opinions, undermining behaviors, and eventually a vote of no confidence aimed at the leader.

The gut-wrenching truth that holds many leaders back from fulfilling their responsibilities in nonprofit organizations, clubs and associations is that the necessary evils associated with their jobs carry a weightier moral component not found in the profit-making world. Most people are drawn to causes for personal and values-related reasons rather than monetary.

Like their private sector siblings, however, nonprofit leaders who avoid the unpleasant deeds spawn a malignancy that is hard to reverse: People disengage or choose to leave in frustration, emotional confrontations and choosing sides increase, and a passive aggressive way of group interaction envelopes the culture.

In the end, the necessary evils associated with community leadership is the “tough love” that is fundamental to doing good. It’s most commonly needed in four forms in addition to the necessity of severing relationships with board members, other volunteers or staff who are genuinely good people but detrimental to progress.

The second form of a necessary evil is turning away a financial contribution that, in the end, will create more harm than good. The belief that a nonprofit should take any money thrown in its direction is dead wrong. Dollars that will veer an organization away from its mission, exploit the people that it helps, or comes with strings that are more expensive to perform than the actual amount contributed requires a rejection to generosity.

Turning away people with needs that the organization simply cannot or should not address is another painful form of tough love. No nonprofit has been successful in serving its mission well by trying to be everything to everybody. Performing the necessary evil that says, “We can’t help you,” is guaranteed to tug at the very fiber of a community leader’s moral conscience.

A fourth necessary evil in community leadership is ending vital programs or services that are draining the organization of its ability to remain sustainable. Good-hearted people will often wait too long to pull the plug out the fear of having to manage the emotional reactions to the decision. The most courageous act of tough love is to periodically ask if the entire organization, rather than a single aspect of its work, has outlived its relevancy before it faces a slow and painful death.

Bringing situations that are “under the table” to light are the evils that seem to be avoided most and, if left unmanaged, will cause the greatest damage. The most common situations are turning a blind eye to blatant conflicts of interest, consistently ignoring policies, or violating laws in the name of serving others. Sadly, many leaders aren’t in tune with their own organizations enough to know what’s going on under the radar screen that could potentially close them down.

There are, of course, other necessary evils common to both the profit-making and nonprofit sectors including shutting down uses of technology that work against the organization, downsizing operations, or protecting intellectual property that is being misused by others in the name of doing good.

The most memorable nonprofit leaders understood and acted on the necessary evils associated with their jobs. Their acts contributed to their notoriety. In the end, each was not loved by all. Yet, in face of difficult situations, each decided that the love needed most for the good of their beloved organization must be tough.

***The Next Third Sector Report:
The Secret Ingredients in the No-Fail Recipe to Leading Successful Community Organizations***

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