

# The Future Just Walked in Your Door—Or Out of It

*Are the choices you make each day the best ones for your organization's future? Test yourself.*

BY BRUCE GLASRUD

**C**reating a dynamic future for your nonprofit organization doesn't rest solely with processes of trend watching, strategic planning, and creative visioning. It is often as mundane a process as the routine management choices you make in your day-to-day work. These choices can have greater impact on your future viability than the best strategic plan.

To illustrate, let's look at some typical nonprofit management decisions. Ask yourself what you would decide in each case. Then look at the list of pro-future decision indicators to see if you made the most future-oriented choice.

## **Choice 1: Hiring**

You're hiring an entry-level program manager and have narrowed the field to two candidates. On paper, each candidate is suited to the job. Both recently graduated with the required major from a good university. The first candidate arrives for her interview in a modest but sporty car. She is conservatively dressed and well-groomed. She looks just like one of your daughter's wonderful sorority

friends. To break the ice, you ask what she did on spring break. It turns out she went to the same Mexican resort you visited a year ago, and you spend perhaps more interview time than you should discussing your vacations. She impresses you with her charm, enthusiasm, and eagerness to please. She would have many things in common with you and the rest of your staff. The board would adore her too.

The next candidate arrives for her interview on a motorcycle. On her own motorcycle, though, not as some guy's rider. Although well groomed, her taste in apparel is decidedly avant-guard. She also favors pierced jewelry, and you see some artistic tattoos peeking out past her attire. She looks like one of those bohemian students you've always

encouraged your daughter to avoid. You can already hear your board members' tongues wagging. A closer look at her resume reveals a list of involvement in campus organizations you never heard of. Lots of cross-cultural, arts and fringe organizations. She also apparently worked her way through school by holding down almost as many part-time jobs as classes.

You try your icebreaker question on her. Her terse answer reveals she spent her spring break in Mexico as well. However, she spent it helping build sanitation facilities for some rural village you couldn't find on a map. She is polite but wants to stick to business. She asks as many questions of you as you do of her. Tough, penetrating questions about the job and your organization. You get the feeling that she's very analytical and quite smart. Smarter than you, in fact. She might be a handful to supervise. She would question many of your procedures. You wonder whether she would be a good fit for your organizational culture.

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difference,  
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### Pro-Future Decision Indicators

- Remember that good grades and orthodox activities don't prepare someone to strive and thrive in a topsy-turvy future. People with unconventional backgrounds will enable your organization to flourish in the new world disorder.
- Hire for difference, not sameness. We tend to hire people who are just like us or just like the last person we had in the position. Transformation and growth rarely come from an insular organizational culture. Involving diverse critical thinkers in your organization is even more important than involving diverse racial and socioeconomic factions. You need to build cognitive diversity in your staff so you won't be blindsided by social and cultural shifts. Your future demands that you actively seek employees who can be agents of change, not representatives of the status quo.
- Hire for high IQ. Don't be threatened by employees that may be smarter than you. Instead, be pleased that highly intelligent people are attracted to your nonprofit and want to put their talents to use under your leadership.
- Once you have hired for IQ, take advantage of it. This means you must be prepared to have your organization's values, mission, and methods analyzed, questioned, tweaked, and even repudiated. It's a good thing! Unorthodoxy rules the future.

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### Choice 2: Expenditure

Fundraising fairy tales can come true. A foundation has just given your organization a large grant, to use however you like. What do you do with this windfall?

Your first instinct is to earmark the funds to keep your core program alive. The program has been in existence since your organization was founded, but you've been having trouble attracting money for it in recent years. Funders say its outcomes have been steadily declining and they can no longer justify financing it in light of other community needs. They just don't seem to realize how much this program means to your organization. The new grant will save you from having to lay off the long-term staff who have been running this program all these years.

Unfortunately, one of your staff has got wind of the money and wants to use it to start a new program. She says with this grant as "seed money" your organization can revolutionize the way you serve your mission. She has done her homework and worked out a business plan, complete with more stringent outcome measurements than the flagging charter program you are trying to save. In your heart, you know the new program would probably be stellar. Yet, you and many of the board are emotionally vested in the old program and would hate to see the staff alterations that may result from a changeover.

### Pro-Future Decision Indicators

- Reinvesting in the past is not an investment in the future. All programs and services have life cycles. Those life cycles must be recognized and respected. A brave new future demands that we also be brave in realizing when cherished programs have run their useful course.
- Be aware that your loyal staff who have been running a core program for years may themselves desire change. They may be more aware of program shortcomings than you. But they may be hesitant to bring it up because they know you and the board are emotionally tied to the program.
- Invest in innovation. That is what your organization did when it was founded. The trap so many nonprofits fall into is to become so vested in their charter program that new and perhaps better ways of serving their mission go begging.

### Choice 3: Staff Management

You try to be fair with all your employees. Yet, one of your staff acts like a real prima donna—or is he just plain unmotivated? Your other staff are punctual. But this guy strolls in several minutes late and leaves whenever the mood hits him. Even at that, his departure is often well after your official closing time. The guy can't get it right on either end! You know that some of your other staff "team" resent him getting away with this. Yet, as defiant as his behavior seems, he's also one of the most enterprising and creative persons on your staff. For all his chronographically challenged habits, he does work hard and does produce results.



To make things worse, he's been hinting that he'd like to work from home. This troubles you. How can you confirm that he's actually working? Besides, how could you extend that much latitude to all your other staff? It might be a moot question at any rate. You figure this employee is going to quit soon if you don't give him even more freedom. Well, you'll just have to make certain his replacement will be more punctual.

### Pro-Future Decision Indicators

- Don't equate treating everyone the same as treating everyone fairly. You hire different people for different jobs to produce different results. Why should you then force-fit everyone into one work structure? Employees no longer have to occupy the same space at the same time to produce "team" results. What does industrial-age assembly-line clock-watching have to do with an information-age workplace anyway?
- Analyze each of your staff positions. Not everyone needs to work 9-5 unless you have a specific business reason. If you need people to answer phones during "business hours," then they must perform their duties 9-5. But does your grant writer also need to work 9-5? You and all your staff must recognize that different talents can be used at different times. Are all your employees working parameters the same? Of course not. Do all your employees have the right to be treated fairly—but from within the parameters of their individual positions? Of course!
- Analyze your attitude toward flexible schedules and remote

workers. What's really holding you back? Is it your fear of losing command and control? What you may instead lose is your best and brightest workers. If you don't adapt to the bold new workplace, they will walk out your door and go to work at a more progressive organization. You need to control employee output, not employee time. Welcome the new parameters of employment, or you'll be unable to attract and keep the talent you need to sustain your organization.

### Which Choices Did You Make?

Did you make the pro-future decisions in the above scenarios? Or did you find yourself wanting to stick to the status quo?

For many of us, making future-oriented decisions is tough. Each pro-future choice carries risk to your organization, to your staff, and to you as the decision-maker. Yet, in this fast-changing world, there is more risk in keeping to the status quo. If you are truly leading your nonprofit to "build for the future," you must assess each management decision you make in that light.

Leading your nonprofit requires living and breathing a number of future-directed behaviors. Having the "vision-thing" is meaningless unless your daily choices reflect that vision. On a decision-by-decision basis, you determine whether the future just walked in your door—or out of it. ■

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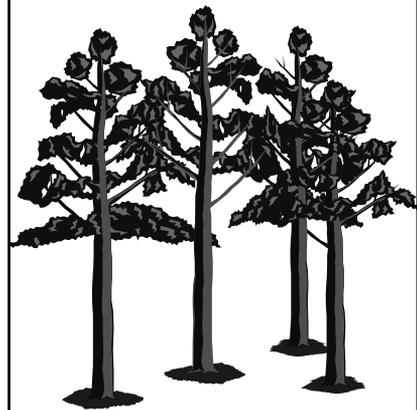
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These publications are available through the Society's Resource Center, 608-274-9777.

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