Put the Expressive Dimension to Work

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To gain the most from employees, cultivate an expressive culture.

by David E. Mason

Many people criticize nonprofit organizations because they're not like businesses. The cure, they think, is to make profits and eliminate volunteers. Believing that economic production is the only reasonable motive for human effort, they regard any entity that fails to generate a surplus of wealth as dysfunctional.

What such critics don't understand is that all organizations, especially nonprofits, have two dimensions:

1. The *instrumental dimension* includes behavior that leads to a concrete, measurable goal, such as a profit.

2. The *expressive dimension* includes action for direct, intangible gratification rather than for a defined goal. Expressive behavior is play for the sake of play, work for the sake of work, energy spent for the sake of the spending.

We often start and sustain organizations because we want to do something (expressive behavior) as much as because we *want something done* (instrumental behavior). Organizations in the

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nonprofit world lend themselves to *doing for the sake of doing*. They are a positive, expressive arena of choice.

We aren't compelled to be involved in the voluntary world. We get involved because nonprofit

organizations can fulfill both our desire to act and our desire to accomplish. Nonprofits are instruments for people who want something done and arenas for people who seek expressive involvement. Those who want to understand nonprofit organizations and operate them at full capacity must understand and use both their instrumental and expressive dimensions.

Has the Pendulum Swung Too Far?

Expressive behavior — activity for its own sake — is characteristic of our species. We've been forming organizations to enhance such natural activity since prehistoric times. We need expressive activity. We hunger for it. If the government outlawed it, we would go underground to get it.

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On the other hand, we also like to improve things. We spend much energy cleaning things and putting them in order. We like to fix broken things. Occasionally, our ardor pushes us to fix unbroken things.

This urge to improve swung like a pendulum in the direction of the nonprofit world in the early 1960s. American business was doing so many good things following World War II that some of us wondered how to apply this know-how to nonprofit organizations. When we tried it, it worked. Our nonprofits became more efficient, more effective, and more accountable. They grew and prospered and spawned more organizations. Outsiders began to notice the voluntary sector as if it had just been born.

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The pendulum may now have swivelled too much. Nonprofits' successes are attracting those who should be in business. They want nonprofit tax benefits, so they devise joint ventures to link those benefits to the profit motive. They try to transform nonprofits into for-profits. Some even start their new businesses under a nonprofit cloak.

Some financially challenged nonprofit leaders have piggybacked on this trend. The changes they've made in their organizations verge on throwing the baby out with the bath water. They're losing the motive power that nonprofits gain from expressive behavior. The swing of the pendulum has helped the sector by bringing in some positive business practices, but it's now time for the pendulum to

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move toward the center again, before it ceases to be a pendulum and becomes a wrecking ball.

Specifically, the nonprofit world has swung far from its base of broad voluntary participation and too far toward the practice of hiring paid professionals to do what volunteers once did. It has swung too far from support by contributors and toward fees for service. It has swung too far away from principle and toward expediency, away from affiliation toward efficiency, away from serving participants toward serving managers, and away from independence toward dependence on government, corporate, and foundation grants. Most of all, it is swinging away from the expressive dimension.

We need a new point of view. We need to recognize nonprofit organizations' relationship to people's expressive needs. That new perspective may tilt the pendulum in a better direction, conserving the best from our recent gains but also capturing our new enlightenment.

How Great Is the Chasm between Sectors?

We have only recently recognized the commonalties among the diverse entities that make up the nonprofit world. Indeed, *voluntary nonprofit sector* is itself a new term, and the study of the sector is still maturing. Gifted scholars are

shining a light into many dark crevices and making significant discoveries. Yet a problem affects their studies: Many of them know more about their discipline than about the inner reality of nonprofit organizations. Moreover, they start with theories developed for other species of organizations. And when they look at nonprofit organizations through those lenses, they search for a reality that is not the nonprofit reality, and they often ignore the expressive dimension.

A profound cultural chasm separates the business and government sectors from the nonprofit world. Typically, business owners worry that expressive activity may undermine profits; to them, it is dysfunctional. So they work to reduce expressive activities or to harness them for instrumental ends. Their norms say, "Do that sort of thing on your own time. You're here to work!" In nonprofit organizations, on the other hand, we optimize expressive activities; we often see them as ends rather than means, as legitimate in themselves.

Government's power controls. Businesses' exchange mechanisms produce profit. Nonprofits, according to Peter Drucker, produce changed human beings.[1] Similarly, Thomas Jeavons writes, "The work of business revolves around wealth. The work of government revolves around power. Around what, then, does the work of...nonprofit organizations revolve? I would contend

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that the answer to this question is values." Nonprofits are engaged in both "providing a service and making a statement about the values that undergird their motivation for and commitment to service."[2]

As organizations that emphasize human values above profit, nonprofits elicit great commitment and loyalty. They are communities where individuals can function without economic pressures and reach goals consistent with their personal agendas. Nonprofits are incubators for innovation without utilitarian constraints. They're where individuals are appreciated for who they are. In short, they are our primary expressive arenas.

Are Expressive Outputs Worthwhile?

Expressive behaviors have been ignored and condemned for so long that it's vital to ask whether they are valid organizational outputs. If the answer to that question is yes, nonprofits suddenly appear in a different light. Those who have had a problem fitting nonprofits into their paradigms will have to realize that, far from lacking an important ingredient, nonprofits have a double advantage, since their outputs are both instrumental and expressive.

Expressive outputs, unlike instrumental outputs, are often unstated. Yet satisfied expressive participants are both consumers and products of nonprofit organizations. Should we not have organizations that feed the needs of people whose other activities restrict their expressive behavior? Is that not a legitimate goal? For example, an adult literacy program involving volunteer tutors has the instrumental output of X number of adults increasing their reading ability by Y number of grade levels. It also has the expressive output of A number of tutors learning B number of skills and experiencing C amount of satisfaction. One might add the serendipitous benefit of Z amount of cross-cultural rapport. Who can say that benefits

to the learners are more important than benefits to the teachers? Surely, both benefits contribute to society.

Any organization will appear inefficient if an observer compares its costs to only part of its outputs. Effective evaluation of nonprofit organizations must include both their instrumental and expressive outputs. There is no reason to see expressive behavior as dysfunctional and to attempt to purge it. Our society has a robust business sector for organizations that exclude "unnecessary" expressive action. For nonprofit organizations,

the expressive dimension is crucial and should be consciously acknowledged, enhanced, encouraged, and enshrined among their cultural norms.

Expressive activity in organizations is important not only because people *need it as an end in itself* but also because *the opportunity for expressive activity attracts and motivates participants to work for instrumental purposes.* As one example, volunteers who work for charitable causes are more likely than other people to contribute money to charity.

Participation in expressive organizations influences decisions that affect people's lives. Listen in at an informal reunion of people who once worked together on a campaign or project. The conversation will revolve around humorous, difficult, or even unsuccessful problem solving and decision making. Participation "plugs people in," giving them a functional identity.[3]

Consider how often we base our images of individuals on information about their group affiliations. Participation establishes part of our reality. We see this when people change their affiliations and then begin to see the world from a different point of view.

Though studies tend to discount expressive behavior, we need to recognize it as natural, legitimate, and potent in achieving a wide range of ends. The more we understand expressive behavior and apply this understanding, the more effective our nonprofit leadership and our nonprofit organizations will be. ∎

Footnotes

[1] Drucker, Peter, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization,* New York: HarperCollins (www.harpercollins.com).

[2] Jeavons, Thomas, "When Management Is the Message: Relating Values to Management Practice in Nonprofit Organizations," *Nonprofit Management and Leadership,* 1992, 2(4).

[3] Mason, David E., "How to Build a Cohesive Organization," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 22, No. 6 (www.snpo.org).

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20 Ways to Optimize Expressive Outputs in Your Organization

1. **Encourage** expressive behavior through rituals and ceremonies.

2. **When measuring outcomes, include expressive criteria** as part of the calculation.

3. **Provide training** not only for utilitarian reasons but also to help employees learn skills of personal value to them.

4. **Constantly remind** employees — both paid and volunteer — of your organization's traditions, purposes, and objectives.

5. **Use teams and task groups** to boost comradery and reinforce common values and goals.

6. **Develop a communication plan** that inspires, motivates, stimulates interaction, and builds cohesion among everyone in your organization.

7. **Acknowledge and enhance** expressive behavior by making it part of your organization's cultural norms.

8. **Celebrate** successes throughout the organization.

9. **Make employees feel part of the organization by sharing stories** of its founding and key events in its history.

10. **Give employees a sense of ownership** in the organization's plans, goals, and decisions by encouraging their input and keeping lines of communication open.

11. **Add an expressive dimension to your staff meetings** by asking people to share personal triumphs.

12. **Create an environment of integrity, openness, and sincerity** in which trust can flourish.

13. **Offer frequent occasions** for employees to socialize and have fun together.

14. **Paint word portraits** of the dream you envision so that others can picture it and share in its attainment.

15. **Tell personal stories** of how you overcome problems and reach goals to show others in the organization how to do the same.

16. **Give employees opportunities** for self-expression, personal challenge, visible achievements, and development of abilities. Let them try new things.

17. **Recognize and reward** accomplishments, and praise the work of both teams and individuals.

18. **Ask volunteer and paid employees** about their personal goals, and match those goals to the work they do.

19. **Help people make the connection** between their work and the organization's mission and vision. Reinforce to them how they are making a difference in the world.

20. **Break the routine.** Provide new perspectives. Help people see things in different ways.

For more on creating an expressive culture, see the series of articles on communications by Larry Lauer in *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 11, No. 5 to Vol. 15, No. 2, www.snpo.org.