



Idealism and Activism in Today's Nonprofit World

Nonprofits can — and must — redefine activism so that it's integral to their work.

By Doug Sauer

Are charitable nonprofits idealistic? Fundamentally, yes. Idealism starts with the individual. Virtually every nonprofit originated from a vision held by its founders to achieve some fundamental good, the pursuit of which would be never-ending. These ideals were translated into mission statements that evolved in concert with changing environments over time and were, and increasingly are, shaped by laws and restrictions — a sort of regulated idealism if you will.

Are charitable nonprofits idealistic? Fundamentally, yes.

Idealism breeds action, and nonprofit organizations are the vehicle for individuals with a collective charitable purpose to organize, raise resources, and act. In this era of accountability, compliance, restricted advocacy, practical outcomes, and strategic competitiveness, maintaining spirited idealism in the sector is a challenge, especially for the typical overworked, under-compensated, and often under-appreciated nonprofit executive.

Nevertheless, our sector is amazingly resilient and perseveres as an attractive workplace and volunteer opportunity for those motivated by the desire to build community and make a difference in the lives of others. Consider the business person with an MBA who leaves the corporate arena to pursue work in the nonprofit sector for personal satisfaction or the retiree who devotes volunteer time to board service.

Given all this, one would think that nonprofits would embrace activism, but it is clear that most nonprofit executives and board leaders do not. The explanation seems to have little to do with the true nature and impact of nonprofit work. Rather, the reasons have to do with the popular definition of “activism” as well as with regulatory, stakeholder, and funding restraints, both real and perceived.

Definitions are important, however; witness the current debate as to whether “electronic surveillance” is the same as “wiretapping” in defining spying. Likewise, according to the dictionary, “activism” means taking “direct action, often confrontational, such as a demonstration or strike, in opposition to or support of a cause or social change.” For some reason, the “direct action in support of a cause” part of this definition has been hijacked in our culture by the “confrontational demonstration in opposition to a cause” component. No wonder most nonprofits are uncomfortable with the label. I would argue that sheltering domestic violence victims, feeding the hungry, tutoring the illiterate, rehabilitating neighborhoods, lobbying to protect animals from abuse, and promoting artistic expression are just as much activism as a street demonstration. I would also argue that these everyday, “quieter” and less obvious forms of nonprofit activism have a tremendous, immeasurable impact on change in our society.

The nonprofit sector's vast array of approaches in pursuing a diverse range of missions is unimaginably creative. This diversity includes

the vitally important work of social activists who organize to fight the many injustices of our society. Times are changing, however, and our sector's social activists are no longer just those on the political left. Social causes, too, are diverse, presenting an interesting challenge to the National Council of Nonprofit Associations and state associations who are trying to find common and meaningful sector-wide policy agendas.

Our sector's idealism and activism are embedded in our missions, values, human capital, and everyday work. We need to continually recognize it, nurture it, and protect it, in all its forms. ■

Your Library of Policy, Activism, & Advocacy Resources

For more on uniting and gaining a voice, see these *Nonprofit World* articles, available at www.snpo.org/members:

- **Building Networks, Mobilizing Forces** (Vol.12, No. 4)
- **How to Lobby without Breaking the Law** (Vol.14, No. 5)
- **Ready to Erupt: How Can Coalitions Avert Conflict?** (Vol.16, No. 4)
- **Finessing City Hall: Coalitions, Lobbying, and the Question of Power** (Vol.6, No. 1)

Doug Sauer (dsauer@ccsnys.org) is executive director of the Council of Community Services of New York State, Inc., www.ccsnys.org.