



Divided We Lose

Conservatives aren't the enemy. They're a valuable part of our compassionate community. Let's be sure to treat them that way.

By Bruce Glasrud

No one can escape the shrill and often shrewish political debate these days. Civic dialogue throughout our history has often been anything but civil. Yet while it's a mistake to imagine this is historically new, it's also a mistake to ignore the impact it may have on nonprofits.

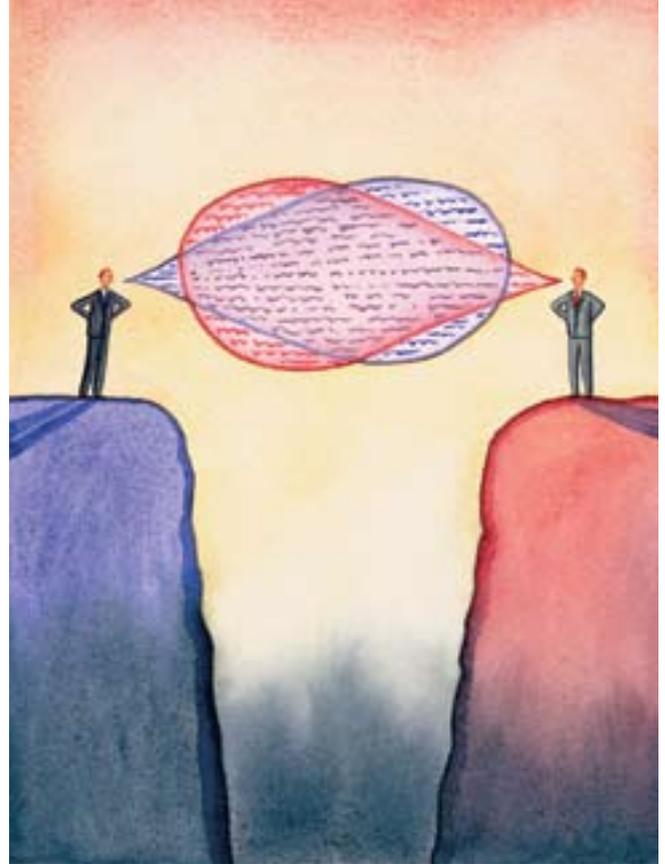
It's no secret that the nonprofit sector is largely oriented toward liberal causes. But that doesn't mean we should treat conservatives like the enemy. Instead, we need to work to win their support. A too-partisan stance isn't in the best interests of civil society nor the nonprofit sector.

One of the most troubling things I've been observing is that many liberals reflexively label conservatives as Ebenezer Scrooges. It's illogical to think that how you vote determines how benevolent you are. The true gauge of your compassion is how you respond to people's needs, what charitable contributions you make, and how much you volunteer in your community.

Public support and sustainability for the nonprofit sector are at stake.

Conservatives uncharitable? Not hardly! I'll guarantee that after a Tea Party rally, some of those demonstrators rush off to do their regular Meals-On-Wheels route. I'll further guarantee you that conservatives often go nose-to-nose with liberals on personal contributions to charity.

Divisive rhetoric isn't the sole realm of conservatives. Liberals have too often been no better. And acting on partisan impulses is one of the worst thing nonprofit leaders can do. There are forces eager to propose heavy regulation or even revocation of our nonprofit status and to demonize the sector. Reviling those forces with



our own divisive rhetoric plays into their hands.

I'm not urging nonprofits to remain silent in what may be the most pivotal point in their history. I am, however, arguing against alienating conservative and moderate citizens by contributing to the uncivil din. Public support and sustainability for the nonprofit sector are at stake.

Here's how to modulate your public "voice" in these troubled times:

Keep well informed. If you make statements on an issue, make sure you can back them up with current citations and research. What you learned back in college, or even in your last professional enrichment seminar, has since changed.

Don't use partisan rhetoric. Avoid sound-bite shibboleths such as "bigoted," "racist," and "homophobic." Stick to the logic and merits of an issue. You won't persuade when you tirade.

Always be the strong and respected community leader. Present yourself with genteel reserve and dignity. Make sure your statements and responses are convincing but respectful, especially when in disagreement. Remember what Martin Luther King, Jr. accomplished by exuding those qualities. Don't be baited into acting otherwise.

Be a force for change. Nonprofits must support citizens of all political persuasions. They must help people feel they're part of a community that's not tied to a particular partisan agenda. Only then will positive change occur. ■

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