



“You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger...”

What trends can you expect in the next five years? The next 10 years? It's time to get ready.

BY BRUCE GLASRU D

When I'm introduced as a futurist, I'm often asked to “predict” something. I must admit that, despite the logo at the top of this column, futurists aren't fortunetellers. Rather, professional futurists engage in rigorous studies within their area of specialty. They cultivate broad-based, wide-angle knowledge to create “what if” scenarios of what the future might hold for a certain community. They don't make predictions—that's what those dial-a-psyche folks do.

Yet some trend indicators are crucial and credible enough to justify making a few forecasts. Here are trends your nonprofit organization should be aware of, along with suggestions for ways to deal with their implications. Fasten your seatbelts!

In Your Next Five Years—

Your Organization Will Be Caught in a Cultural-Wars Crossfire. Diversity's other shoe is dropping. Just ask your local Boy Scout Council. When its stand on gays as scout leaders was “outed” in the media, the scouting movement faced a plethora of issues that quickly compounded upon themselves. Confronted by groups critical of its stance, the Boy Scout Council found itself

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dealing with folks it hadn't previously pictured as stakeholders.

The same thing could happen to your organization. A mounting collection of social factions will increasingly question your accountability to their “community.” Much of the flack will emanate from your fellow nonprofits pushing their own agendas. More than one nonprofit group has aggressively backed other nonprofits into a corner on matters of inclusiveness.

In a diverse society, you will find yourself pressured to respond to issues you may consider outside your mission. But you can't ignore these pressures. Here are ways you can keep from getting caught in the crossfire:

- *Be proactive!* Keep current with social mores, and maintain a high learning curve on pluralism. Nothing gets an organization in trouble faster than outdated social views. Myopia virus is equally contagious to liberals and conservatives.

- *Be proactive!* It's a given that your organization will have to take a controversial stand at some point in our extraordinarily evolving society. Be brave, but do your homework on what your stance may trigger in some community factions. Run a cost-benefit analysis on all your policies and social positions. Project out your financial, social, and mission arena impacts.
- *Be proactive!* Test your policy positions on outsiders. You might be too innocent or too insular. Testing potential policies with an external focus group is a lot more fun than doing damage control in a hostile community. Proactive communications strategy can prevent a TV crew from showing up at your next board meeting armed with some very uncomfortable questions.
- *Be proactive!* The old wisdom in advertising is that if you have to think too long about how to market your product, you've probably got a bad product. The same holds true for your organization's policy.



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- *Be proactive!* Sticking to your principles is admirable. Being poorly prepared to defend those principles with well-reasoned and well-articulated policies is not.

You Will Have Many Visits From Mr. Murphy. Here is your “Dark Stranger.” You’re probably familiar with Mr. Murphy and his laws. You can expect he will be full of new ways for “stuff” to happen.

You can’t run. You can’t hide. You can only try to mitigate Mr. Murphy’s impact on your organization. Mitigation starts with recognizing that what you *don’t* do can create more problems than what you *do*. Inertia and adherence to traditional practices are albatrosses that will bring you down. For example, if you’re not maintaining a solid risk management effort in your organization, Mr. Murphy will certainly find that crack in your armor. It’s going to get harder and harder to recover if you don’t anticipate and prepare for change.

Mr. Murphy is writing a whole new set of laws for your future. Here are ways to keep him from coming around too often:

- *Be proactive!* Murphy’s Law clearly states that the more you wish for something to blow away so you don’t have to deal with it, the more it hangs tough.
- *Be proactive!* Get your board members on the proactivity platform. They can’t help you deal

with Murphy’s Laws if they like to “just wait and see.”

- *Be proactive!* Pay now on the installment plan or pay through the nose later. The beauty of mitigation strategies is that they are incremental and adjustable. You can’t say the same about operating in the reactive and remedial mode.

Your Long-term Employees Will Turn Out To Be Your Biggest Liabilities. At a time when many nonprofit executives are struggling to attract and retain staff, this forecast might sound loopy. Yet, for many organizations, the old paradigm of high retention as a sign of good management will soon be over.

Be careful when you praise retention. An employee with five years of experience in your organization may, in effect, have only one year of experience—repeated five times! That’s hardly an asset in a high-speed, rapid-growth society.

When long-term employees leave, it is often bewailed that a lot of institutional knowledge leaves with them. That lament bespeaks poor organizational communication and poor management. It means that your long-term employee has been hoarding knowledge—a definite no-no in a collaborative, knowledge-age workplace. Here are some ways to maintain the viability of your staff:

- *Be proactive!* If employees resign because they’re unwilling to go with the flow of change, that’s a good thing. Long-term employees are assets only if they operate in a big-picture, wide-angle role—

regardless of their specific job. Institutional knowledge is only valuable if there is a cross-functional, cross-tenure exchange of information. This exchange is crucial to your organization’s success.

- *Be proactive!* Too often, the long-term employee functions not as a wisdom-keeper but a gatekeeper. Your turnover problem may be due to a gatekeeper thwarting change and stifling proactive thinking with cries of “We’ve always done it *this* way!” If creative, change-friendly employees are bailing out your door, it may be because a change-unfriendly staff member is holding it open for them.
- *Be proactive!* Transform your old employees into new employees. Cross-train them. Retrain them. Reassign them. Your long-term staff must contribute to your organization’s evolution beyond the bounds of their job descriptions. Make it explicit that both people and their jobs must constantly evolve.
- *Be proactive!* Evaluate long-term staff on their ability to foster change, ensuring that new ideas will be heard and tried.

Your Biggest Funder Will Be an Entrepreneur You Haven’t Even Heard of Yet. The entrepreneurs driving our new economy present a different mindset than traditional funders. The entrepreneurial mentality is creative, competitive, and hands-on. Here are some ways to find and cultivate future funders:

- *Be proactive!* Research the new moneymakers with as much time and effort as you do your traditional old-money sources.
- *Be proactive!* Don’t disregard a company or entrepreneur that’s in

a start-up phase. A well-planned cause-related marketing partnership may be a growth opportunity for both of your organizations. Corporate and nonprofit organizations that “grow up together” can form a lasting bond of mutual support.

- *Be proactive!* Entrepreneurs don't have the time or patience for the style of appeals you presently use with foundations. Don't approach an entrepreneur without doing targeted research on their industry and lifestyle to make certain they're like-minded with regard to your mission.
- *Be proactive!* Entrepreneurs will treat you the way that investors treat them. Don't contact an entrepreneur with anything less than a concrete, business-like proposal.

In Your Next 10 Years—

Your Core Mission Will Be Provided in a Way You Never Imagined. Scientific advances will have major effects on every aspect of the nonprofit sector. Computer-

aided *everything* will be a given. What will also have tremendous influence on nonprofits will be biotechnology, robotics, chemistry, climatology, and genetic engineering. To keep pace with these advances, follow these tips:

- *Be proactive!* Be open to new ways of serving your mission. Be ready to augment your high-touch with high-tech.
- *Be proactive!* Pandora's box of science and technology is open wide. Trying to shut the lid is neither proactive nor possible. Proactive organizations don't ban the future—they build it!

So much for making predictions, or forecasts. For all the prognostication methods ever developed by humankind, none is as effective as an open and inquisitive mind. Our only certainty is uncertainty. Our only way to see the future is to look for it. ■

Selected References

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These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, 608-274-9777, Ext. 221, www.danenet.org/snpo.



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