



Thinking out of Pandora's Box

Nonprofits need a paradigm shift of mythic proportions.

BY BRUCE GLASRUUD

In Greek mythology, the jealous Gods gifted an extraordinary box to the beautiful Pandora. When she opened it, all the evils of the world flew forth and have ever since afflicted humankind.

According to legend, the last thing that flew out was Hope. Still, some believe that Hope remained in the box.

In a sort of modern mythology, we might say that the evils Pandora set loose provided the need for nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit professionals envision themselves as modern emissaries of Hope. They battle the evils of disease, inequality, hunger, environmental degradation, and all the rest. Yet, nonprofits often feel that Hope has taken up permanent residence in that box. Hope seems to give us short shrift in inspiring our efforts.

Perhaps the problem is that Hope is unable to think out of the box in which it's trapped. In that light, the capacity to think out of Pandora's box is a critical skill for tomorrow's nonprofit leaders. Here are some ways to do so:

Forget the Problem-Solving Paradigm.

The orientation of many nonprofits is to solve problems. This stance presents roadblocks in creating a positive future. It's as if nonprofits are following the old health-care model that medicine is now trying to replace—the practice of treating the symptoms rather than preventing the illness. As medicine moves toward a wellness and prevention model, nonprofits ought to follow suit.

To accomplish this paradigm shift, the medical field has been conducting more research into diseases than ever before. In the nonprofit field, however, research has been sorely lacking.

Too many nonprofit missions are formed around out-of-date anecdotal evidence. Nonprofit programs are often shaped more by the personal passions of staff and board than by research results.

Sure, there are small pockets of research and development in the nonprofit field. But we need to increase these efforts in both scope

and rigor. We must eschew self-fulfilling “research” in which questions are rigged to produce our desired findings. If asked in a court of law, some of what passes for research questions in our field would engender shouts of, “Objection! Leading the witness!”

We must also integrate research into our service delivery rather than relegating it to manuscripts. We must put research findings to work, not let them rest in professional journals.

Many nonprofits do focus on preventative interventions for their clients. Yet, most are still only symptom-treating interventions, like Pandora's attempt to close the lid on her box of evils. This conduct exemplifies reactive, not proactive thinking.

With the problem-solving paradigm as their guide, some nonprofits have become walking solutions in search of a problem. They believe they need to “find a problem and fix it” to attract funding.

That's no way to position ourselves for the future. Instead, let's think out of Pandora's box by looking at new ways to deal with our major social problems:

Gangs: Social scientists have studied gangs for decades. Conclusions abound in the literature. Some studies postulate that lack of a stable family is a major contributor to gang membership. Therefore,

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under our problem-solving paradigm, we must strengthen the family to combat gangs.

After decades of programs that have tried to strengthen the family, however, gangs are more prevalent than ever. Our solution hasn't worked because we're treating the symptoms.

Take a closer look at the allure of gangs: their "colors," their "turf," their "code." Young people join gangs to gain real social acceptance, real status, and real power in their community. They obviously don't get what they need from their families, schools, or any place else in the community.

Instead of building better families, how about building better gangs! Why not create gangs that are focused on positive outcomes, yet provide the status and clout young people crave?

Clearly, our youth programs haven't filled the bill. They are adult-driven, lacking the vigor, esprit, and sense of youth ownership that make gangs click. They are too squeaky-clean, with none of the dark, edgy, rebellious counter-culture look and feel that attracts alienated youth.

Create a future-positive gang in a future-negative guise, and you can rest on your laurels, my friends! Better yet, get out of youth's way, and they will create it themselves!

AmeriCorps has, so far, missed the boat on its real "gang" potential. Colin Powell coulda made a cool gang out of AmeriCorps if he'd been given a free hand. Too bad he's sorta busy these days.

Drugs: You don't have to go far to find critics of our long-failing war on drugs. Some of our staunchest

anti-drug warriors have, at least privately, admitted defeat. They recognize how much our children, communities, and personal liberties have been sacrificed by this "war"—kind of like that village we destroyed in Vietnam in order to "save" it.

In a prime example of our dilemma, research shows that programs such as D.A.R.E. aren't producing the outcomes we'd hoped for. Yet, we don't seem to care about this research. Our problem-solving mindset simply likes the D.A.R.E. program. Therefore, we keep on funding it.

We continue to throw our resources into the old solutions that failed us during Prohibition. Haven't we learned from these failures that part of our human psyche just wants to get "high"?

Thinking out of the box, we might turn our attention away from preventing drug use. We might work instead toward producing kinder, gentler drugs.

What if a fraction of the money spent on our drug war went to researching and producing safe, non-toxic drugs? What if people could find the euphoria they crave without becoming addicted or suffering dangerous consequences? A risk-free ecstasy pill or electronic trance-inducing device could have put the Colombian Cartel out of business long ago. Yet, we are firmly vested in treating the problem, not creating the solution.

Try New Ways to Create Breakthrough Thinking.

You may take issue with my two admittedly radical examples.

Thinking out of the box is bound to stir up hornets' nests. Yet, it's such thinking that produces breakthroughs. Let's look at ways to think out of Pandora's box by examining what sort of box it is:

Understand Causality.

One way to think out of Pandora's box is to spot the difference between correlation and causality. Even researchers confuse the two. Sometimes they do so by mistake, but often they deliberately disguise correlations to further their agendas.

Causality is the relationship between cause and effect. Correlation is a complementary, parallel, or reciprocal relationship, not necessarily cause-and-effect related.

If a study reports that nine out of ten homeless people chew tobacco, you won't build a program around tobacco cessation as a cure for homelessness. That is, you won't accept that correlation as causality. Yet other, more subtle correlations may appear causal if not thoroughly questioned. Too many nonprofit efforts are launched by such misconstrued data.

Ban Stereotyping.

Erroneous stereotyping of groups often influences how we work with our clients and shapes our relationships with our own staff. The stereotyping of ideas is also too prevalent in our sector. For example, how many times have you heard expressions like, "That idea is too



Caution: You may find that your opposition comes up with a good idea from time to time.

corporate to work in a nonprofit agency”? The speaker unfairly stereotypes both sectors and thus limits their contributions to society.

Don't Be Afraid of Espionage.

Nonprofits seem to lack the wits to profile those who oppose their missions. All over the country, nonprofit leaders grouse about those “mean-spirited conservatives.” Yet, how many have studied their “opposition” by subscribing to a conservative magazine or reading books by authors who oppose their efforts? Try it, and you'll discover many ways to thwart your enemies by using their own words against them. Caution: You may also find that your opposition comes up with a good idea from time to time.

Challenge the “Truths” of Your Profession.

Ask yourself these questions:

- **How much does your professional sphere know** in actual fact? Is the knowledge in your field based on solid data or repeti-

tion of “truths” that “everybody knows”?

- **Is your knowledge base** truly up-to-date? When was that last study done? Was it challenged?
- **Who is on the leading edge** of new research?
- **Do your judgments rely** on previous professional schooling or training? Have things changed since you went to school? They probably have—even if that was only a few years ago.

Move Beyond the Box.

Are you getting the idea that thinking out of the box requires examining its outside boundaries, not just its inside margins? If so, you're on the way to dealing with this “box thing” in a new way.

Get used to serving your mission using complex, multi-level thinking processes. Entertain a variety of responses to an issue. Always think out of Pandora's box when working on complex social problems. Remember that problems aren't simple things; that's why we call them problems. ■

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These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, 800-424-7367, www.snpo.org.



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