For All Our Corporate Look...

Has your organization sold its soul? Is there a way to regain it?

BY BRUCE GLASRUD

In recent years, our sector has taken on many attributes of our for-profit cousins. The nonprofit "corporation" is ascendant. Not altogether a bad thing, the corporatization of the nonprofit sector has reduced wishful thinking as a force in delivering services to the community. Yet, while we have mirrored the attributes of the for-profit sector, many worry that we might have lost our soul in the process.

Yes, we've come a long way, baby! Yet, for all our corporate look and behavior, we are still thought of and largely act like second-class organization citizens. While corporatization has given us a more professional look, it has yet to polish our image enough that the community thinks we should be paid a professional wage. I guess we'll have to wait for that big 401K in heaven.

Can we regain our lost soul and the community's respect? Yes, if we each take a hard look at our own organization and our sector as a whole. Here are some of the things we need to do:

Revitalizing Research

For all our corporate look, our research practices remain largely shoddy and often self-serving. Whether gathering data for outcome-based accountability or framing needs assessments and background statements, we're woefully lacking in our ability to discern and articulate cause-and-effect relationships.

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If we can't accurately link stimulus and response, how on earth can we purport to bring forth community change?

Some of our participant survey and feedback questionnaires are so skewed as to isolate the "correct" response that justifies our program. How, then, can we look down our noses at such as Enron and Big Tobacco?

When will we launch our initiatives based on hard research, not soft hearsay? When will nonprofits and funders provide for the creation of bona fide Research Departments? When a Research Department has equal clout with the Development Department, the Marketing Department, and the Program Department, we will have made quantum progress in our ability to deliver true value to our community.

Sensible and Sustainable Sector Growth

We still have much to learn about serving the "marketplace" of human and social needs. Sure, the nonprofit sector is the fastest growing area of our economy. But, rather than pat ourselves on the back, perhaps we should look at why we're growing so fast. Certainly, a large part of our growth is due to caring, committed people striking off to make a difference in their community. However, a good deal of that caring is launched without doing much of that aforementioned research. Many people start nonprofits without a vigorous investigation of the problem they want to solve. They are especially lax in "competitive intelligence," identifying existing agencies that may be already working on that problem.

Are nonprofits truly corporatized in their thinking? It seems not. Too many are committing marketing blunders along the lines of building a McDonald's without realizing that there's a Burger King right across the street! This isn't thoughtful community building. It is willful and wasteful do-gooding.

As the number of nonprofits skyrockets, whining about lack of funding grows louder. In turn, the funding community bemoans having more and more of us with our hands out for dollars. We must find someone (else) to blame for this mess! Those darn politicians are probably behind it all. Why, if it weren't for them, surely we'd have enough money for all the nonprofits we'd ever want to start!

Before a new organization is granted a 501(c)3 status, perhaps we should require the equivalent of a patent or

copyright search. Or, at least a checklist like the following:

• First, produce some valid research on the problem or condition.

• Next, propose an evolutionary service or service delivery scheme, not just a rehash of what's already offered by another agency.

• At the very least, display a map proving there isn't another agency similar to the one you are proposing within, say, a six-block radius.

• Better yet, prove you are aware of that other agency and are willing to compete with them for funding by actually providing a better program or a service delivery improvement!

This isn't to urge a moratorium on new nonprofits. We desperately need new ideas in our sector. New nonprofits do need to be given a chance. We need them to drive out those older nonprofits that are resting on their laurels and haven't had an innovative thought in years. Our field is sodden with organizations rehashing old solutions and duplicating efforts. This, because they haven't done adequate research and marketplace analysis in their mission sphere before launching their organizations.

Ethics, Integrity... and Other Stuff That Sometimes We Don't Quite Understand

We like to visualize ourselves as morally superior to our corporate cousins. Yet, our workplaces are rife with the same characters that Scott Adams lampoons in his Dilbert cartoons. Yes, friends, here's one area where we can truly compete head-to-head with the for-profits. Admit it; we have the same micro-managing executives, the same soulless HR practices, and the same toxic organizational cultures. The difference is, our ills are covered up under layers of warm-fuzzies.

Independent Sector recently came out with a Ethics and Accountability initiative "to provide tools and guidance to help the boards and staff of nonprofit organizations develop clear standards and procedures for ethical behavior." Essentially, Independent Sector wants us to follow a code of ethics "at a time when the public is concerned about the ethics of…(insert a list that covers everybody)." Well, hooray. Under something they're calling "Obedience to the Unenforceable: Ethics and the Nation's Voluntary and Philanthropic Community," they've even created a whole compendium of nonprofit standards for us to use as a resource. "Obedience to the Unenforceable?" Wow. Sounds like something a preacher would come up with when he ran plumb out of sermon titles! There surely are a lot of sinners in our sector. Otherwise, the Independent Sector organization wouldn't have gone to all this trouble, right? Face it; all the fancy ethics statements in the world won't improve upon one good look in the mirror.

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We all like to think of our staff as dedicated to our mission. They work hard because the mission makes them passionate about their work. Hooray for us! However, it's often that same dedication that lets them overlook their shabby treatment by the executives and board members who oversee how that mission is served. Hooray for us? The etiology of "compassion fatigue" in nonprofit staff may be less cause-centered and more management-centered. So sure, go ahead and put an ethics statement up on the wall—put it right up there next to your mission statement. You'll then have done your bit to restore the public trust, eh? But what about the trust of your staff? If you want an ethical challenge, how about assessing what your mission is inspiring your staff to excuse, in you and your board?

Pay-Back Time?

There's one final challenge for the nonprofit sector. We must bring value back to the for-profits! We're indebted to them for teaching us much about organizational management. We're also indebted to them for financial and volunteer support. Now, how do we pay them back? Sure, we serve our mission. Sure, we make our communities better places in which to work and live. Yet, what can we directly teach the for-profits that will improve them organizationally, as they have improved us? If we're truly different in character from for-profits, then there must be something we can offer. Otherwise, our mantle of moral superiority is no more than a mythical garment woven of warm-fuzzies. Otherwise, we don't have that much of a soul to lose to corporatization after all.

Meeting these challenges won't be easy. Doing so will, however, make us more dynamic and effective in the difficult times ahead. Fortunately for you, dear reader, *Nonprofit World* will continue to provide all the ideas, timely information, and practical tools you'll need to evolve and thrive in the years to come. ■

Selected References

Glasrud, Bruce, "Being Proactive Means Being Pro-Future," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 5.

Glasrud, Bruce, "Brave New Workers in a Brave New Workplace," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 6.

Glasrud, Bruce, "Create an Environment of Discovery," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 3.

Glasrud, Bruce, "Your Future Just Walked in the Door–Or Out of It," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 4.

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

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