

# All Events Come from a Distance

Are you on top of the most important trends? Here's a foresight starter set.

By Bruce Glasrud

As soon as nonprofit folks find out I'm a futurist, they usually ask what the latest trends are in the nonprofit arena. Although I'm flattered to be asked, I'm a bit dissatisfied with the question. I'd much rather have nonprofit executives ask about trends they've already identified in their particular mission sphere. Then I can further sleuth out those trends, verify their insights, and help them strategize around the omens and portents.

Too often, though, nonprofit executives become mired in the day-to-day struggle of keeping their organizations afloat. Thus, they fail to attend to that "better future" they purport to create for our communities.

## A Quick Quiz

Let's run a little exercise:

- 1. List three major trends in your specific mission arena. (Don't put down anything about funding woes. That is less a trend than a fact of life.)**
- 2. Note how many years you've known about each trend.**
- 3. Now indicate how many years each trend was probably growing before you discovered it. This will need to be a guess, but make it an honest one.**

What do your answers tell you about the trends in your field? How often have important trends snuck up on you? How many trends have you known about yet disregarded till they got too big to discount? Is there a gap between a trend's arrival and the moment you acted to take advantage of that trend? If so, you may benefit from doing some trend sleuthing.

## Track the Trends

Here's how to use your increased awareness of the trends shaping the future of your organization.

**Admit to yourself that you don't know what you don't know.** No matter how long your professional tenure, no matter how recent your degree or continuing education, things have changed. Intellectual complacency is not a management survival skill.

**Set aside a time every week to do professional reading.** *Nonprofit World* is a good place to start, especially for general nonprofit information. But also keep abreast of your specific mission sphere. Subscribe to print and online newsletters and blogs that reflect the leading edge of thought-leadership in your field. Read them faithfully. Don't let them pile up.


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**Block out a time every week to analyze trends gleaned from your weekly reading.** Map out possible “what-if” strategies you could use to rise to their challenges. You'll eliminate a lot of future floundering.

Nonprofit execs desperately need to add trend tracking to their list of routine daily tasks. Nonprofit boards need to add trend-tracking expertise to the list of competencies they look for when hiring an executive. Boards themselves must adjust their focus toward oncoming horizons, not the typical “strategic” planning that extrapolates on the here-and-now.

The best way to prepare for a fast-changing world is to connect with what might be coming tomorrow and then pre-figure your responses. The future belongs to those who foresee change and manage their organizations rationally, even amid chaos.

As was written in the Tao Te Ching, “All events come from a distance.” With a high vantage point, foretelling the future is elementary. 

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## Trend Watching

Gain more clues to spotting the trends with these *Nonprofit World* articles at [NonprofitWorld.org/members](http://NonprofitWorld.org/members):

**Being Pro-Active Means Being Pro-Future** (Vol. 18, No. 5)

**Thinking Out of Pandora's Box** (Vol. 20, No. 2)

**Prepared & Resolved: How to Become Future-Ready & Make an Impact** (Vol. 26, No. 1)

**Why Predict the Future?** (Vol. 19, No. 3)

**Will & Vision: Keys to Advancing Your Organization** (Vol. 26, No. 2)

**Advance to the Future or Retreat to the Familiar?** (Vol. 22, No. 6)

**Your Future Just Walked in the Door – Or Out of It** (Vol. 18, No. 4)