

I've Been Thinking about... Enduring Issues

If I could grant you three wishes to strengthen your organization, what would they be?



By Martha Golensky

After five years of writing this column, the time has come to move on. I wish I could say the topics I've addressed have all been resolved. Instead, I'm leaving you with my thoughts on three issues I wrestled with as a CEO that never seem to go away:

1. An Effective Board

The most effective board I've ever encountered defied logic: It was huge (44 members) and full of strongly opinionated individuals. One key to its success was tradition. Having had years to work out the kinks, this nonprofit established itself as the place to serve in its community. Recruitment was a year-round, systematic search for new people with great potential. Board members knew exactly what was expected of them, before and after they joined, and were held accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities. Decisions were reached through respectful, open discussion. Opportunities abounded for personal growth.

Lessons learned:

- **Treat your board as a vital resource** rather than a necessary evil.
- **Provide ways for board members to make meaningful contributions**, and they'll reward you with dedication and hard work.
- **Show your appreciation to each board member individually**; never forget the board is a collection of individuals.

2. Collaboration that Boosts Your Impact

It continually surprises me that so many nonprofits shy away from collaboration, given the many positives to be gained internally and externally, not the least of which is how favorably funders view such efforts.

The first step is to understand the different forms of collaboration, ranging from a mere "toe in the water" to merger. If there is initial resistance from staff, board members, or volunteers, start with a limited commitment of time and resources, like partnering with a complementary nonprofit on a short-term project. Assuming this first venture goes well, you can build on the success to engage in something more ambitious.

However, collaboration isn't a panacea for all organizational woes. It's critical to determine what you hope to achieve. The

“Stay tuned in to what's happening in your community.”

“Never forget the board is a collection of individuals.”

most desirable outcome is to increase the impact of your services at the lowest cost, calculated in dollars but also in more intangible ways.

Ask the hard questions. For example, is there a danger that your organization might lose its identity should your partner be a larger, more affluent organization? As part of your due diligence, consult with an attorney on the legal ramifications of each type of alliance.


3. Strategies to Ensure Financial Health

In a study I did a few years ago of ways to cope with the changing political and economic environment, it was impressive to see the variety of strategies organizational leaders adopted to ensure financial health. Savvy leaders recognize the need for creative measures to keep their planning, management, and fundraising activities in step with the times.

Diversification of funding sources should be high on the list; it's the rare nonprofit that can survive by relying on one major revenue stream. Refining your marketing and PR might be just the ticket to broaden name recognition.

Stay tuned in to what's happening in your community. You may spot a programmatic niche to fill. Build bridges to the most successful nonprofits around you; emulating or adapting what works for them could pay big dividends.

It's also important to look internally. Can you increase productivity without sacrificing quality? Are you making the best use of your staff and volunteers? Perhaps this is the right moment to upgrade your computer system or improve internal coordination among departments to achieve greater efficiency.

Let me end by wishing the faithful readers of *Nonprofit World* my best, and offering my sincere thanks to Jill Muehrcke for affording me the opportunity to be a regular contributor to this fine publication. 

Martha Golensky, professor emerita of social work at Grand Valley State University (golenskm@gvsu.edu) is the author of Strategic Leadership and Management in Nonprofit Organizations: Theory and Practice, published by Lyceum Books, which draws on her 30-year career as a nonprofit executive, professor of nonprofit management, and consultant to local nonprofits on strategic planning, financial development, and board governance.