



The Importance of Thinking “We”

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I have always felt that great successes in the nonprofit world occur when organizations harness the collective energies of individuals and deal purposefully with some aspect of this nation - or any nation - needing intervention. In this process, they create for a brief moment a joint and reciprocally driven, caring, civic community. The assumption on the part of all parties to be responsible for the common good and welfare of those in need is part of this underlying ideal and belief.



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This has been my personal experience as a donor to a variety of causes. The urgency and ego of “me” has become subsumed in the “we” as together with other donors and volunteers, I contribute to solving an impending or immediate social problem, or help take advantage of a new opportunity that benefits a group of individuals in need. Thousands of individuals around the world had a similar experience to mine during the New York terrorist crisis on September 11, 2001 as they took part in a worldwide, collective show of support for those who had fallen.

However, what of those times in everyday life when there is not an all-consuming

societal crisis to draw everyone together? At the end of January I was able to join my colleagues at a national fundraising convention. Some nonprofit executives I talked to feel this notion of civic sharing and involvement is in danger of being stripped away from Society as it becomes seemingly harder to convince some individuals as to its worth. These same institutional executives wonder aloud if many of our nation's potential donors and volunteers are simply too narrowly self-serving in their approach to life. Is it possible - they ask - that the notion of civic joining is being eclipsed by a society that seems with every passing day, to only have room for a collective "I" at its center? A society whose very notions of success seem at odds with caring for those not succeeding at the same level?

Do the questions our Society seems preoccupied with - "What do I need today?" "What must I do to succeed," "Where will I find fulfillment?" - increasingly preclude civic and moral involvement? What do contributing issues like environmental and economic concerns, our nation's economic outlook and the ripple effect this has had upon investors and foundation giving, not to mention unemployment, have upon stakeholder involvement?

There is some justification for these expressed concerns. Though philanthropic giving is increasing across the United States, it still represents slightly above 2% of the nation's gross domestic product. Some higher earning income groups give at less than half this rate and many wealthy individuals are no longer able to give at the rates they gave at during boom times.¹

Perhaps not surprisingly, some statistics show many wealthy taxpayers have actually retreated from charitable giving.² In contrast, some lower income brackets now contribute a higher percentage of their earnings to charities than individuals in other income tax brackets. There is still money available for individuals to give. Just a few years ago, FAST COMPANY columnist Tony Schwartz quoted the Newtithing Group, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that promotes philanthropy, as suggesting Americans could have given an additional \$250 billion to charity without decreasing their net worth.³

However, a number of Americans choose not to follow suit. Why? Though there could be many reasons for this, a chief reason may be nonprofit organizations themselves. Regardless of how well those in need may be served, many organizations have done a poor

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job of engaging donor, customer, and volunteer feelings and emotions in a satisfactory way, what director of the Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies, Rolf Jensen calls “emotional jogging.”⁴ As a result of this lack of satisfactory engagement, some third sector observers have joined political scientist Everett Carl Ladd in asking, “Aren’t we retreating into private pursuits, or to use a metaphor that has resonated in recent years, aren’t we increasingly ‘bowling alone?’”⁵

Though some of the concerns nonprofit directors cite regarding the lack of future donor and volunteer involvement within their own organizations might seem plausible, aspects of their argument also miss the mark. While it may be true that for a select group of individuals, their current involvement with causes they support is churning heavily and in flux, it is equally true many of these same causes are changing their methods of operation to allow donors and volunteers access to their organizational mix and inner workings in a way previously not thought of as possible or appropriate.⁶ Additionally, other organizations are pooling their efforts with agencies in similar categories of service, consolidating work loads, reducing costs of operation, and in the process, creating a new critical mass of service.

Philanthropic tastes are also changing and contributing to this churn, especially given the large number of individuals who no longer feel content to simply give away financial gifts to charities.⁷ For many of today’s donors, being philanthropic means choosing not only where their gift goes but also being actively concerned about the recipient organization and following up on how the gift is used. For example:

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The telemarketing team for a client notes that in a recent campaign, among those who responded affirmatively to their fundraising calls, two different response segments emerged. The first segment were those who asked no questions when engaged by the solicitor and got off the phone as quickly as possible after responding affirmatively or negatively. The second segment responded to the offer with a qualified “yes,” only after asking a series of questions about the cause’s request and engaging the operator in conversation about detailed aspects of the program.⁸

When added up, instances like this may not point to a widespread decline in societal involvement with the philanthropic world. Rather, the opposite could be true. We have seen as a firm a dramatic change in philanthropic involvement taking place within some sectors of the population in the light of individual initiatives and personal preferences. For these sectors of society, a massive social and cultural revolution is at work, particularly in the way individuals relate to nonprofit organizations and each other, affecting what they will and will not support and what they expect from such philanthropic involvement.

These societal changes are as real as is the moral mandate most nonprofit organizations have in bringing help and providing hope to those in trouble and in need. They represent the “new normal” that nonprofit organizations will have to contend with.⁹ Our job in development is increasingly, to determine how to enable this type of change to take place at an even deeper level by giving those who donate money and/or their time, or purchase nonprofit products, a compelling and rewarding experience and a reason to continue to involve themselves within your philanthropic world.

The marketing battle of the future may become a battle between those organizations that have decided to heed these changes and those that haven't. In fact, I believe donors and investors will come to recognize those nonprofit agencies that take note of these changes and do something about them as assets and places to entrust their funds to. This is a critical concept. How will you and I develop, strengthen, defend and manage our agencies in the future? For many of us, it may be more important to ponder this question than many of those typically bandied about at seminars.

The battle will be between organizations that have decided to heed these changes in the marketplace and those that haven't.

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Notes

1. Kirsner, Scott, "Nonprofit Motive," **WIRED**, September, 1999, p. 110.
2. Rosenberg, Claude Jr., *Wealthy And Wise*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), p. 15.
3. Schwartz, Tony, "Tell the Truth," **FAST COMPANY**, August 2000, p. 228.
4. Jensen, Rolf, *The Dream Society: How the Coming Shift from Information to Imagination Will Transform Your Business*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999)
5. Ladd, Everett Carll, *The Ladd Report*, (New York: The Free Press, 1999), p. 2.
6. Oates, Mary J., "How the Catholic Church Made Giving Decline," **The Chronicle Of Philanthropy**, March 21, 1996, p. 50.
7. Mitchell, Emily, "Getting Better At Doing Good," **TIME**, February 21, 2000, p. B9.
8. From the personal client files of Barry McLeish.
9. McNamee, Roger, as quoted by Polly LaBarre, **FAST COMPANY**, May 2003, p. 78.