

Six Values The Nonprofit Sector Should Share

Jane Garthson

This article is based on my remarks at the World Association of Nonprofit Organizations Conference (<http://www.wango.org>) in Toronto in November 2007. I was speaking at a symposium on Shared Values and Principles in the nonprofit sector.

I chose to focus my remarks on COMMUNITY, as that, to me, should be the foundation of all values in nonprofit organizations. A COMMUNITY may be geographic, where the people who benefit most live. It may be a particular interest - readers of Canadian Fundraiser eNews are part of the wonderful COMMUNITY of people who care about the critical role of charities in the quality of Canadian life. It might be very broad - organizations dealing with climate change have to think of the planet Earth and its future residents as their COMMUNITY.

I think it is critical that each nonprofit organization define its COMMUNITY. Whose lives will be better because we exist? Who do we exist to serve? Remember always how you started. You never planned, in those early days around the kitchen table, to set up an organization so staff could have good jobs, or so donors would have another giving option, or so government could give you grants. Nonprofits form because villages need better water, or children need a chance to make and hear music, or donkeys need rescuing from abuse. Never, ever, forget that your COMMUNITY is those whose lives you exist to change, and therefore your primary accountability is to them. Accountability to everyone else, even to someone who gives you 100% of your money, is a very distant second or less.

So let me list the key values that I think arise from our responsibility to our COMMUNITY.

1. Placing COMMUNITY benefit above mission or organization

Challenge the Mission whenever it becomes a barrier to serving the Community well.

Wind up the organization if it is no longer serving the COMMUNITY well and is no longer a wise use of COMMUNITY resources.

2. Engaging with your COMMUNITY

Use an open COMMUNITY-wide process to define the desired COMMUNITY of the future. Sharing the decision-making thereafter whenever possible. Develop new ways to collaborate on serving the COMMUNITY.

Accept that creating that desired COMMUNITY is beyond the ability of any one organization. Work together toward the vision the COMMUNITY has developed.

Put COMMUNITY good ahead of personal or organizational power or credit.

3. Being accountable to COMMUNITY above all other stakeholders

Engage the COMMUNITY to determine what results matter to your community. Allocate all resources, especially time, to the achievement of those results.

Track and report on results, including and especially those that cannot be quantified.

Accept a degree of uncertainty and risk, and some failures, as necessary to a process of meaningful COMMUNITY change.

Be transparent about goals, resources and results.

4. Serving your COMMUNITY with integrity

Build and retain public trust by operating with the same set of ethical values in all aspects of your lives and your organizations.

Choose your ethical values carefully and define them well. Communicate them widely so you can be held accountable. Be prepared to reflect those values in all significant actions and decisions at all levels of the organization.

5. Respecting your COMMUNITY

Affirm the basic value of human life, and the right of every human to fundamental freedoms.

Respect local knowledge, sweat equity and the long-term commitment COMMUNITY members have to their community.

Understand that a healthy environment is the most critical determinant of any desired future.

Acknowledge, respect and engage the natural leaders within your COMMUNITY.

6. Reflecting your COMMUNITY

Ensure the full diversity of your COMMUNITY is reflected in your leadership team, staff and volunteers, so the best range of ideas and knowledge is available to support informed decisions.

Include diversity specific to your cause and by socio-economic class.

I hope my comments help nonprofits in competition for resources or on opposite sides of controversial issues learn that they have ethical values in common. Perhaps these will provide an opportunity for dialogue for the sake of their one COMMUNITY.