# THE
# Nonprofit
## QUARTERLY

*Renewal*

Miller on the Four Horsemen

Dunn on Tainted Donors

Cleveland and Top on Powerful Design

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Guide.

# HARVARD

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# Welcome

**D**EAR READERS,

By now I hope that you have noticed that the *Nonprofit Quarterly* online is new and improved.

Specifically *NPQ* has transformed its online presence significantly so that you can stay current in this fast-changing operating environment. The most significant change is introducing our Nonprofit Newswire, which assembles news from throughout the United States as well as various fields of practice and that helps you—our reader—to recognize trends in policy, practice, and philanthropy (www.nonprofitquarterly.org/states).

As you can imagine, the implementation of this new service means huge changes for our staff. We stay up late compiling the news of the day and get up early each morning to ensure that stories are ready to go, because our commitment to you requires that we don't just deliver the news but provide a sense of its context and its implications for your work.

As we regularize our offerings and add a steady stream of Web-only articles about time-sensitive issues, we recognize that there will be an increasing division between what we provide online and what we provide in this journal. So we want to take this opportunity to bring you up to date.

From now on, the print publication will focus more exclusively on nonprofit management and governance, on recent research about nonprofits and philanthropy, and on investigative articles. This issue features two great examples of what you can continue to expect in these pages: Clara Miller's "The Four Horsemen of the Nonprofit Apocalypse" (see page 22) and "Visual Rhetoric," an interview with Peleg Top and Jonathan Cleveland (see page 14). These articles epitomize what you can expect from the print publication of *Nonprofit Quarterly* as we move forward: timeless, insightful articles that surprise and inform.

Meanwhile, the online edition of *NPQ* will cover more time-sensitive issues and changes in the nonprofit sector and provide interactive forums for you to engage with the material. I must also say that this year has been both difficult and exciting for the *Nonprofit Quarterly*. Like the rest of publishing, *NPQ* is swept up in the transformation of the entire industry, and I think we (and you) are far better off as a result. But we need the financial support of our readers more than ever.

And don't forget to sign up for the *Nonprofit Newswire* at www.nonprofitquarterly.org.

# Thank You !

**Y**ou've walked the Walk, now we're reminding you that feeding 554,000 hungry people next winter takes one more step — so please send in all your pledges. This year, every dollar counts, and we're asking that you go back to those who pledged you to tell them about your success. You can help us even more by reminding your supporters that their employer's matching contribution can also help. And remember, if you raise $500, you become a member of our Heart & Sole Circle.

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for Hunger

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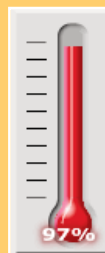
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# The Nonprofit Ethicist

## By Woods Bowman

*Editors' note: This unsigned story turned up in the Ethicist's electronic inbox as a posting to a discussion group. Traditionally the* Nonprofit Quarterly *does not publish anonymous letters, but the letter is in the public domain and the problem is regrettably all too common.*

DEAR NONPROFIT ETHICIST, Along with several social-service agencies, I attended a United Way forum, and each entity gave its updates. One director asked everyone to call her and report on each homeless person he or she saw the following day. (It was nationwide census day.) Later I walked to Rotary with someone from another agency and I wondered aloud, "What if more than one individual reports the same residentially challenged person?" She replied, "Fine; then our community would receive more funding." This kind of attitude creates animosity and cynicism among many in the public—myself included.

Who Dat?

*Dear Who Dat?,*
*Right: sloppy data gathering opens the door to even more cynical and deliberate gaming of the system, which results in a misallocation of scarce public resources and poor service to the homeless. Someone in another community may wind up sleeping in a doorway because your local agencies got money that should instead have gone to these* organizations. *Bad management almost always creates ethical dilemmas and always leads to bad policy. I presume that you called her out.*

Dear Nonprofit Ethicist,
I was just notified of a bequest to my organization. As I reviewed the donor's trust amendment, I noted that the former development director for my organization is also named and will receive twice the amount the organization will receive. I'm pretty sure that this is unethical, and I am analyzing the pros and cons of pursuing the issue informally or legally.

During the late 1990s, when the amendment was made, my organization did not have conflict-of-interest and gift administration policies as we now do. So the former development director had not signed these documents. I do not know whether she had a relationship with the donor that created the trust amendment naming our organization and her. Is this situation always unethical, and which factors should be considered as I decide how to proceed?

Upset

*Dear Upset,*
*This windfall raises some titillating questions, but the answers depend on the relationship between the decedent and your former development director. Maybe the relationship was on the up-and-up; the development director could be the decedent's favorite niece, for example, who begged to have your organization included. I doubt it, but if anything unethical occurred, the onus is on the development director. What is done is done. There is no point in refusing the bequest. Cash the check.*

*If the development director were still on your payroll, it would be incumbent on you to conduct a full-dress investigation. If she manipulated a feeble-minded donor to cut herself in, she would deserve to be fired for abusing her official position for personal gain. In extreme circumstances, her behavior might be considered fraudulent. Even if your organization had no policy regarding business decorum, egregious self-serving behavior detrimental to an organization is a firing offense.*

*But your organization should have a policy on business decorum. This situation should be a wake-up call. So first, consult the Association of Fundraising Professionals Code of Ethics (www.afpnet.org/ethics). While you are at it, look for other areas in need of attention.*

*If you do not have a policy on client relationships, now is a good time to adopt one.*

*By the way, when an organization becomes aware that it has been named in a will, it should obtain a copy of the relevant portion of the document for its records. There are good business reasons for this practice, and it aids monitoring policies on business decorum in fundraising.*

Dear Nonprofit Ethicist,
On December 31, my organization's board treasurer told me—the executive director—that he had loaned $3,000 to a donor so she can submit it with her own donation of $2,000 to her employer to get a triple-matching donation from the organization. This was the first I had heard of this agreement. I told him that, at the least, we needed to have a loan agreement in place so we could start triage on the matter. He blew up at me, told me that we had an agreement, and said that I didn't need to know anything about the loan anyway. (I am not allowed to sign checks.)

At the next board meeting, I heard the tale and how much money we would get. It was alleged that there was a loan agreement (which I had not seen) and the donor's employer didn't care where money for the matching gift came from. I explained it was unethical and probably illegal for a board member to make a loan to any individual, especially when it is not designated for organizational mission purposes. In effect, the loan meant we were aiding and abetting fraud against the donor's employer.

The board member who I suspect set this deal into motion stated that there was, in fact, no loan agreement. It all just happened quickly; parties exchanged checks in a bank parking lot so the deposit could be made on December 31. In the end, after one of our employees threatened to write the state

attorney general and the IRS, the board agreed to decline a matching gift from the employer. But the board discussed other ways to give the donor the loan for future matching gifts. The board also claimed that a loan agreement would be put together.

I would love your take on all of this, but I want the movie rights.

Disgusted

*Dear Disgusted,*
*Beware easy money. You are right thrice over: (1) the proposal was an unethical scam; (2) assuming that loaning money to a board member is legal, you need a loan agreement for protection of the organization; and (3) insisting on movie rights is a good move.*

*The IRS might look askance at this transaction. Your clever donor might consider deducting the full $5,000, but $3,000 is repayment of the loan which, of course, is ineligible for deduction. The IRS requires you to acknowledge all gifts of $250 or more. In this case, you should acknowledge receipt of only $2,000.*

*The Ethicist loves to call a bluff. When someone said that the donor's employer does not care about the origin of the money for the matching gift, I would have asked the board to direct the secretary to write a letter seeking verification from the employer. If the organization really believed that nothing was wrong with the transaction, it would not care. But you just know that the board member would have rationalized why a letter was unnecessary and even undesirable while dancing around the real issue that it was just plain wrong.*

*As for legality, many states have laws prohibiting loans to board members for any reason, so the Ethicist defers to local lawyers on the question of legality. A few years ago, the* Chronicle of Philanthropy *studied all the 990 forms listed*

*in the GuideStar database and identified hundreds of nonprofits in putative violation of state laws.*

***Editors' note:*** *The author of the previous letter was subsequently fired from her organization and sent the following postscript.*

Dear Nonprofit Ethicist,
I don't want to have anything to do with these board members, yet I truly believe in the mission and see tremendous potential in what the organization can do for the community, but only if it's done right. I hate to see the organization close its doors because of ignorant, arrogant, and greedy board members. That thought really hurts.

More Disgusted

*Dear More Disgusted,*
*All of us at NPQ feel bad that you lost your job, but you did the right thing. It is to your credit that you stood up to the organization. You can cite this experience to prospective employers as proof that you run a tight ship. There are plenty of boards that would agree with you that it is not enough to do good; doing good must be done well. When you find an organization with such a board, you will be home.*

**Woods Bowman** is a professor of public service management at DePaul University.

To comment on this article, write to us at feedback@npqmag.org. Order reprints from http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org, using code 170101.

*Ask the Ethicist about Your Ethics Conundrum*
Write to the Ethicist about your organization's ethical quandary at feedback@npqmag.org.

# When a Donor Becomes *Tainted*

by Paul Dunn, Ph.D.

*Editors' note: This article was originally printed in ARNOVA's publication* The Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly *in February 2010. It is adapted with permission here.*

**How should a nonprofit react when a benefactor becomes embroiled in scandal?**

ON MARCH 12, 2008, STEPHEN SCHWARZMAN, the cofounder and chairman of the private equity firm the Blackstone Group L.P., pledged $100 million to the New York Public Library. The gift was the single largest donation the library had ever received, and the library will rename its main Manhattan building after him. A donation of this size is not an unusual occurrence. For generations, wealthy entrepreneurs have made pivotal donations to all kinds of nonprofits. When all goes well, wealthy benefactors give, and nonprofits name things after them—a building, a school, a program or hallway—and all is well. But what happens when a benefactor gets embroiled in a scandal after the donation has been made? How should a nonprofit react?

**PAUL DUNN, PH.D.,** is an associate professor of accounting at Brock University in Canada.

Consider this. On September 21, 2005, Queen's University announced that it would return a pledged gift of $1 million from David Radler and remove Radler's name from a wing of the business school and from the university's benefactor wall. Why? According to the press release, "The integrity of the gift to the university had been compromised." The previous day, in a Chicago court, Radler pleaded guilty to one charge of mail fraud and was given a 29-month jail sentence and a $250,000 fine. His alleged scheme diverted more than $32 million from the sale of several newspapers that were controlled by Hollinger International.

What would and should prompt a nonprofit to return a donation that has been accepted in good faith? This article considers the forces that prompt nonprofits to keep, reject, or compromise on a gift. It walks your organization through ways to sort through the "taintedness" of a donor and the potential forces that influence the decision to (1) keep a donor's money and name on a building; (2) return the donation and remove the name; or (3) adopt a compromise position.

Ultimately, the article helps your organization weigh the factors and determine the most appropriate outcome for the "tainted donor" scenario you face.

## The Social Acceptability of Donors and Their Money

A tainted donor is a previously clean benefactor who has become socially unacceptable because of scandal. A tainted donation is money that was derived illegally or through a socially unacceptable manner. Donors and donations can be grouped into four categories.

The first category involves donations from individuals working within the law and following socially accepted standards of behavior. So the money and the donor are both socially acceptable. Presumably most charitable donations received by nonprofits—such as the gift by Stephen Schwarzman to the New York Public Library—fall into this category. Neither the donor nor the donation is tainted by scandal or social unacceptability.

The second category involves donations from tainted donors who give money that is apparently clean. These individuals generated wealth through legal and socially acceptable means but whose reputations have been tarnished by scandal. Real estate developer and philanthropist A. Alfred Taubman—who generously supported Brown University, the University of Michigan, and Harvard University—had his reputation tarnished when he engaged in price fixing as the chairman of Sotheby's auction house. Similarly Augsburg College changed its opinion of financial supporter Elroy Stock after he sent racist messages to mixed-race couples. Tainted donors, then, make acceptable donations (i.e., give nontainted money) but subsequently become embroiled in social or legal scandal.

The third category of donations involves those where the money and the donor are socially or legally suspect. This includes donors who engage in illegal activities, such as the Mafia and drug lords. Many, but not all, organizations are loath to accept such money. Mother Teresa, for example, willingly accepted donations from any source, including despots and unsavory political leaders. She argued that these ill-gotten gains had been used to aid the destitute in Calcutta. Bishop Ramón Godinez of Aguascalientes holds a similar view and asserted recently that while the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico does not knowingly accept donations from drug traffickers, he does not consider it the Church's responsibility to investigate the source of its numerous anonymous donations. The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh accepted a donation from Dr. Hastings Banda when he was the dictator of Malawi. It seems that organizations that accept category-three donations consider that the money has no pedigree or history or that funds' pedigree and history are irrelevant.

In category four are clean donors who give tainted money. In 1996, for example, Gert-Rudolf Flick, the grandson of German industrialist Friedrich Flick, proposed making a donation to Balliol College to fund a professorship in European thought. Some argued that although Mr. Flick was not accused of wrongdoing, the money was tainted because he was the heir to an evil fortune. At the Nuremburg Trials, his grandfather was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment for using slave labor during the Second World War. The younger Mr. Flick eventually withdrew his offer.

**Which forces prompt nonprofits to keep, reject, or compromise a gift?**

## Strategic Responses to Tainted Donors

Now we will consider the strategy that a non-profit should adopt when a previously screened donor who was considered acceptable becomes tainted—that is, when a donor moves from category one to category two. This shift occurs when additional information about a donor becomes publicly known and this new information alters the ex-post-facto perception of a donor. A movement from category one to category three or to category four may present a legal issue. It suggests that a donor was not legally entitled to make a donation. In 2001, for example, the University of Oregon returned an $850,000 donation from financier Jeff Grayson after a court ruled that Grayson had donated money that was not his. And the government of Malawi has unsuccessfully tried to get the Royal College of Surgeons to return Dr. Banda's donation on the basis that the donation was made from public funds.

In her article "Strategic Responses to Institutional Pressures," management scholar Christine Oliver outlines differing organizational strategies based on varying degrees of pressure. When pressure is strong, an organization is more likely to acquiesce; when pressure is weak, it is easier to defy. When pressure is moderate—that is, strong enough to induce a response but not so strong as to require compliance—the response may be to compromise. In the case of a previously honored benefactor who subsequently becomes tainted, a nonprofit has three options: it can return the donation and remove the public acknowledgement (acquiescence), keep the money but remove the public acknowledgement (compromise), or keep the money and continue to publicly acknowledge the benefactor (defiance).

**Acquiescence.** Queen's University said that while the Radler donation was given in good faith and in accordance with university-approved guidelines, the gift's integrity had been compromised. The money was returned and the donor's name was deleted from a wing of the business school. Other organizations have taken a similar approach. After Grayson was convicted of investment fraud, the University of Oregon returned his donation and removed his name from the law school. In 2004, after four years of debate, the

Harvard Divinity School returned a much-needed $2.5 million donation from accused anti-Semite Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and removed his name from an endowed chair in Islamic religious studies.

**Compromise.** In Pennsylvania, Villanova University's basketball pavilion was named in honor of a major donor: John Eleuthère du Pont, an heir to the du Pont family chemical fortune. But in 1997, after du Pont was convicted of murdering Olympic wrestler David Schultz, du Pont's name was removed from the building. The donation, however, was not returned. In 2004, Bill and Nancy Laurie—Nancy is the heiress to a portion of the Wal-Mart fortune—donated $25 million to the University of Missouri–Columbia. The sports facility was to be named after their daughter Paige, who attended the University of Southern California. Paige was accused of academic misconduct and ultimately returned her diploma to USC. Meanwhile, her name on the arena was widely opposed by students, and the issue eventually aired on the news show *20/20*. Three weeks after

naming the facility the Paige Sports Arena, the university renamed the building the Mizzou Arena.

**Defiance.**[1] The Greenwich Hospital in Connecticut—the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Medical Building—is named after hotelier Leona Helmsley despite the fact that Helmsley served 18 months in prison for tax evasion. The Rigas Family Theater at St. Bonaventure University is named for John Rigas, the former chairman of Adelphia Communications, who was convicted of conspiracy, fraud, and stealing money from the cable company. Buildings and schools at Brown University, the University of Michigan, and Harvard University are named after A. Alfred Taubman, the philanthropist and former chairman of Sotheby's auction house, who served a year in prison for price fixing.

So the question is, which conditions influence a nonprofit to adopt one of these three strategies over another?

## Theory and Propositions

**Stakeholder theory.** Stakeholder theory contends that various parties have a stake in your organization; but some stakeholders have a more pressing relationship. According to management scholars Mitchell, Agle, and Wood, the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims is a function of three attributes: (1) legitimacy, because the stakeholder claim is consistent with socially defined norms and standards; (2) power, because the claimant can influence the organization's behavior; and (3) urgency, because the claim is either time sensitive or critical to an organization.

The model of legitimacy, power, and urgency can be adapted to identify factors that influence management's decision whether to return a tainted donor's gift. A nonprofit's strategy will be a function of three factors: (1) the perceived degree of incongruence between the goals and nature of the nonprofit and the actions of the benefactor that lead to the scandal (legitimacy); (2) the extent of coalescence of demands of multiple stakeholder groups (power); and (3) the perceived visibility and timeliness of the scandal (urgency). Management is likely to ignore scandals that have only one attribute, it begins to listen when two

attributes are present, and it is apt to address the situation when all three are present.

This model is dynamic and particularly useful in analyzing situations in which multiple stakeholders make conflicting demands on an organization. But the variables in this model are transitory. At any given moment, management may perceive one or more variables to be pressing. So the strategy that a nonprofit adopts is a function of the degree to which management perceives these three factors—value incongruence, coalescence, and visibility—to be present at that time.

**Value incongruence.** This factor involves the degree of compatibility between the norms, values, and actions of an external stakeholder with the core values, beliefs, and activities of an organization. Managers tend to respond more favorably when the values of an external stakeholder are compatible with an organization's goals and objectives. Incongruence occurs when a nonprofit's values and activities are inconsistent with those of a donor.

Mary Tschirhart notes that this incongruence manifests in two types. First, the values and norms of a donor may be inconsistent with the activities of a nonprofit. Tschirhart calls this an organizational legitimacy problem, and it occurs, for example, when a subsidized housing complex accepts a donation from a slum landlord or the cancer society accepts money from a tobacco farm. The second type, which Tschirhart refers to as a stakeholder legitimacy problem, occurs when the activities of a benefactor are not suited to the goals and values of a nonprofit.[2]

The degree of incongruence depends on the nature of a scandal. A hospital whose primary function is treating patients, for example, may see only a small gap between the core values of the hospital and a donor who has been convicted of tax evasion. But a business school that strives to elevate the ethical standards of future business professionals may consider a gift from a business executive who is subsequently convicted of fraud to be totally unacceptable. The degree of incongruence is a function of the nature of the scandal that taints a donor and the core values of a nonprofit. In other words, how incompatible are a nonprofit's goals with the action that tainted

a donor? This is a stakeholder legitimacy issue; the greater the perceived gap between a donor's scandalous activity and the values of a nonprofit, the more likely a nonprofit is to return a donation and remove the public honor previously bestowed on a donor.

*Proposition one: The degree of value incongruence affects the strategy of a nonprofit when it learns that a previously honored benefactor has become tainted by scandal. A large, medium, or small degree of value incongruence is associated with an acquiescence, compromise, or defiance strategy, respectively.*

**Coalescence.** Nonprofits tend to have several stakeholders with inconsistent goals. As such, managers need to address conflicting demands and expectations. Balancing the demands of conflicting stakeholder groups becomes an essential part of a nonprofit manager's job. While it is easy to ignore the demands of conflicting stakeholder groups, managers must heed the demands of stakeholders who come together in a united fashion. Stakeholder power accrues when the interests of multiple constituents coalesce.

In the case of a tainted donor, this means that part of the decision-making process is to identify the relevant parties that claim that the donor is tainted. Does this accusation reflect the collective views of multiple stakeholders on whom the organization is dependent, or is this the lone voice of a demanding stakeholder? Tony Platt, an emeritus professor of social work at California State University, Sacramento, has waged a seemingly solo campaign to have his university disassociate itself from Charles Goethe, who was accused of racism. Goethe, who died in 1966, was a sizable donor to the university, and the arboretum is named after him. In contrast, Rachel Fish, a divinity student, organized a successful campaign to have the Harvard Divinity School return Sheikh Zayed's donation. She lobbied the school's administration, posted a petition on her Web site and solicited the support of the national media. In this example, the interests of numerous stakeholder groups coalesced, and through normative pressure, they influenced the decision of the organization.

*Proposition two: The degree of coalescence affects the strategy of a nonprofit when it learns*

that a previously honored benefactor has become tainted by scandal. A large, medium, or small degree of coalescence is associated with an acquiescence, compromise, or defiance strategy, respectively.

**Visibility.** Academic Paul Nutt notes that nonprofits "do not have the luxury of keeping strategic decisions secret." When a previously honored benefactor becomes tainted because of an economic or social scandal, it often becomes front-page news. As such, a nonprofit cannot ignore the scandal in the hope that it will not become publicly known. On September 20, the media reported that David Radler had been convicted of fraud. The next day, Queen's University returned his donation and removed his name from a wing of the business school. The visibility of the debacle at the University of Missouri increased when *20/20* covered the incident. In each instance, the organization reacted quickly to the issue because of its visibility.

Some issues are urgent because they are timely. Time measures the speed with which an issue becomes important. But as time passes, memories fade and a scandal may begin to lose its relevance and importance. In the past, some have claimed, for example, that the fortunes that established the Rockefeller Foundation and the Rhodes scholarships were tainted. But over the years, these institutions have become well respected; no one lobbies against them today. During the 1950s and 1960s, Charles Goethe made sizable donations to Sacramento State University. Despite current appeals by Platt, the university, now more than 50 years after the donations were received, has not removed Goethe's name from the arboretum; there is no urgency, timeliness, or visibility.

*Proposition three: The degree of visibility affects the strategy of a nonprofit when it learns that a previously honored donor has become tainted by a scandal. A large, medium, or small degree of visibility is associated with an acquiescence, compromise, or defiance strategy, respectively,.*

**Pressure-strategy link.** Stakeholder theory argues that the stakeholder who gets priority is the one who has the greatest legitimacy, power, and urgency. Similarly, the pressure to return a

donation and remove the honor bestowed on a beneficiary should be highest when incongruence, coalescence, and visibility are all perceived to be present. Further, there may be interaction effects. There was high-value incongruence at the Harvard Divinity School between the sheikh's gift to endow a chair in religious studies and the claim that he was religiously intolerant; visibility increased when the media publicized the story, which resulted in the school receiving pressure from various stakeholder groups.

With fewer pressures, a nonprofit can more easily adopt a compromise strategy. After Augsburg College learned that Elroy Stock had sent racist messages to mixed-race couples, the college decided not to put Stock's name on a college building. In a fitting irony, rather than return the money, the college chose to use Stock's $500,000 donation to support Scholastic Connections, a mentoring program that pairs students of color with alumni of color.

When the pressures exerted on a nonprofit are low or can easily be deflected, a defiance strategy is more likely. Alfred Taubman made generous contributions to Brown University. The Center for Public Policy and American Institutions is named after him. At the time of his gifts in 1984, Taubman had amassed his fortune as a real estate

developer. The price-fixing scandal that led to his subsequent imprisonment in 2002 occurred much later, when he was chairman of Sotheby's Holding Inc. As a result, Brown University has not removed his name from these two centers, nor has Harvard University or the University of Michigan, both of which have buildings in his name. In this case, there is no value incongruence; the donations were made when he was a real estate mogul, whereas the scandal that tainted him involves his capacity as the CEO of an auction house 18 years later. Further, no group of outraged stakeholders has coalesced. Because there is no pressure, it is easy for these universities to maintain the status quo and continue to publicly acknowledge him.

*Proposition four: The cumulative number of attributes due to value incongruence, coalescence, and visibility affect the strategy of a nonprofit when it learns that a previously honored benefactor has become tainted by a scandal. The perceived presence of one, two, or three of these attributes is associated with an acquiescence, compromise, or defiance strategy, respectively.*

### Resource Dependency

The theory of resource dependency holds that organizations are constrained by their environment. They depend on others for the resources necessary for their survival. When deciding whether to return a donation, nonprofits are constrained by economic need and their commitment to a donor and a donation.

**Economic need.** Although mission traditionally takes precedence over economics in nonprofit organizations, financial issues cannot be ignored. If a nonprofit believes that there is a greater economic benefit from returning a tainted donor's gift than from keeping it, the organization is more likely to return the gift. The nonprofit, for example, may be in the middle of a fundraising campaign and the bad publicity associated with a tainted donor may jeopardize the success of the campaign. Keeping such a gift and/or retaining the public honor may send the wrong signal when a nonprofit seeks additional contributions.

Alternatively, a nonprofit may have a large endowment, and so it may be relatively easy to return the largesse of a tainted donor. There is

If a nonprofit has a large endowment, it may be easy to return a donation.

often a direct correlation between the strength of the economic need of a nonprofit and the likelihood of a nonprofit's decision to keep a donation. If financial need is great, a donation will be kept. As economic need abates, however, a nonprofit may be more likely to consider a compromise position or even returning the money.

*Proposition five: Economic need affects the strategy of a nonprofit when it learns that a previously honored benefactor has become tainted by scandal. A small, medium, or large economic need is associated with an acquiescence, compromise, or defiance strategy, respectively.*

**Organizational commitment.** Commitment is the notion that a decision maker has a psychological obligation to behave in a manner that is consistent with the implications of previous decisions. Within an organizational setting, people become committed to strategies that they make on behalf of an organization. They become reluctant to alter their decision or to admit that they made an error. But organizational adoption and change are more likely to occur when changes in upper management take place, such as with the selection and removal of executives. The same principle applies to fundraising committees. When the composition of a fundraising committee changes, altering a prior decision often becomes easier.

So too, it should be easier to reverse a decision and return a donation when an individual who initially obtained the donation is no longer associated with a nonprofit. It should also be easier to reverse a decision when the benefactor has no active involvement with the nonprofit (for example, the individual does not sit on a nonprofit's boards or committees). On the other hand, if a nonprofit has already named numerous different buildings, programs, or activities after the tainted donor, it is often harder to rescind an honor.

*Proposition six: The degree of organizational commitment affects the strategy adopted by a nonprofit when it learns that a previously honored benefactor has become tainted by scandal. A small, medium, or large degree of organizational commitment is associated with an acquiescence, compromise, or defiance strategy, respectively.*

**Decision-making constraints.** Two constraints—economic need and organizational commitment—act as moderating variables in the pressure-strategy link. In particular, the greater the constraints, the less likely a nonprofit will be to return a donation and remove the honor. A nonprofit is more apt to keep a tainted donor's gift (e.g., a defiance strategy) when the economic need of an organization is high and when there is strong commitment to a donor and a donation. But as these constraints moderate, it becomes easier for a nonprofit to adopt a compromise strategy (keep the money but remove the public recognition) or when the constraints are low to adopt an acquiescence strategy (return the money and remove the public recognition).

## Being Prepared to Act

In the information age, organizational scandals do not stay quiet. Recent scandals within the business community of massive malfeasance have been well publicized. Many nonprofits have received largesse from the same business leaders who perpetrated accounting, financial, and economic scandals. As a result, nonprofit organizations must be forearmed and ready to react upon the revelation that a donor once perceived to be clean is now tainted. The model outlined in this article should help organizations in deciding which strategy to adopt.

**Endnotes**

1. An organization can more easily pursue a defiance strategy when it has not yet recognized a gift. Mississippi College, for example, accepted $45 million from Bernard Ebbers, the convicted former chairman of WorldCom. But the college did not name a building, school, or program after him. Nor has the college returned the donation.

2. An inappropriate action can occur when a donor is accused of a horrendous crime. The Welsh Language Society reversed its decision to accept £100,000 from John Owen after it was revealed that, over the course of a 10-year period, Owen had sexually abused children.

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# Visual Rhetoric:

## *The Powerful Design of Nonprofit Campaigns*

### An Interview with Peleg Top and Jonathan Cleveland

### by the editors

**Editors' note:** *Ruth McCambridge and James Morgan of the* Nonprofit Quarterly *sat down with Jonathan Cleveland and Peleg Top, the authors of* Designing for the Greater Good, *to discuss what makes nonprofit media campaigns powerful. The images mentioned in the interview were selected on a competitive basis for inclusion in this unique design annual, which we highly recommend.*



PHOTO © STREET REACH CAMPAIGN: T2H ADVERTISING, MYRTLE BEACH, SOUTH CAROLINA



PHOTO © STREET REACH CAMPAIGN: T2H ADVERTISING, MYRTLE BEACH, SOUTH CAROLINA

**NONPROFIT QUARTERLY**: *First, tell us a little about the book* Designing for the Greater Good.

**Peleg Top:** The idea for the book came up about seven years ago, and I shopped it around to many publishers who really weren't interested in publishing a book on this subject, because "Why would anybody want to buy a book about work that's mostly done pro bono or for free? There's no market for this." It wasn't until Crescent Hill Publishing actually embraced the idea and enthusiastically presented it to HarperCollins, who said yes to the project, that it actually came to life. When we sent out the call for entries, we received close to 4,000 submissions: about four times the average entries to most design books.

**NPQ:** *Well, it is beautiful. Most of my questions have to do with what goes into making a campaign that captures people's attention. I'd like to go through a couple of campaigns in the book and ask you, "What are the things that people can learn from?" But first, I want to ask more generally why this kind of media is important to the relationship between nonprofits and their communities.*

**PT:** Where design and marketing can really play a powerful role in a nonprofit's outreach to their constituents is through making an emotional connection that almost puts the audience in the place of the people that they're trying to help. That creates a very powerful emotional connection to a cause.

**NPQ:** *So it's something that would retain its own space in somebody's head?*
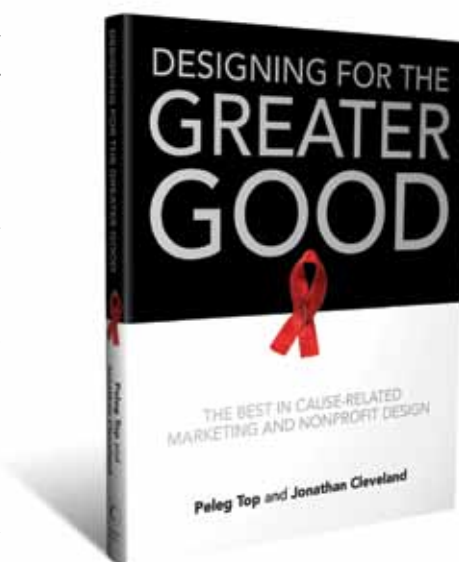
**PT:** That's a good way of putting it.

**Jonathan Cleveland:** It brings it firsthand and makes it real to you; so it does create that own emotional space, as opposed to simply providing an observation or watching experience.

**PT:** I think making it personal is the key. [The way someone will] care about something is if you put them in the other person's shoes. So marketing and design have the power to enable [you] to do that.

**NPQ:** *What can marketing and design like this do for organizations? What are the roles it can play in organizational missions?*

**PT:** What each organization wants is action. They want involvement of various kinds from benefactors, volunteers, and they want to create general awareness. That directly helps their mission. So it's not necessarily to help do the work but to help get the work done by supporting it, by donating, by talking about it, by letting everybody know about it. But ultimately these campaigns are meant to inspire action. One of the things we would always ask when we were at a meeting with a marketing department in a nonprofit is, "What are your goals here?"

**JC:** There is no doubt that great design in marketing can really bring that message to the people to create the action. That takes something different than pictures of lots of happy elderly people or happy kids. There is really no story there. We call that approach "spray and pray," meaning: "Let's just do a generic campaign, send it to a huge

mailing list, and try to pick up some donors, as opposed to defining the message with great copy and great design."

The [T2H Advertising 2009] Street Reach Campaign is a good example of storytelling with an image. They created ads and billboards that showed a person in one situation in normal-day life and then take that exact person and position them on the outside as a street person looking in the window at themselves having a nice dinner in a restaurant. This is a very effective campaign. It drives home a message and has a real pinpoint focus on it—as opposed to just showing a lot of down-and-out people.

**NPQ:** *You've worked with several groups in helping them to develop their images. What's the process like? Is there some value beyond mobilizing an organization's constituency that it brings to an organization to really consider an ad campaign like this?*

**PT:** I think what it does ultimately is help the organization tell their story in the simplest and most powerful way, which leads to action. So a lot of marketing and design is a form of storytelling, and what we do as creative experts and designers is help take that big story and everything that it represents from the organization to the cause and distill it down to a message that can connect with people. That's when it's effective. That's when it's

> **"Great design in marketing can really bring [a] message . . . to create action."**
>
> —Jonathan Cleveland, coauthor, *Designing for the Greater Good*

powerful: when somebody who has never heard of this cause sees their ad and gets what they are all about. They see a logo and they get it. There's an emotional, visceral connection to that cause and that organization that created it. It's beautiful. It's magic when it happens. That's what every organization wants.

**JC:** Nonprofits often have a decent knowledge of their audience, but I think we can bring new ideas to the table on reaching a broader audience. Because usually this is all based around fundraising of some sort. So the more you can bring the message to a wider audience, that always helps.

**NPQ:** *Let's go to the ads on pages 168 and 169 of your book [at left]. What do these pieces do effectively?*

**JC:** One of the first things we looked for in selecting the entries for the book and making the choices was visceral impact. This is one of the campaigns that presents something oddly. You really have to look at the picture, and the picture draws you in because it is so grimy and grim and dark and depressing. But then you have to take a double look at this picture to get the message here, and I don't mean that it's hard to figure out the message; I just think that it's done in a very intriguing way. Just the way the photograph has been used to manipulate with the person as part of that environment and then the message is projected onto the building, as opposed to a flat headline, you know. It just becomes one really effectively designed piece that is intriguing, smart, and gets the message across.

**PT:** Imagine looking at this ad and just seeing the photograph with the homeless person . . . just photographed just as a regular homeless person against the wall with the headline on top of it. That's the standard way many might show a homeless person. It will not be as effective as what happened in this ad because what they did is they showed you that when you're homeless, you are just one with the streets. And that's the story that they're telling.

**NPQ:** *It is very subtle but very powerful.*

**PT:** Exactly. So again, we go back to, "What story is the work telling?" You picked a perfect one for us to look at that really tells a very powerful story about being homeless, about how you are the street. Not just homeless on the street, you are the street, and in order for me to understand what that means, I have to see it. People are visual. They have to really visualize what it is that you're trying to say, and that's where the power of design comes in, where we can take an idea like that and materialize it.

**NPQ:** *And so, if we go from there to something a bit more in your face, the ads on page 140, "Real Manly Men Aren't Afraid"[at right]. Can you talk about why this works?*

**JC:** One reason it works is because it is very fun. They're attacking a subject that a lot of men just don't want to deal with. Most men just don't want to get a checkup and don't want to go to the doctor; and so they're presenting the need for it in a fun way by using the really big muscle man and then the cowboy: men's men. There, again: it just draws you in.

**NPQ:** *So they're using iconic images in a way that just flies in the face of the manliness concept.*

**JC:** Absolutely.

**PT:** This is an element that you'll see being used in advertising over and over, which is a combination of humor and shock. They do something that's not expected and give it a humorous twist. Those are two powerful ways to get a message out there. Think about all the ads that you reacted to—whether it's for a nonprofit or not, even if it's for products—what is it that grabs your attention? If it's funny or if it just shocks you and everything in between is just blah—in the gray area that you don't really remember. But we tend to remember things that either make us laugh or shock us. I think this ad does both.



REAL MANLY MEN AREN'T AFRAID OF A LITTLE PROSTATE CANCER SCREENING. IF YOU'RE 40 OR OLDER, TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT PROSTATE CANCER SCREENING. BE INFORMED. BE A MAN.

UTAH CANCER ACTION NETWORK

PHOTO © UTAH CANCER ACTION NETWORK: LOVE COMMUNICATIONS, SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH



REAL MANLY MEN AREN'T AFRAID OF A LITTLE PROSTATE CANCER SCREENING. IF YOU'RE 40 OR OLDER, TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT PROSTATE CANCER SCREENING. BE INFORMED. BE A MAN.

UTAH CANCER ACTION NETWORK

PHOTO © UTAH CANCER ACTION NETWORK: LOVE COMMUNICATIONS, SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

"[These ads] do something that's not expected and give it a humorous twist."

—Peleg Top, coauthor, *Designing for the Greater Good*

ILLUSTRATION © HUMANE SOCIETY OF TAMPA BAY: COSMIC, ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA



ILLUSTRATION © TRAVIS COUNTY GREEN PARTY (POWER OF VOICE): GRAPHIC GRANOLA, AUSTIN, TEXAS

**NPQ:** *So, moving from there to Page 95 . . . talk to me about this ad [at left].*

**JC:** When they submitted this, I recall reading their paragraph on how they approach this. It is such a strong, important issue, and they wrote that there's no way they could do a photograph of a dog dying inside of a car, so they really struggled with how they were going to get the message across. And there, again, I think a part of it is a little bit of humor and shock as well, and it's fun and whimsical.

So it draws you in, but it is a really, really important message. You know, you got the little devil on the car and the dog trying to get out, but it's not done in a grotesque way. You get in an instant that underneath the whimsy of the graphic, there's a very important message that is being articulated.

**PT:** Illustration was the best approach on this, I think, because philosophically it could be tough to figure this out photographically.

**NPQ:** *How about the "Power of Your Voice" piece on page 163 [at left]? What is this meant to evoke?*

**JC:** Oh, it's so bold and out there and outrageous. It really visually grabs your attention and draws you to read what it's about. I t's more of a political issue, and I think it illustrates that through the screaming-out image. It is trying to motivate you—whether you're angry or not—to take action in your political party or go to this meeting to learn more about the Travis County Green Party.

It just grabs your attention visually, which I think is the first thing that every designer strives for. Does it stand out? Does it look different than anything else that you see out there? And that's the power of design, and that's the power of using design as a communication tool, because it's a blank canvas and the right designer with the right idea and the right style can really articulate a message in a way that is unique and noteworthy.

**NPQ:** *What is your favorite ad campaign in the book? Do you have one?*

**JC:** I'll give you two. I love the Hurricane Katrina posters [at right]. That's not one, really, but there's a variety of those. But on a much simpler level, which I thought was done just incredibly well—simple and clever—is on page 45 of the book [see page 20]. I love the Goodwill poster for Halloween and probably one of the simplest things in the book, but I find it very fun. They took their mark and just played it out really well in a very simple format and that just works.

**NPQ:** *When people are looking to get design help for these kinds of campaigns, what should they look for in a design or marketing partner?*

**PT:** When designers ask me how to get into doing more nonprofit work, I tell them to begin by looking for agencies that promote causes they care about so they can see that you understand their world. I want to look for a designer or a design team or an agency that really understands my world and specializes in that arena and that has experience in that area. So I think experience is one thing and expertise is another, and the third thing is really a sense of aesthetic. "Do we connect on a level of aesthetics?" Because there are so many different designers with so many different styles out there.

**JC:** If you're lucky enough to find all of that, plus a designer or a design firm that also has a passion for your cause, that really helps.

**NPQ:** *A lot of the campaigns in the book are done by smaller nonprofits. Given their small size, how do you see these organizations balancing their organizing strategy with their communication strategy?*

**JC:** Well, at least from my experience, a lot of these smaller agencies have really tight budgets, if they even have one. So it's important to work with a design firm that really likes your cause and wants to be a part of it. But what I also find challenging with these small groups is they normally don't have a marketing person. You're usually working with a couple of assistants and maybe an executive director, so I find that there has to
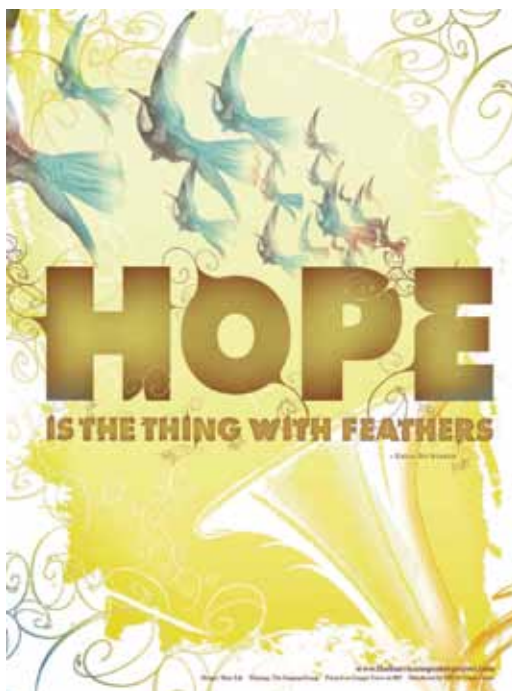


ILLUSTRATION © MICHAEL ERAZO-KASE, MUTT INK, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSLYVANIA



ILLUSTRATION © LANNY SOMMESE, PORT MATILDA, PENNSLYVANIA

"It's important to work with a design firm that really likes your cause and wants to be a part of it."
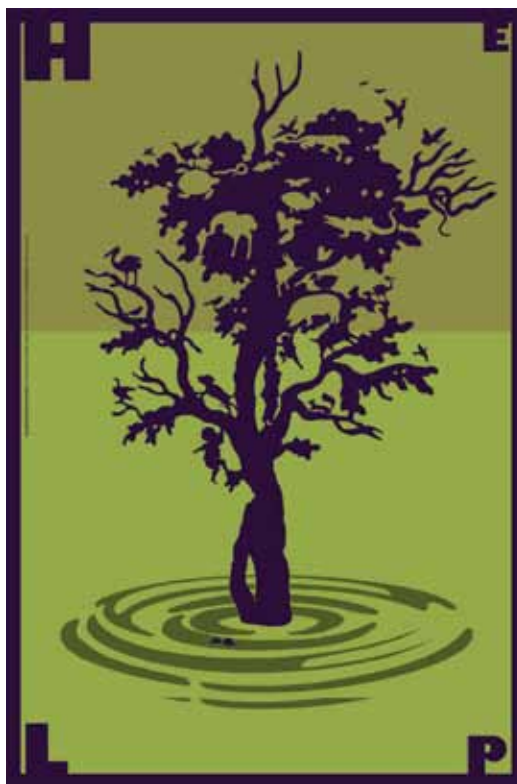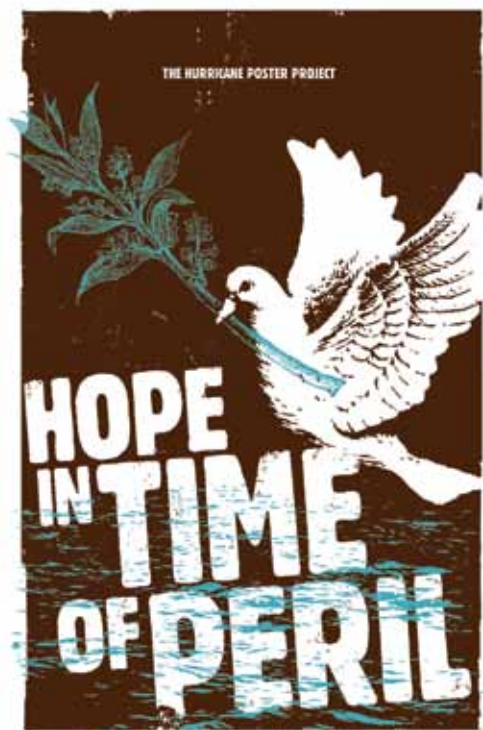
—Jonathan Cleveland

ILLUSTRATION © JORDAN BUTCHER, SQUAD STUDIO, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON



ILLUSTRATION © GOODWILL SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: THE MILLER GROUP, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

be a lot of education and guidance, and it falls on the design firm or the designer to work directly with them to get the best possible product for pro bono or an extremely tight budget.

**PT:** Many times the designer or the design firm serves as an extension of the organization from a marketing perspective. We come in with our expertise and fill in that gap—that hole that's missing internally for them—and we support them at that level with all of our expertise.

**JC:** Frequently a nonprofit will ask a variety of different designers to do a variety of different projects pro bono. They may be getting all of this work for free, but using different designers ultimately undermines their brand and their cause, and they lose sight of the value of the work. It's best to build a relationship with one designer.

**PT:** Absolutely. I always tell designers that pro bono doesn't mean totally free. It means an exchange. So if I'm a designer and I'm giving my services and my work to a nonprofit, there are two options here: just give for the sake of giving and don't expect anything in return, or have an agreement with a nonprofit that recognizes in some way the value of what we're contributing.

When there is no value articulated, the relationship can really get abused. So it is important to clarify that up front and put some ground rules in place as to what pro bono looks like. What are the boundaries? What are the limitations?

When both parties really know and agree on that, when that agreement is in place, it makes the project and their relationship beautiful, rather than creating anxiety. It's important, in other words, for the nonprofit to understand that they're getting something really valuable and to respect that and to offer something back that could be valuable to the designer.

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diquam rufaa
fu quefa cenuf
fup aru theuu
ci la aum

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# The *Four Horsemen* of the *Nonprofit Financial Apocalypse*

## by Clara Miller

**A**S THE RECESSION LOOMED, NONPROFIT Finance Fund (NFF) realized that its clients—borrowers, financial advisees, and grant recipients—had been exposed to a virulent flulike virus. The financial crisis was like a pervasive, all-encompassing malady. And like health workers fighting a true epidemic, NFF's clients would be exposed to the disease and expected to fight it simultaneously. There was no vaccination program, although there were some swift and thoughtful efforts by funders to maintain funding levels, release restrictions on grants, and provide real-time relief. And it was well understood that the disease could be fatal.

Like flu sufferers, organizations with preexisting conditions were likely to be more vulnerable. Flu fatalities and close calls were more common among those suffering from, for example, chronic asthma. And similarly, the economic H1N1 epidemic (or financial "plague") was likely to hit certain organizations harder. NFF's funder partners and Community Development Financial Institutions colleagues saw the same patterns.

Indeed, some difficult cases were predictable. Organizations that had suffered from the financial equivalent of chronic asthma were hit hard. They were weak from years of marginal operation and further hollowed out by what NFF terms "pretty bad best practices." These practices include a tendency among funders to routinely restrict cash; a public obsession with pointless metrics (e.g., overhead rate and fundraising costs); government's declining reimbursement coverage; and a mounting list of unfunded compliance and comportment mandates from all sides. And contributing to the prevailing weakness was everyone's tendency (managers, board members, and the public) to do more with less and thus weaken organizations' built-up service-delivery capacity.

Another group of victims in the sector was less predictable. These organizations had played by the nonprofit rules, were likely to have four- and five-star ratings, and boasted enviable business models that were carefully built according to so-called best practices in capitalization. They also owned their buildings, used long-term bond financing, and steadily built their endowments. Unrestricted net asset balances were handsome.

**Nonprofit organizations that suffered from the financial equivalent of asthma were hit hard.**

**CLARA MILLER** is the president and CEO of Nonprofit Finance Fund.

THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE RIDE IN, AS SEEN IN THE "SILOS APOCALYPSE", 1109.
PHOTO: AKG-IMAGES / BRITISH LIBRARY

THE NONPROFIT QUARTERLY  **23**

Savvy, connected business folk peopled their boards.

Still, a surprising number turned out to have been vulnerable, too. And while most members of these groups have worked hard to convalesce, they may remain members of the "walking wounded" for years to come.

### The Four Horsemen

The H1N1-like financial virus that wrought havoc on these predictable and unpredictable victims also bedeviled banks, homeowners, and businesses throughout the economy. Quite simply, the culprit was declining—and increasingly uncertain—revenue. This simple reality hit all organizations in some way: large and small, nonprofit and for-profit, rich and poor. And the factor that predicted vulnerability can best be summed up by Peter Bernstein's pithy description of financial risk: "not having cash when you need it."

Well, that seems straightforward enough; we might even call it the quintessence of a "duh" moment: if your organization doesn't have cash, it suffers financially. But even strong nonprofits that looked great on paper became vulnerable, and their struggles surprised many. So what went wrong?

From the capitalization point of view, these organizations had some shared characteristics. And we call these carefully built elements that made them vulnerable the "Four Horsemen of the Nonprofit Financial Apocalypse." Any one horseman can make an organization more vulnerable in an uncertain, changing economy. But when these horsemen ride together, they can be fatal.

### Horseman One: Too Much Real Estate

For most board members and nonprofit advisers (or, for that matter, senior managers) it's practically axiomatic that owning your facility is better than leasing one. Why pour rent money down the drain when you can build up equity? If you own a building, you can borrow and leverage your growth.

In NFF's experience, this prevailing "wisdom"—even in good times—isn't reliably true. The prospective returns on commercial real estate (or personal homeownership) don't usually square with nonprofits' commercial realities. Even in the best of circumstances, acquiring a facility
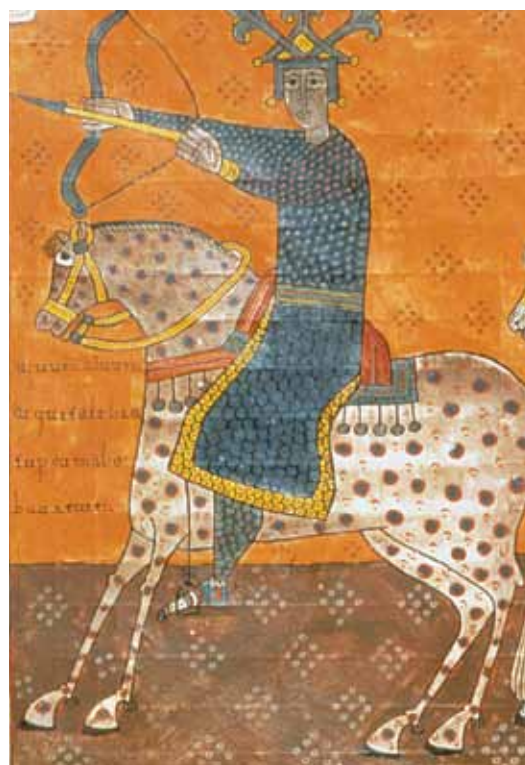


that doesn't push an organization's fixed costs to an uncomfortable level is devilishly difficult.

NFF research indicates that about one-third of organizations that acquire facilities can manage these shoals well. This third ends up with a building that cradles the program and works financially: a true triumph. Another third manages to complete the building but arrives gasping on the beach; as a result, this group becomes the walking wounded. Among this group, program quality and financial health are typically impaired for years.

For a final third, financial imbalance pervades operations to the point of requiring reorganization or even extinction. What's more, the tendency to value real estate purchases over other capital investment—building the technology platform, refreshing programmatic assets, or adding firepower to the development department, for example—forces more important parts of the organization's operation—and future—to go without capital investment. Especially in a rapidly changing economy, the opportunity costs are high.

In the boom times that preceded the recent crash, some capital campaigns and facility planners in the nonprofit sector experienced irrational exuberance as well. Building campaigns and

acquisitions regularly outstripped carrying capacity. Some strong organizations built or acquired more than they needed in the belief that market value would continue to increase and that they would continue to grow. In some cases, they reasoned that having excess capacity would allow them to go into the landlord business (and collect reliable revenue from rent).

For overbuilders, the market has been a cruel teacher. Even where nonprofits didn't expect rental income, those that anticipated straight-line growth have experienced interruption, decline, and vagaries in revenue, so the increased fixed costs of a larger facility (and more managerial and programming expenses) have become a burden. Moreover, quick fixes are elusive. Especially in a down market, it's difficult to sell a building or lease surplus space to ease this burden.

Thus, for prospective landlords, overly large buildings have imposed a double whammy: not only do these landlords face the burden of higher fixed costs but the collapse in commercial rents has made tenants rarer (or nonexistent), eliminating expected rental income. Most made their revenue and expense projections at or near the top of the real estate market, so market rent declines will have real and probably long-lasting financial consequences during a slow recovery.

## Horseman Two: Too Much Debt

While there's much talk about nonprofits' lack of access to debt, research by Robert J. Yetman of the University of California, Davis, demonstrates that nonprofits resemble their for-profit peers (in terms of size and type of operations) with respect to the levels and kinds of debt deployed. Historically low interest rates attracted nonprofits just as these rates did everyone else, even though that situation created too much borrowing.

In the recent downturn, debt—especially high levels of debt where borrowers and lenders overestimated the amount of reliable revenue available for repayment—has affected even strong organizations. Those taking out mortgages or issuing bonds to finance purchase or construction have found that their debt is an additional component of increasing fixed costs. And ironically,

some of the most creditworthy—medium-size and large organizations with excellent bond ratings—find themselves working their way out of this fix. Because they could borrow at low rates and, in some cases, against endowments that pumped out historically high returns, they did. When operating revenue dropped, they had to cut programs and services to stay afloat. As Stephanie Strom notes in her September 23, 2009 *New York Times* article, there are numerous cases where robust organizations with excellent bond ratings, the best access to capital, and "management savvy" overreached, and their capital structure made them less flexible, with negative consequences.

## Horseman Three: "Under Water" Balance Sheets and Negative Liquidity

Over the years, one of the so-called pretty bad best practices that NFF has observed is a purported formulaic path to financial stability through the successive addition of assets (generally increasingly illiquid) to the balance sheet: first a leased space, then the cash reserve, then a building, and then, finally, the endowment.

For many, amassing an endowment represents



For overbuilders, the market has been a cruel teacher.

a "nirvana" state, where fundraising (and related pain) ceases and programs are amply funded; the sun shines on beaming board members who have tidy, constructive discussion about investment options (as opposed to unseemly wrestling sessions about who's written their annual check); and every meeting includes thoughtful planning based on a reliable, multiyear gush of investment earnings from the endowment.

Myriad factors make this progression impracticable (and even undesirable) for most organizations, but it persists. And it has for many years, despite evidence to the contrary. Even in 1940, Margaret Grant and Herman Hettinger noted that endowments provided potentially unreliable revenue: "Endowments are becoming more difficult to build up and *the income there from has been found uncertain when most needed*, in depressions [emphasis added]," they wrote.

By 2008, many endowments were heavily invested in equities, and portions of most portfolios were "under water" (i.e., had declined in value to a level lower than their purchase price). A cash-strapped organization faced the unsatisfactory choice of (1) selling (and thus realizing a loss while awaiting recovery); (2) holding on while

accepting that the returns would be meager or nonexistent; or (3) borrowing against the devalued portfolio or another asset (consider New York's Metropolitan Opera borrowing against its Chagalls to raise cash).

This is not to say that some organizations do not have a compelling mission-related need for an endowment or that having cash reserves, sinking funds, and similar assets on the balance sheet are not evidence of enterprise-savvy financial management. The problem is our sector's automatic-pilot approach to making these decisions.

## Horseman Four: Torturous Labor Economics

Finally, an important part of the sector's commercial proposition is difficult labor economics, which makes commercial operation problematic. Managing workforce dynamics has been a historically challenging aspect of nonprofit enterprises, and one of which seasoned managers are well aware.

Some nonprofits require highly specialized talent, which is expensive and requires ongoing care, feeding, and investment. Economies of scale available in the for-profit world are not always applicable to nonprofits (consider symphony orchestras and research universities). Other nonprofits are labor-intensive because of quality and regulatory considerations (consider skilled nursing facilities and day-care centers).

Despite difficult times, nonprofit workforce reductions are often impossible or highly undesirable. Consider the impracticality of these scenarios: "We've decided to lay off the brasses, the second violins, and if revenue doesn't rebound, the oboist" or "We're not going to give our Nobel laureates lab privileges for a week a month," or "We'll just reduce nurse count in the intensive-care unit by half." Hmmm . . . brain surgery, anyone? While sometimes possible, productivity gains from economies of scale and technology simply do not follow the path of those for for-profits. And in many large institutions, labor unions add another layer of complexity. Unlike other horsemen, however, this one is more closely related to mission, making it essential to some organizations' core values rather than an optional strategic choice. I would argue that building a business that supports this "human

## What to Do If You Are in over Your Head

Even if the Four Horsemen are gaining on nonprofits, what can these organizations do now? NFF believes it's useful to think about this problem in two "bites": (1) coping (that is, getting through the worst of the recession and preserving an organization's current programs as much as possible); and (2) changing (that is, rethinking and redoing the business model and programming given a new reality).

Successful coping is often a central skill for nonprofit managers. Coping enables them to sharply assess the reliability of revenue, adjust and readjust expenses accordingly, and sometimes make tough choices that allow mission-critical services to be preserved, even when it means layoffs and furloughs.

Successful changing requires access to capital along multiple dimensions, which allows organizations to adapt as the environment evolves. For various reasons, the principles of sound capital investment are foreign to most funders, boards, and managers in our sector, but suffice it to say that capital—whatever the purpose—is not the same as revenue to support the regular delivery of services. One way to think about capital is to understand that it funds the temporary deficits incurred before it attracts enough revenue to support program delivery going forward. Thus, capital

is temporary, while revenue—at least in good times—is not.

Organizations that have taken advantage of our Tough Times services have found help on the coping and the changing fronts. First is a program profitability analysis, which breaks down individual lines of business and analyzes their contribution (or lack thereof) to the bottom line. This informs decisions on coping with real-time information. Organizations also like the related scenario planning tool—which is more about the medium and long term and the implications of various coping strategies. Organizations can project the financial implications of what-if scenarios, including mergers, asset sales, retrenchment, transferring programs to other organizations, and so on. And some of these coping strategies involve major enterprise change and, yes, capital.

Finally, it may seem counterintuitive, but this is the time to invest in change and growth. Expanding work that is core to your mission and competency; undertaking a radical redo of the business model to a more virtual platform for service delivery; acquiring the right facility at a bargain-basement price; investing in program assets, such as new artistic work, are just a few we've seen. And the bottom line is that all these "changing" activities require capital. — *C. M.*

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capital" as it delivers on organizational mission is paramount.

It's not difficult to see why the Four Horsemen wreak havoc in an environment of disappearing and declining revenue, especially among the Charles Atlases of the sector.

What's most worrisome, however, is that the dominant institutional model in the sector—represented by the Four Horsemen—compels organizations to grow in a hermetic, almost automatic, way and create businesses that are highly illiquid and vulnerable to economic flux. And despite seemingly robust balance sheets, many nonprofits are starved of the capital needed for adaptation to a rapidly changing economy. If the recession has taught us anything, it's that net assets are not the same as "cash when you need it."

Within the sector, the best and the brightest within leading organizations are questioning long-held assumptions and reviewing their business models to determine how to adapt to a changing

economy. They have asked questions that may prompt change that goes beyond simply coping with the current financial woes. Given the new economic reality, they want to build an enterprise that can succeed despite the realities that (1) the pull of place has declined, (2) a global market has developed, (3) "intermediaries" have lost much of their authority and utility, and (4) technology has redefined the market. They are reexamining what happened, why, and how they can push the reset button.

### How Did We Get Here?

The sector suffers from a one-size-fits-all growth-and-change model that is largely the result of habit and reduces cash accessibility. Because capital investment in the nonprofit sector was traditionally associated with either a building purchase or a restricted endowment, these factors alone have become the default setting for capital investment. Moreover, the financial best practices put in place

**Many nonprofits are starved of the capital needed for adaptation to a rapidly changing economy.**

by the nonprofit sector are largely unrelated to sound capitalization. Instead, they focus on reporting, tax-law compliance, and counterproductive pretty bad best practices. Finally, both donors and recipients routinely put money into hermetic compartments that limit how funds are used rather than connect funds to what they are meant to accomplish. Taken together, these tendencies have led to widespread institutional fragility.

The one-size-fits-all model also has long-lasting opportunity costs. When capital is invested in assets that aren't mission critical, it means that other, more important investments can't be made. Capital routinely invested in a prescribed progression of fixed assets can't play the multiple roles that change requires. An organization boxed into an overly large building, for example, may lack the option to invest that cash in more critical areas, such as mitigating operating risk, upgrading technology, burnishing the brand to appeal to national corporate sponsors, or building talent (including a scaled development department). Capital is also required for other kinds of change, such as improving revenue reliability, improving operating efficiency, or reducing overall cost. In this approach, real estate is not off the table; it is simply one asset among others in a more diversified business investment strategy.

## What Now?

To be perfectly clear, the message here is not that all owned property, debt financings, endowments, or human-capital strategies are bad. Over the years, NFF and others have financed buildings with debt and tax credits throughout the country, and helped organizations find ways to build other parts of their balance sheets, including endowments, cash reserves, and sinking funds.

And NFF continues to see great projects. Based on practice and research, however, we do believe that these projects are frequently undertaken in a kind of managerial sleepwalk. They are subject to a kind of groupthink about capitalization that fails to examine alternatives and is unlikely to align capitalization strategy with program, capacity, and market. This just isn't good enough anymore.

Change is here, and many are behind the curve. Business models and markets in the economy as a

whole have changed, and those in the social sector must change with them. And this change is happening. An increasing number of young people entering the sector are platform- and sector-agnostic. The one-size-fits-all institutional model has been subject to "disruptive innovation" in real time. If institutions don't pay attention, they will invest themselves into irrelevance and, from a mission point of view, lose their way.

We need to broaden our capitalization horizons. Our sector tends to embrace an enterprise model built on a static set of assumptions about financial risk, investment, and return. As the world changes, we need to provide capital investment for growth within the sector's great organizations without confining deployment to a specific asset class or use.

Funder practice and social-sector management norms need overhaul. As NFF has learned, pretty bad best practices are deeply ingrained in the sector. It's truly empowering for funders and nonprofit leaders to become more enterprise savvy rather than focus on compliance (mainly with trust, estates, and tax law), comportment (mostly focused on reporting hygiene), and pretty bad best practices.

The first step is to understand what capital is and isn't. Many in the sector use the word *capital* interchangeably with money, income, and revenue, which creates conceptual squishiness and imprecision that undermine progress. One approach is to think of capital as the "factory:" the built capacity of an organization that supports the delivery of programs and services. These built programs then reliably attract revenue that pays for them, and this situation becomes "sustainable." Growth capital (philanthropic equity) changes that factory—makes it bigger, smaller, develops new offerings, invests in efficiency, develops a system to measure effectiveness, and so on. It is required for any change. Replenishment capital takes care of the usual wear and tear on the built "factory": depreciation, the need for program refreshment, technology replacements, and so on. And both types are deployed to ensure that revenue to fund organizational mission can flow more reliably in the future. Capital builds the factory (no matter what it's spent on), and revenue pays for regular delivery of programs and services (no matter what it's spent on).

## The Real Risk Is to the Public

This is a difficult but defining time. We must keep foremost in our minds that our sector exists to serve the public. So the question we must continually push ourselves on is this: how is the public best served by the choices we make? As difficult as it is for us to confront, the real risk is not to our jobs or those of our colleagues, it's the risk to the public: that a child will go home to an abusive parent, that a homeless veteran will not find help, or that a talented teen won't be able to go to college. This is why the failure of a nonprofit can be so painful. If organizations sense growing danger, they will move quickly to ensure that constituents are best served or as little harmed as possible, and the rest is secondary.

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# The Problem of Solo Civic Engagement:

## *An Interview with Doug McAdam*

by Cynthia Gibson, Ph.D.



**Teach for America has asserted that its teachers become more civically engaged than average.**

Teach for America (TFA), a program that enlists recent college graduates in urban areas, has asserted that its value proposition goes beyond its immediate benefits to schools and students in that its participants, the teachers who emerge from the program, are likely to be more civically engaged than average. TFA leader Wendy Kopp has likened the program's outcomes to those of Freedom Summer. Stanford professor Doug McAdam, the recent recipient of Tufts University's Tisch Civic Engagement Research Prize, wrote a book on the Freedom Summer participants. He studied the TFA question at the invitation of Kopp, and his findings have now become a source of controversy. Here Cynthia Gibson, an expert on civic engagement, interviews McAdam to see what the fuss is about.

**Cynthia Gibson:** *The TFA study has generated some lively discussion among those who are impressed with its rigor and breadth and*

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**Cynthia Gibson, Ph.D.,** is the founder of Cynthesis Consulting.

STUDENT PROTESTORS ARE PHOTOGRAPHED BY A POLICEMAN ON FREEDOM DAY IN GREENWOOD, MISSISSIPPI, IN 1964.

**Teach for America (TFA)** places recent college graduates, many from elite universities, as teachers in some of the nation's neediest and sometimes least well-performing school systems. The young TFA teachers receive some training before placement, but unlike traditional public-school teachers, they lack teacher certification.

Now two decades old, TFA has placed approximately 24,000 recruits in classrooms, including more than 7,000 currently participating as Teach for America corps members. As one of the nation's most widely recognized socially entrepreneurial nonprofits, TFA has received extensive grant support from a cross-section of foundations and significant government funding through the Department of Education, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and other agencies. Accustomed to receiving "set asides" or earmarks in the federal budget, TFA now faces a change as the Obama administration's Department of Education has recommended elimination of TFA's $18 million earmark in the FY 2011 federal budget, a move that TFA says may jeopardize the organization's growth.

*those who have concerns about its conclusions. Then there are some in between who believe that service and service learning have long-term civic outcomes but want more solid data to affirm that. I would call them hopeful skeptics, perhaps.*

**Doug McAdam:** I think that actually describes nicely where I'm at. I don't doubt that some forms of youth service or youth activism have longer-term civic impacts, but I'm also convinced that you can't assume those impacts.

**CG:** *So let's start with what interested you in pursuing this particular study.*

**DM:** Well, I'm a political sociologist who has mostly studied social movements and other forms of nonroutine politics, and the focus of that work has been either at the meso level looking at social-movement organizations or looking at

the most macro level: under what conditions do movements emerge? How do they develop over time? What impacts, if any, do they have? And so on. So, with one notable exception, I haven't been looking at individual-level data on the enduring effects of youth service or youth activism. I did a study 25 years ago where I looked at the biographical trajectories of all those who applied to take part in something that, at the time, was called the Mississippi Summer Project but which has come to be known as "Freedom Summer." And I stumbled upon the original applications from that project. I realized as I was looking through these applications that I had the applications not only for those who applied, were accepted, and went to Mississippi, but also a large number of applications for people who applied, were accepted, and for whatever reason didn't go.

So I had this wonderful naturalistic experiment dropped in my lap. You have two groups that look similar on the eve of the summer. One has the experience of Mississippi; the other does not. Simple question: what difference, if any, did Freedom Summer make in their subsequent lives? And the answer was it made a huge difference. The biographies went in very different directions, largely, I would say, as a result of what they did or didn't experience in Mississippi.

The work I did on Freedom Summer is also where the TFA started. In 1998 or '99, Wendy Kopp [of Teach for America] called me and said, "Our 10-year anniversary is coming up. I just read *Freedom Summer* [by Doug McAdam]. I'm convinced that what you showed for the Freedom Summer volunteers is what happens for our alumni on a more regular basis, and I'd be interested in your doing a study of that."

With funding from [the William] T. Grant Foundation, I conducted the study, which looked at three groups of applicants. Wendy was most interested in the impact on graduates: that is, people who are offered positions, take them, and fulfill their two-year teaching commitment. We were equally interested in two control groups: "dropouts," or those who began the program but left sometime before completing the two years, and "nonmatriculants," those who were accepted by TFA but declined the offer.

When I took the study on, I was skeptical that there would be big enduring effects for the graduates, largely because TFA is not like Freedom Summer. I never regarded Freedom Summer as a typical youth-service experience at all because it was much more intense, much more collective, much more explicitly political, and it also took place at a particularly pregnant moment in U.S. history: the summer of 1964, just as the '60s wave was starting to build. So I assumed a lot of what happened to those who went to Mississippi was a function of what happened immediately afterward—not just about what happened that summer.

There are other significant differences as well. Compared to Freedom Summer, TFA is much less explicitly political. Freedom Summer was also a very collective—intensely communal—experience, whereas TFA is a more solitary service experience. Finally, there are huge selection effects in TFA. That is, the most service-oriented, graduating seniors apply to TFA, and then TFA gets to select the most active of the most active. So I expected there would be small or minimal differences between the three groups, and I was really intrigued as a social scientist to see if in fact that was true.

**CG:** *What did you find?*

**DM:** We looked at six or seven measures of subsequent service—civic and political activity—and found that pretty consistently, TFA graduates lagged behind the nonmatriculants, who were consistently more active on all subsequent dimensions of civic participation, service, politics, etc. The contrast between the dropouts and the graduates was less clear. In general, the dropouts ranked slightly higher on some dimensions of subsequent service, but the differences weren't that great or as consistent as the differences between nonmatriculants and graduates.

I should say, parenthetically, that all three groups are wildly active. They would outpace their age peers by a factor of three or four. So these continue to be very civically engaged folk, and that has to be made clear. But it's the differences between the groups that were intriguing and

somewhat surprising even to me. As I said, I was not expecting to see big differences favoring the TFA graduates, but I certainly wasn't expecting to see that they would lag behind nonmatriculants.

**CG:** *Your points about all three groups being very civically active is one that others have made to highlight the importance of this level of civic engagement, even among a cohort that may not include the entire youth population. That is, isn't it good to see that some programs attract young people interested in being engaged and that support that engagement?*

**DM:** Absolutely. I think these programs are terrific, and I think TFA is terrific, especially in the educational service it provides. But that's not the issue here. The question in this case goes beyond the educational service to a second claim made by the organization. TFA says it enhances the level of civic engagement of its graduates.

But we found that, relative to these other two groups, it doesn't in fact increase subsequent civic engagement. That's not a criticism of the organization. It's a finding that reflects differences among three groups of subjects who were all very active before they applied to TFA, all three are accepted, but exhibit different trajectories afterward. TFA graduates wind up being, in general, less active than the other two groups and especially the nonmatriculants. That raises all sorts of interesting questions it seems to me about the impact of this particular service experience. What is it about that experience that's seemingly depressing the levels of subsequent service? That's the interesting question.

**CG:** *Almost a decade ago, there was quite a lot of debate about whether service led to more political engagement, and among some, there was the belief that service needed to lead to political involvement; otherwise, it wasn't "deeper" civic engagement. As a result, there was a great deal of effort in trying to ascertain—using data— whether service led to long-term political involvement among young people—efforts that included the development of new sets of variables representing political or civic engagement.*

*Today, there doesn't seem to be as much*

"Pretty consistently, TFA graduates lagged behind the nonmatriculants, who were consistently more active."

*discussion about this issue. So is it important that these programs make an effort to prove that they lead to civic outcomes if they're doing other things just as well?*

**DM:** It seems to me that TFA's main mission is to provide important educational services to resource-poor school districts, urban and rural school districts. That's a terrific mission. I'm persuaded that they do it pretty well and that that ought to be the fundamental basis for judging TFA. The fact that it doesn't dramatically enhance the subsequent civic participation of its graduates seems to me to be a relatively minor matter. As a social scientist, it's an interesting issue to me personally, but it shouldn't be seen as a devastating critique of TFA given its central mission.

**CG:** *So why are the civic outcomes interesting or important, though, to you or to anyone else?*

**DM:** I go back to [political scientist] Bob Putnam, who claims that the foundations of civic life in the U.S. are weakening, that in some sense civic participation is in trouble in the United States and [that] for a democracy to be viable, there has to be an engaged civic sector.

I think it's a legitimate concern that the civic sector is atrophying and that young people are not encouraged to engage in civic behavior. So besides debating what the reality of civic life in the United States is, we ought to be concerned with what kinds of experiences encourage a kind of enduring commitment to civic participation among young people. Lots of people have worried about that, and I think, in general, we're at a moment where we assume that any kind of youth service—youth civic engagement—invariably produces positive effects, and I think that's absolutely false.

I believe that, if we really did a series of systematic comparative studies of the long-term effects of various kinds of civic engagement or youth service, we'd see highly variable effects. That's what I see in the study of Freedom Summer versus the study of TFA. I think if we took these studies seriously, we would see variation in effects, and we ought to then be interested in identifying those features of service experiences

that help us understand the variation in impact. We ought to try to identify those features of youth service—youth civic engagement—that produce longer-term effects. If we're concerned that civic life is on the wane in the United States, we ought to be interested in finding out what specific kinds of programs or activities encourage a longer-term engagement in politics, civic life, etc.

I don't like the fact that we simply assume that if kids do service-learning courses or people participate in Teach for America that, invariably, this is going to have long-term positive consequences for increased civic participation. I think that's almost certainly not true, and we ought to be interested in looking at variation and trying to understand what's producing it.

**CG:** *Recently there was a public back-and-forth about whether service—and people's increasing interest in it—was a movement. Do you think it is?*

**DM:** I don't think I would call it a movement. I think we throw that term around very loosely. And by *movement*, I think we should mean something a little more restrictive.

**CG:** *Why not?*

**DM:** For me, a movement typically involves some kind of organized, sustained effort to produce change—or maybe resist change—and that change effort has to involve—at least to a certain degree—some kinds of nonroutine, noninstitutionalized forms of collective action, and I think that's the distinctive feature of a true social movement.

There are lots of activities in the world where people are allegedly trying to change something, but are we going to call all that activity social movements? That's not fine grained enough. I think movements in general involve forms of collective action that are nonroutine, sometimes disruptive, and that's what differentiates something that I would call a movement from other kinds of institutionalized change efforts.

**CG:** *One of your study's findings is that graduates of TFA report lower levels of employment*

*in pro-social jobs. How was pro-social employment defined? Did you look at post-TFA employment in terms of nonprofit work or government service? Also, what about people who work in these spheres and see that as part of their "service"?*

**DM:** Yes, that's why we looked at, again, six or seven different measures, because we wondered whether people whose paid employment was very service oriented would not count that as volunteer service on some of our other measures. So we wanted to definitely differentiate the two.

Pro-social employment—I don't have the specific operational definition in front of me—but it was jobs clearly in the so-called helping professions. That included teaching, but also nonprofit work, etc. Certain kinds of legal work were counted, but it depended on the kind of law. So we had lots of detailed information on what their current job was, and we had a set of criteria by which we defined some positions as pro-social employment, and we applied that across the three groups; and again, all three groups were—the rates of pro-social employment were pretty darn high, pretty impressive—but the TFA graduates ranked lowest on that dimension as well.

**CG:** *Why is that?*

**DM:** In analyzing the data, we tried hard to figure out what kinds of factors explained this slightly lower rate of subsequent civic participation, service, etc., and it was hard to identify specific factors. Here's as much as I can say: about 20 percent of the graduates report feeling disillusioned by their TFA experience at the end of the experience. Again, we tried to unpack that; we tried to look at the factors that seemed to predict disillusionment, and we didn't get very far. All we know is that about 20 percent in the end concluded that they were somewhat disillusioned by their experience, and they were also very likely to say they felt like they were not very effective as teachers, and then we had a lot of open-ended items. And so we've looked at a lot of what people actually told us on those open-ended items, and there was a fairly consistent story.

A small percentage of all graduates—just under 20 percent—got to the end of the experience—they hung in there to the end—but in the end, came to see this whole issue of educational inequality as much bigger and much more systemic and they came to see the TFA approach as not very effective.

Yes, TFA was a great organization for trying to do the work it was doing, but the problem was much greater than the approach suggested. And so, they exited feeling somewhat ineffective themselves and disillusioned with this particular approach to this daunting problem of educational inequality. It doesn't necessarily mean they were down on TFA, although some of them were. They simply came to doubt that this was an effective way of addressing this very challenging issue, and they felt pretty ineffective as teachers. If you feel that way, your willingness to re-up and engage in another really intensive service experience, I think, is obviously going to be diminished.

If you take that 20 percent who felt disillusioned out of the graduate group, the rates of subsequent civic participation, service, etc. are statistically indistinguishable from the nonmatriculants. So my sense is that—for a small percentage of the TFA graduates—their experience actually discourages subsequent participation. For the vast majority of graduates, they have a terrific experience, they feel positive about what they've done, and it has no real implications for subsequent service, political activity, etc. They're very likely to stay very engaged and to continue to focus their energies on educational inequality, which is something that TFA does very well. It encourages the majority of their graduates to stay active on this issue, and that's another part of TFA's mission. They are committed to gradually building a very large alumni community around this issue.

**CG:** *Have you considered digging deeper into the data regarding that 20 percent and finding out whether there something that's common to them that distinguishes them from the other 80 percent?*

**DM:** Yes, this is the core of this issue. It's the key to the finding in general. The difference between

"Twenty percent [of TFA graduates] . . . came to see . . . the TFA approach as not very effective."

these three groups is this 20 percent. And yes, I'd love to dig into it more.

I think it would require interviews of some sort. This is a very intensive experience, and for graduates with very different characteristics, some percentage of them—again, in this case 20 percent—at the end wind up going, "Well, I worked really hard and I admire what this organization is trying to do, but I don't think I was ultimately very effective, and I've come to the conclusion that this is not the most effective approach to this very tricky issue" and that they came to that [conclusion] for very different reasons or with very different background characteristics. So you'd want to interview them and say, "How did you come to this conclusion? What was it about your experience that led you in the end to this conclusion about your own efforts and about the effectiveness of the organization?"

**CG:** *One of the most interesting things in your article is your distinction between service learning and school-based community service and also between school-based service that stresses civic engagement and school-based activities that don't. And that the latter seems to encourage more civic engagement over the long term. Can you talk about that?*

**DM:** I'm very interested in this issue too, and this is my provisional take on the matter. There are kinds of activities in schools, but also, I suppose, in the community where it's not that the goal is to encourage service or civic engagement but these are collective activities where people are—whether they know it or not—engaged in civic life. They're involved in collective action around some issue, even if that issue is not really about politics or civic life. They're involved in some club on campus, and they're developing a set of civic skills on the one hand and maybe an orientation to collective life that may pay dividends in the future.

So they're developing a sense of themselves and their competence in groups that may in fact translate into various kinds of group participation—some of it civic—in the future. I touched on this earlier, but the more collective the service or civic experience—whether or not we call it

that—I believe the greater the likelihood that you will engage in collective activity in the future.

The point is the Teach for America experience for many graduates is also a very individual one. They are up at 1:00 in the morning slogging through the next day's lesson plan or grading papers or whatever. They weren't engaged in the community in any meaningful way, and although TFA has all sorts of regional associations, they weren't very involved in the regional TFA association; they basically slogged through two years as a "lone" teacher. And that also appears to be related to whether you wind up being disillusioned.

You're not getting this collective sense of empowerment or mission because your experience is fundamentally isolating. Freedom Summer—these folks were housed communally in freedom houses or in private homes in Mississippi with other volunteers, and on the outside was this hostile white community. So there was this really strong us-them dynamic, and they really came to feel a part of this movement community, and many of them came out of Mississippi absolutely committed to finding other versions of this experience in the North.

So if we really did this set of careful, systematic, comparative studies of youth activism or youth service, we're going to find variation in the long-term effects, and what we really ought to try to identify are the mechanisms that account for that variation. I would bet that one of the big features that differentiates the longer-term effects is just how communal or collective the experience is.

**CG:** *The personal/individual versus the collective service experience—and whether the latter results in a better one—continues to be debated, especially given the advent of online activism, which some argue is more individual. But some believe that these efforts can be just as effective in social change and that behind the arguments about "collectivity" is a mindset of a 1960s-sort of notion of civic engagement (e.g., protests, etc).*

**DM:** I'm not pushing politics with a capital P. I'm not pushing a version of '60s politics. All I mean is that if your service experience [takes place] in the year 2010, the more collective it is, I'm betting

that it's more likely to produce enduring effects. And again, as I mentioned earlier, so you're the president of the French club at your high school. Nobody is going to confuse that with '60s politics. But I'm saying that probably has much greater implications for your behavior in the future than being in a service-learning course.

Essentially, the more collective the experience, the more I think you are encouraged to engage in the future, and my point about Teach for America is that it looks like those who slogged through as individual teachers were more likely to get to the end of the experience and were more likely to go, "That was exhausting; I don't think I was all that effective; I don't see educational inequality changing in a big way; I'm going to get back to my life; I'm going to divest here a little." And so, this is not about '60s politics versus [today's levels of civic engagement] to me. This is about how collective is this civic experience that you're having—whether we characterize it as politics or not.

**CG:** *It's interesting to me that your study found that the TFA organization was important to so many and that they got identity from it at a time when the way in which people—particularly young people—are choosing to engage and be excited about engagement is not about organizations. In fact, research shows [that] young people mov[e] away from organizations as their primary outlet for civic engagement, as evidenced by the decline in membership among large, nonprofit advocacy and political organizations. So what does it mean for civic engagement when TFA alumni feel so connected to TFA, the organization, but not necessarily to other forms of civic and political life?*

**DM:** I've got two daughters. They are densely connected, but not through formal organizations at all. They live on Facebook, among other things. They are wildly more interactive, engaged with other people, than I am, but it's mediated through technology, as you're pointing out. But fundamentally, people still are social creatures who derive their sense of themselves and their values and priorities through interaction with others.

Nothing has changed. The medium through which they interact has changed, but it's not as if people are no longer influenced by their peers or something. My point here is that if, like TFA, you can create a set of procedures—a program that encourages people to engage with the organization—those organizations can continue to be central sources of meaning and identity in people's lives.

It's not that organizations have lost the capacity to do that; it's that they're now competing with other mechanisms, other vehicles that connect people. So we go, "Oh, organizations are dying." Well, yes, they're in a much more competitive environment, and lots of young people don't identify with organizations and seek their social connections through much more direct forms of mediation like Facebook, etc., which are themselves, again, communities of a sort. But it doesn't mean that organizations can't compete effectively. But they're going to have to design programs that young people come to value, and if in fact they can successfully recruit individuals, those organizations can be again just as important as sources of identity and meaning as they've always been.

**CG:** *As you know, there's a lot of energy around national service, with policies being promoted and passed, money allocated. Do you see this as a positive trend? Will they help to encourage civic engagement across the country?*

**DM:** I know I'm repeating myself here, but I really think we have to move away from the assumption that we're going to invariably see effects from youth service or youth activism. I'd love to see a richer set of really systematic comparative studies of the longer-term effects of a range of service experiences, because I think what they would show is highly variable effects, and I think that would be very important for policy makers to understand. Just because you create a service program it's not going to necessarily produce long-term civic engagement.

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> **The more collective the experience, the more people are encouraged to engage in the future.**

# *The State of the States* Moves Online

### by Rick Cohen

**The national economy may be on the upswing, but state budgets are still in the pits.**

*The* Nonprofit Quarterly's *coverage of the economic downturn and its effect on the states and the third sector has moved to the Web. Below we provide an overview of the online State of the States package. (for the complete article, go to www.nonprofitquarterly.org/states).*

THE NATIONAL ECONOMY MAY BE ON THE upswing and heading toward recovery, but state budgets are still in the pits, suffering shocks and aftershocks that compel frequent downward revisions of revenue estimates as well as higher deficits to offset.

In the winter 2009 issue of the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, we began our coverage of the financial downturn's impact on the states. The leaders of several state nonprofit associations proffered analysis on the effects of the financial crisis. They also helped us understand the bumpy ride ahead and the different ways in which state governments have approached the challenge of deficits with new revenue-generating tactics and slimmed-down programs.

In this issue of *NPQ*, our coverage of the states moves exclusively online (see www.

nonprofitquarterly.org/states). The package includes an article by Edward Smith of the National Conference of State Legislatures that was originally published in *State Legislatures* magazine. The piece provides a telling, up-to-date analysis of the dynamics that have undone the budgets of so many states and have left only a minority with the possibility of better fiscal prognoses. In addition, we continue our profiles of state conditions.

Visit our Web site for the complete story, but here's a sampling of what you'll find online:

- In Georgia the governor hopes to generate new revenue from high fines on "superspeeders" caught on the state's highways as well as from additional fees and taxes; to use the state's reserves to plug widening budget holes; and to cut social–safety net services (such as by reducing the number of state benefit workers who help people enroll for Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and emergency food programs).
- Maryland's governor has considered "special funds," plus a hoped-for extension of or addition to the federal stimulus to reduce—but not eliminate—the state's budget deficit.
- Oregon's voters just fended off ballot initiatives that would likely have deepened the

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**RICK COHEN** is the *Nonprofit Quarterly*'s national correspondent.

social-service crisis, but the state still ranks among the most at risk for financial crisis.

- Nebraska's governor has submitted a budget pledging no tax increases and, consequently, no increase in revenue. But even in this state with relatively low unemployment, the economy has created families in need of more services and nonprofits without the new revenue to respond.

- Minnesota's governor has implemented the practice known as "unallotment" through which he has cut appropriated programs as a response to higher-than-anticipated tax-revenue shortfalls and budget deficits. The result has been pressure on nonprofits looking to state programs to meet service demands.

- In Hawaii the budget process is characterized as a "shell game," with stimulus funds used for some programs, but others have suffered from concomitant cuts. Some legislators believe that nonprofits' tax exemption was not intended to be permanent, but rather to be used as "seed money" for service providers that would

ultimately operate without 501(c)(3) status and exemption.

Today, the following has become all too clear:

- An economy on the rebound doesn't mean there is a quick fix for tax revenue flowing to state budgets;

- States have relied on stimulus funds to reduce the impact of budget problems in FY 2009 and FY 2010, but these funds may not be available in FY 2011. The result will be many nonprofits peering over a financial cliff.

- Nonprofit associations have brought the condition of state budgets to the top of their public-policy advocacy agendas.

For more on the impact of the financial crisis on state budgets and the third sector, go to the *Nonprofit Quarterly* Web site. You can also add your view of how state economic conditions will affect the nonprofit sector in the future.

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**Many states have relied on federal stimulus, but these funds may not be available in 2011.**



The Fifty United States and their Mottos

Emily Wick 2008

# The Way We Write Is All Wrong:

## *Fixing the Broken Discourse of Fundraising*

by Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.

*Editors' note: This article provides insight into the import of story and how we process the language of stories. Stories, of course, are the key to being good fundraisers and communicators of our organizational missions.*

**The discourse of fundraising involves some disturbing trends.**

THIS ARTICLE FEATURES SOME SURPRISING findings uncovered during my doctoral research. Why would this research be of interest to those running nonprofits? The findings indicate that the discourse of fundraising involves some disturbing trends. The good news is that addressing these problems in your own work can help you communicate more effectively with donors and help your organization succeed.

Like a linguistic MRI, my computer-based analysis of fundraising documents revealed troublesome linguistic and rhetorical patterns. These

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patterns profiled a discourse focused more on transferring information than on creating interpersonal involvement. Fundraising texts were cold and detached, like doctoral dissertations rather than like friendly, personal conversations. Rather than gaining reader attention with emotionally rich human-interest stories, they contained less narrative than academic prose; in fact, they contained less narrative than official documents.

### Research Methodology

My research mined more than 1.5 million words of online and printed fundraising texts from America's largest charities. Of the 880 organizations represented, 735 report direct support of $20 million or more on the Internal Revenue Service's Form 990. In total, I analyzed 2,412 Web- and print-based documents across nine philanthropic sectors. To date it is the largest study of its kind

and was designed based on 2003 research of 316 fundraising letters and conducted by Ulla Connor and Thomas Upton at Indiana University.

Linguist Douglas Biber developed the computer algorithms in Connor and Upton's study and those in my study. Biber's methodology profiles texts by tagging and tallying the counts of specific sets of 67 linguistic features.

The data established that these linguistic features work together in texts to achieve specific communication goals. For example, personal pronouns, contractions, and private verbs (e.g., "I think" and" I feel") were among 23 linguistic features that occurred together to create interpersonal involvement in personal letters and conversation: two elements located on a continuum between high interpersonal involvement and high information. Conversely, on the high-information pole are features such as long words or words that weaken the power of verbs and adjectives by transforming them into nouns, such as by adding -ion or -ity (e.g., *evaluate* becomes *evaluation* or *intense* becomes *intensity*).

After scoring fundraising texts based on the frequency of such features, my research compared scores with those of 23 common genres. Among these genres, fundraising texts most resembled academic prose and official documents.

For linguists, this finding is interesting; for fundraisers, it's tragic. It's tragic because the style of writing among America's largest nonprofits runs counter to the advice of experts in direct-response marketing and fundraising. In fundraising, experts such as Jerry Huntsinger and Mal Warwick have long championed a writing style that creates interpersonal involvement and presents narratives. In fact, among the reviewed texts, one of Huntsinger's letters scored highest on the dimensions of interpersonal connection and narrative. His letter tells the story of Janice, a young girl who was rescued from sex traffickers by Covenant House workers. It put a compelling human face on the appeal.

While those who make a living by writing can craft documents with ease, it's hard work for the rest of us. We all know a good story when we see one. But knowing exactly what makes a story good . . . well, that's another story.

Two goals fueled my research. First, I wanted to help fundraisers better see and hear the stories that play out every day in their organizations: the narratives of need or opportunity that show how their work makes a difference. Then I wanted to help fundraisers translate what they see and hear to written form without draining a narrative of its human passion. I call this daunting task writing the voice of philanthropy: writing as if one were in fact speaking as a compassionate voice for someone who has no voice. The following highlights the most important lessons learned.

## Who Is Writing, and What Grade Is Deserved?

As a starting point, I wanted to learn which factors the executives at elite nonprofits have identified as elements of effective fundraising texts. So I asked respondents to score the importance of using an argument-centric (expository) writing style. On a 1-to-5 scale (with 5 being high), only 5 percent rated exposition high.

I then asked respondents to score emotional, human-interest narrative writing on the same scale. Those rating narrative over exposition highly increased by a ratio of 9 to 1. But despite the percentage of those favoring narrative at 45 percent, their writing revealed a wide gap between what they believed about good writing and what they actually wrote.

At the root of this disparity is that we all take writing for granted. We all can write. And most of us think we can write well. Yet the evidence of linguistics analysis refutes this assumption. The problem is that few of us critically consider the rhetorical superstructure and linguistic substructure of what we write. In short, we don't critically consider the language.

Stephen King, who was a high-school English teacher prior to becoming a best-selling author, drove this point home in explaining what motivated him to write *On Writing*, his book on composition principles and techniques. King's motivation came from a conversation with the author of *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan. He asked her "if there was any one question she was never asked during the Q-and-A that follows almost every writer's talk . . . . Amy paused, thinking it

over carefully, and then said: 'No one ever asks about the language.'"

The irony is that fundraisers should care passionately about the craft of telling stories on paper. In fundraising, language means a great deal. Someone selling a product creates an exchange based on the value of what is offered. And before making a purchase, a customer can kick the tires or thump a melon. For a fundraiser, the burden of raising money often rests squarely on the power of words. Yes, nonprofit donors occasionally visit a charity or see a video about its work. But many donors decide to give based on what they read. And unfortunately, what they read is usually not that good.

### Why Does Poor Writing Happen?

One reason may be the way we're raised to write. Our education teaches us to use an abstract, impersonal writing style that runs counter to established fundraising best practices. This is consistent with research by Jeanne Bell and Timothy Wolfred, who found that 58 percent of nonprofit executive directors hold a master's degree or a doctorate. Most fundraisers write what I call "discourse de facto" (i.e., discourse as a matter of practice).

These nonprofit executives write as though they're locked in a time warp and back in graduate school. Even though fundraising requires a different style of writing, they are living in another place, at another time, writing for a professor who is no longer there.

This unfortunate phenomenon also reflects a cultural shift from orality to literacy. Cultural linguist Walter Ong traced this shift, citing examples of orality in epic poems such as *The Iliad* and *Beowulf* and familiar stories such as David and Goliath. Then Johann Gutenberg's repurposing of an olive press to print with movable type changed everything. Ong concluded that the innovation of printing brought a change in the way we produce and process knowledge.

He observed that oral cultures depicted agonism (e.g., the agony of people in conflict). The discourses of these pre-literate cultures were filled with scene, plot, characters, tension, and resolution: the stuff of stories. On the other

*Nonprofit executives write as though they're locked in a time warp and back in graduate school.*

hand, as movable type and literacy took hold, Ong observed that writing fostered "abstractions that disengaged knowledge from the arena where human beings struggled."

The writing of marketers, public relations, and fundraising professionals tends toward an oral mode of discourse, even though the work is eventually reduced to the printed page or computer screen. These professionals tend to write like people talk. Thus a good fundraising letter will read like a conversation sounds: like the banter between friends over a cup of coffee, which is filled with personal views, concerns, stories, and emotion.

Effective fundraising copy sounds like human interaction.

## How We Process Language

The human quality of writing is consistent with neuroscientists' discoveries about the way people process narrative. Seminal insight into this important area of language research originated with neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti at the University of Parma. During the early 1990s, researchers identified a special class of neurons that fired in the brains of macaque monkeys during specific grasping activities. Researchers linked this mechanism to understanding language processing. This "mechanism was the neural prerequisite for the development of interindividual communication and finally of speech."

At the core of this discovery is evidence from fMRI scans of human subjects for what was only suggested in experiments with monkeys: that the human brain contains "neural mechanisms (mirror mechanisms) that allow us to directly understand the meaning of the actions and emotions of others by internally replicating ('simulating') them without any explicit reflective mediation."

## The Power of Narrative

Lisa Aziz-Zadeh and Marco Iacoboni found evidence that the triggers of mirror neuron response are not limited to visual input: just reading or hearing about an action can produce the same response as seeing the action firsthand.

According to their research of 12 volunteers,

the premotor cortex of their brains indicated the presence of the same neural activity when they heard words describing an action as when they saw it. Their research explains why it's difficult to put down a novel but easy to fall asleep reading a textbook.

The evidence of neuroscience suggests that the writing style dominant among fundraisers actually circumvents the way the human brain is hardwired to process language. The implications are that fundraisers should not shy away from emotion: they should tell stories, and they should not formalize texts.

Science writer Gordy Slack summarizes the implications of mirror neuron research for creating, processing, and interpreting language. Slack wasn't satisfied to just state the implications, but artfully illustrated the implications in a brief text that marshals linguistic features that paint a narrative scene (note his use of the past tense to report past actions and move the reader sequentially through time); intensify interpersonal involvement (note his use of contractions, first-person pronouns, private verbs, and conversational style); and produce empathy (note how the author makes you feel, thus achieving his rhetorical aim: to make you care).

A young woman sat on the subway and sobbed. Her mascara-stained cheeks were wet and blotchy. Her eyes were red. Her shoulders shook. She was hopeless, completely forlorn. When I got off the F-train, I stood on the platform, paralyzed by emotions. Hers. I'd taken them with me. I stood there, tears streaming down my cheeks. But I had no death in the family. No breakup. No terminal diagnosis. And I didn't even know her or why she cried. But the emotional pain, her pain, now my pain, was as real as day.

My research confirms that linguistic features that involve readers and that paint connecting, narrative moments are woefully absent in fundraising discourse.

## The World's Oldest Fundraising Letter

I close this article with what is perhaps the world's

oldest fundraising letter by Pliny the Younger from the late first century. Although 2,000 years old, the letter reads like one from a twenty-first-century parent seeking funds for a local private school. Its style is better than most fundraising texts from today's largest nonprofits.

Pliny's letter addresses his friend Gaius Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman senator. Pliny's purpose was to ask Tacitus to help recruit faculty for a school he hoped to found in his hometown. The letter recounts a meeting Pliny had with parents and children at his villa, during which he asked them to contribute to found a local school.

> When I was in my native town recently, a young lad, the son of one of my fellow townsmen, came to pay his respects to me. "Do you go to school?" I asked. "Certainly," he replied. "Where?" "At Milan." "Why not here?" "Because," rejoined his father, who was with him and had in fact brought the boy, "we have no teachers here." "Why no teachers?" I asked. "Surely it would be tremendously to the interest of you who are fathers" (and quite opportunely several fathers were listening) "that your sons should by all means have their schooling here. For where could they live more happily than in their native town or be kept better under control than under the eyes of their parents, or at less expense than at home?
>
> It is no greater task, certainly, to collect money to hire teachers, and you can apply toward their salaries what you now spend for [the boys'] lodgings, travel, and the things that have to be paid for when one is away from home (and away from home everything costs money). Indeed I, who do not yet have children, am ready to give for the benefit of the municipality, as if for a daughter or parent, one third of any sum it will please you to assemble. I would even promise the whole if I were not afraid that such an endowment might one day be tampered with through political corruption, as I see happen in many places where teachers are hired by the municipality. This danger can be met by only one remedy, namely, if the right of hiring is left only to the parents alone and scrupulous care for choosing is instilled

> in them by the necessity of contributing . . . then agree among yourselves, unite, and draw increased spirit from mine, for I am desirous that what I shall have to contribute shall be as large as possible.
>
> I thought it necessary to repeat all this in detail and from the very beginning, as it were, so that you might the better understand how glad I should be should you undertake what I request. Now then, I request, and in keeping with the importance of the matter I beg, that you look around among the great number of students who come to you out of admiration of your genius for teachers whom we can solicit—on this condition, however, that I do not make a binding contract with anyone, for I leave complete freedom of choice to the parents. They shall judge, they shall select. For myself I claim only the trouble and the expense.

Pliny's letter contains clear narrative superstructure: a definite setting (his villa in Como), sympathetic protagonists (the children and parents), a noble quest (founding a school), and two barriers to fulfilling that quest (lack of funds and teachers).

The overarching narrative superstructure is supported by a linguistic substructure of features common to narrative (past-tense verbs, third-person pronouns, public verbs, and reported speech).

A major problem is that some fundraisers do not themselves suffer through the hard work of experiencing emotionally what William Labov called the "reportable event" in a narrative. This is what allows us to identify with a character and an issue: a connecting, narrative moment. It takes only a few lines to create a poignant scene that prompts an emotional response from a reader. It's much better to connect with your reader than to have your letter become yet one more recycling of babble from a mission statement: a regurgitating of stale goals and objectives without any scene, character development, dramatic tension, and resolution.

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**A connecting, narrative moment allows us to identify with an issue.**

# Education Directory 2010

The following directory of nonprofit management education programs lists programs by state. Some institutions offer single programs, while others offer an array. The programs offered by each institution are noted by numbers accompanying the listings from 1–8.

Readers wishing to get a fuller abstract for each program can access the database directly at http://academic.shu.edu/npo/. Educational institutions may also update their information at this address.

Thanks to Roseanne Mirabella, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Political Science Department at Seton Hall University for working in collaboration with *NPQ* to produce the directory. The database resides at Seton Hall University and is maintained by the Seton Hall Department of Information Technology. Special thanks to Paul Fisher, Michael Soupios, and Thomas A. McGee at the Teaching, Learning, Technology Center for developing and maintaining the site.

## Key to Listings

1. Noncredit Programs
2. Undergraduate Certificate Programs
3. Undergraduate Concentrations (3+ courses)
4. Graduate Nonprofit Studies classes
5. Graduate Certificates
6. Graduate Concentrations Leading to a Masters
7. Graduate Degree Majoring in Nonprofit Studies
8. Online Courses

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# Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

**D**EAR DR. CONFLICT,

A few months ago, I had a conflict with a coworker in which we both behaved immaturely. My supervisor overheard my conversation with my coworker and immediately sided with her. Without notifying me, she then changed my responsibilities so that I no longer supervised this coworker.

I then approached my supervisor. She and her supervisor said that my behavior was unacceptable and that they were trying to avoid conflict. They also noted that my coworker is African American. But my argument with my coworker was not about racial issues. I was offended, but I also acknowledge that I was immature in handling the disagreement. I apologized to the coworker as well.

Now, in the context of my performance appraisal, my supervisor has decided to reopen the issue. I believe she made the issue larger than it was because she never approached me about it. She assumed I was the bad guy without hearing my side. And I don't think my boss realizes that I am also a part of the minority community; I am Hispanic. And besides, race had nothing to do with it.

I want to write a rebuttal because I believe I am being mistreated and that my reputation is now at stake over an issue that was mishandled by those at the top to begin with.

I don't deserve a bad appraisal.

Don't Deserve It

*Dear Don't Deserve It,*

*When Dr. Conflict first read your letter, he applauded you for taking responsibility for being immature with your coworker. Instead of your receiving a bad appraisal, he thought you should be commended for owning up to your mistake. Ditto for your apology to your coworker.*

*But then Dr. Conflict reread your letter and became confused. First, you use the term* coworker *to describe the other party but then note that this person was removed from your supervisory responsibilities. How can someone be a coworker and a subordinate? The term* coworker *means that you're on the same level, that you are peers, colleagues.*

*Second, you say initially that both of you were at fault but then back away from the statement with a conspicuous "maybe I was immature." By the time you reach the end of your letter,*

*the conflict isn't your problem at all, but rather something "mishandled by those at the top."*

*Third, you complain about being left out of the loop about the change in your responsibilities.*

*Fourth, you say that your supervisors noted that your former direct report is African American, but you say that there are no racial issues at play. There's something missing here that Dr. Conflict can't quite figure out. At the very least, there's an undercurrent of some sort; at the very worst, there are real issues that need to be addressed.*

*After putting on his CSI hat, here's what Dr. Conflict thinks really happened: First, you were the supervisor and she was your direct report. Calling her a coworker is a nice way to say that she works on the team, but that doesn't mean she is your peer.[1]*

*Second, you lost your cool as a supervisor and you're minimizing your accountability by ignoring the fact that she worked for you. You can't be a coworker when it suits you and a boss when it doesn't.[2] Even though you both may have behaved badly, you had the power as the supervisor to change the*

tone of the confrontation. You cannot act out with your direct reports just because they act out with you. That's why you're paid the big bucks; you're a supervisor because you're supposed to be wiser and more experienced. In a phrase, your job is to stifle yourself. You represent the organization and your behavior vis-à-vis direct reports can have major consequences (e.g., can you spell lawsuit?).

Third, Dr. Conflict thinks you were left out of the loop because the conflict that your supervisor overheard was much worse than you describe. It was so bad that she took the step of involving her supervisor, and they demoted you without your input. And fourth, this suggests that the racial issues you have dismissed may be more significant than you think.

Dr. Conflict thinks his take is more likely than yours for two reasons. The first is because of Occam's razor, which says that the simplest explanation is likely the right one. In other words, for your explanation to be correct, your boss, her boss, and your former direct report would have to be wrongheaded, and as they say in Kentucky, that dog won't hunt. Second, it's human nature to paint things—especially ourselves—in the most positive light, a phenomenon called the "above-average effect," or, more affectionately, the Lake Woebegon effect where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."

If Dr. Conflict is right about what really happened, it's a sure bet that the issue will appear on your performance appraisal. So what should you do now? What about that rebuttal of yours? Dr. Conflict's advice is that such a rejoinder will surely be ill taken and may hasten your departure from the organization. You're in real trouble. You may not know it, but your supervisors do. And when they removed your direct report

from your supervision, they took strong action to prove it.

The first thing to do is acknowledge your error with a heartfelt apology. Not only should you do so with your former direct report but also with your supervisor and her supervisor. No ifs, ands, or buts concerning why it happened. If expressed with sincerity of purpose, apologies can be powerful. In mediation, Dr. Conflict prays that one or both parties will apologize—even for a small thing. An apology—which often takes the form of recognizing the pain of the other party—is often the turning point from negative and destructive to positive and constructive. In other words, apologies begin the healing process in conflict.

When you apologize, you become more open and transparent as well as someone to whom others can relate. Everyone is human; we all make mistakes. Apologies engender reciprocal behavior and almost always help move everyone forward toward solutions.

The second thing to do is present a plan on how to fix the conflict. You can propose that you take a workshop in people skills or a course on emotional intelligence in the workplace; that you get an executive coach; or that you undergo a 360-degree assessment to gain insight on how others see you. Your organization may or may not help with the costs. But either way, your issue needs attention and will plague your career unless you take action. If there's one thing human-service professionals know about, it's relapse. And without concrete action, you're sure to do just that.

Third, use a trick that Dr. Conflict has learned to keep his head on straight in a storm of emotions: fold your hands in front of you and link your fingers. See how it immediately calms you and allows you to breathe easier. Moreover, you get a near-instant feel

for your anxiety level by noticing your knuckle tension. And best of all, if your hands are folded calmly, it's harder to strangle someone.

As you go forward, just remember two things: First, eating warm crow is easier than eating it cold; don't wait for the performance appraisal to step forward with your apology. And second, remember not to mess it up by making excuses; you did what you did, you own it, and you're going to fix it. Boldly apologize, be spot on with your plan of action, keep those hands folded, and you just might keep your job and turn this thing around.

### ENDNOTES

1. Dr. Conflict is a member of his family of five, but he is not one of the three children (although his wife may disagree). In fact, Dr. Conflict is proud to be the master of his castle right up to the moment his wife gets home.
2. Dr. Conflict often behaves like a child with his children, but as his wife reminds him, he's an adult and this requires a higher standard of accountability.

DR. CONFLICT is the pen name of Mark Light. In addition to his work with First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), Light teaches at the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Case Western Reserve University. Along with his stimulating home life, he gets regular doses of conflict at the Dayton Mediation Center, where he is a mediator.

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*Got Conflict?*
Write to Dr. Conflict at feedback@npqmag.org if your organization's conflict needs resolution.

# Nonprofits and Metaphors: Using Language to Create Better Outcomes

by Scott Anderson

As stakeholders in the nonprofit community, we should carefully consider the metaphors we use to describe the current economic environment. According to language researchers, metaphors are not just phrases that make our language more interesting but also mechanisms that shape how we think. The metaphors we use, then, can exert tremendous influence on others' perception of the world. In turn, these perceptions frame goals and beliefs about possibilities, which translate into action or the failure to act.

So what are the prevailing metaphors used to describe the current financial crisis? Ask just about any nonprofit stakeholder to describe how the economy has affected nonprofits, and you'll likely hear some variation—overflowing with figurative language—of the following response: "We're in the midst of the *perfect storm*, and we need to *tighten our belts* to maintain our *fiscal health* and *avoid the precipice* that awaits many nonprofits." These metaphors appear frequently in industry articles, research reports, and conversations among stakeholders in the nonprofit world. As descriptive devices, these metaphors seem appropriate and effective to convey nonprofits' current economic situation. But they also depict nonprofits in a dire situation from which

they may not recover and offer few solutions to the challenges nonprofits face.

As a result, the key problem with such metaphors is that they can generate unintended outcomes that fail to address nonprofits' plight or that entrench nonprofits' vulnerabilities. They can encourage a picture of powerlessness against which nonprofits are too weak to prevail.

So at one level, the purpose of this article is to generate awareness and conversation about the various metaphors we use to describe the current economy and their respective implications. This article unpacks some of these metaphors and their potential to undermine positive approaches to present challenges. Finally, "Hopeful Metaphors for the Financial Downturn" on page 60 proposes new metaphors that can promote proactive approaches to our economic plight. At a deeper level, this article strives to promote metaphors that encourage fundamental change within organizations that most need it.

## Cultivating Change, not Complacency

Part of the problem with our current metaphors is that they can discourage nonprofits from taking action and can engender inertia. According to *Chronicle of Philanthropy* writer Ian Wilhelm, for example, many nonprofit experts believe

"charities and foundations are too complacent in the face of the [current] economic upheaval and only a few have embraced the radical thinking that is needed to maintain, and potentially strengthen, the nonprofit world." The notion that the current economy will tolerate complacency by assuming that the conditions are simply a passing phase is possible—anything is possible—but it is not probable. The rules of the nonprofit game have fundamentally changed—the third sector now involves new levels of accountability, transparency, and creative collaboration as well as limited resources and mounting demand—and only those players able to play by these new rules will be allowed to continue. For other organizations, it may simply be "game over." And the prospect of nonprofits closing worries me, because our communities *need* nonprofits. With this article, my greater intention is to challenge complacency where needed and encourage "radical thinking" that can strengthen the nonprofit world. I propose that a powerful way to accomplish this goal is through well-crafted, shared metaphors that can catalyze necessary change.

The most effective way to change a system is to change how people perceive their world. As Meadows states, "People who manage to intervene in systems

at the level of paradigm hit a leverage point that totally transforms systems." Following Meadows's lead, I would add that people who manage to intervene in paradigms at the level of metaphors likewise hit a leverage point capable of transforming paradigms. What is at stake with metaphors, then, is not a claim to who can sound the most creative; instead it is about who has the ability to claim meaning and thereby make sense of what is going on in the world and how to respond. Change a metaphor, change a paradigm, change a system.

The system considered in this article is the nonprofit community at large. The specific paradigms being challenged are the metaphors many of us have adopted in our communication—in verbal and written texts with employees, volunteers, donors, and others—about the current economic environment. And the advocated transformation of the system is a modification of our

metaphors to affirming frameworks that encourage engagement, empowerment, and "aha" moments of organizational enlightenment.

### The Inadequacy of Current Metaphors

What are the implications of the metaphors used to describe the financial crisis? This is where I'm troubled. Specifically, I worry about the potential impact of these metaphors on our ability to identify and implement the solutions nonprofits need *now* to prepare for the months and years ahead. We may wield a mighty sword of figurative speech now without recognizing the attendant consequences of every swing later.

I have come to the conclusion that my discomfort with current metaphors can be distilled into three main categories: (1) the literal implications of these metaphorical representations, (2) the levels of realistic empowerment they imply, and (3) a general sense of "doomed-ness"

versus a sense of growth and hope. These categories will be explained in terms of some common metaphorical themes present in many nonprofit communications.

Let's consider these categories in light of the metaphors used to capture the financial crisis. While we've used the metaphors of a storm, lean body weight, and physical health to describe the current economic environment, for example, we have not considered the impact of the metaphors or the action that nonprofits might take based on the mental models that underlie these metaphors.

In other words, a storm, cutting back food intake, or an illness is likely to implicitly promote a logical, expected response that results in a particular solution. Framing the economic environment as a storm, for example, might prompt nonprofits to respond by hunkering down and finding temporary solutions as they wait for the storm to pass. The

# Hopeful Metaphors for the Financial Downturn

Ultimately the critique of our financial crisis metaphors as presented in the article above advocates new, more hopeful metaphors that can replace those we have deemed inadequate.

In an effort to identify appropriate substitutes, we asked members of nonprofit leadership to propose metaphors that they believe are more appropriate for our economic times. The results were as revealing of the executive's personality and world view as it was attached to these times.

"Swing for the fences!" and "Knock one out of the park!"
—The energetic and forthright Robert Ottenhoff, GuideStar

Then Ottenhoff elaborated on these alternatives:

David Brooks of the *New York Times* wrote about the sociologist Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. Just before World War II, he emigrated to the United States and began teaching at Harvard, converting his lectures into English. But he had a problem. According to Brooks, "He noticed that his students weren't grasping his points. His language was not the problem, it was the allusions. He used literary and other allusions when he wanted to talk about ethics, community, mysticism and emotion. But none of the students seemed to get it. Then, after a few years, he switched to sports analogies. Suddenly, everything clicked.

'The world in which the American student who comes to me at about twenty years of age really has confidence in is the world of sport,' he would write. 'This world encompasses all of his virtues and experiences, affection and interests; therefore, I have built my entire sociology around the experiences an American has in athletics and games.'"

In the same article, Brooks quotes Professor Michael Allen Gillespie of Duke University, who says that "American sport teaches that effort leads to victory, a useful lesson in a work-oriented society. Sport also helps Americans navigate the tension between team loyalty and individual glory." Gillespie appreciates the way sports culture has influenced American students too. "It discourages whining, and rewards self-discipline. It teaches self-control and its own form of justice, which has a more powerful effect than anything taught in the classroom."

So the code is unbroken. We've been describing our work in earnest and serious ways, when the world was thinking sports. Nonprofits don't talk the sports lingo well enough.

It's ironic, since so much of what we talk about is really "inside baseball" and so arcane no one can understand what we're talking about. Maybe we need more talk of home runs out of the ballpark when we have a successful program—or asking for patience when we're only hitting singles.

Could we say our programs are in "the red zone" when we're at a critical moment? Successfully completing a phase of a project could be "moving the chains." Nearing the end of a program could be "first and goal." How many times have you heard someone described as "not a team player"? And when was the last time you heard of an executive director "taking one for the team"? Development directors get it. They're always talking about more shots, more goals. And how many times have you thrown a Hail Mary pass to a funder? Maybe even tried swinging for the fences with the audacity of hope?

The indomitable Sister Margaret Leonard of Project Hope, a community center in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Boston, imagines us as living in a time in which we could leap away from the realm of the ordinary and familiar.

A quantum leap is explicitly discontinuous change, and it requires a fundamental change in energy. The opportunity of this economic crisis is the challenge to reinvent or transform ourselves while embodying in perhaps new structural ways our core mission and guiding principles. To make a truly dramatic leap as an organization or movement, we have to fundamentally believe in our collective ability to rise: constituents, staff, and board. The language of physics is about energy and motion, chaos, purpose, and potential.

The very danger of this time is the springboard for imagination and action. A quantum leap is a change from one state of being to another, so it might be frightening but nurturing [to hear] the calls of both hope and action. The capacity to rise implies the intention to leap. Our primary responsibility is to rise and leap, not to stand still and fret.

And Ivye Allen from the Foundation for the Mid South, which is notable for its out-of-the-box work with community organizations in Mississippi and Louisiana, says, "Seize the moment!"

Obstacles and challenges are before us daily, but so are the opportunities for doing things differently. The ultimate concern and our guiding light should be "How do we best serve people and communities?" Sometimes things have to be stripped away so you can see more clearly. Change is not supposed to be comfortable; it does not happen overnight. But we all have to be willing to try new paths when old ones have begun to take us places we do not want to go.

And the ever-fascinating Fran Barrett of Community Resource Exchange contributed "Fran's Many Metaphors":

1. "Fundraising these days is like a never-ending game of musical chairs, with fewer spaces each round: only the agile and quick survive."
2. "We had a civil-rights movement, a women's movement, an environmental movement; each raised public awareness and led to better public policy. We need a nonprofit movement."
3. "Today, fundraising is like a young woman of limited means trying to get a bridal gown at Filene's Basement's annual sale: more or less madness, but a determined shopper may just get a great bargain."[1]

**In sum:** no matter which metaphor you use, watch your language!

### Endnotes

1. Editors' note: I am the mother of a woman of limited means who got a $1,000 dress at the real Filene's Basement for $79. She altered it quite alarmingly; paired it with high, white boots; and it was a wedding and a bride to remember.

metaphor of lean body weight might suggest that an organization needs to cut back its use of resources and continue to tighten its belt, but only until a future day that will assuredly bring more food to the organizational cupboards in potentially gluttonous proportions.

The key concern is that *the response suggested by the metaphor may not be the effective response required by reality*. If organizations make decisions based on these metaphors, they may simply hope that things will improve. As a result, nonprofits may be passive and expect that they will ultimately return to business as usual. But this is the most harmful course for a faltering nonprofit in 2010. This course may contribute to the "complacency" Wilhelm referenced earlier. When nonprofit stakeholders use these metaphors without considering the implications of these metaphors, they pick up one end of a powerful semantic stick without recognizing that they have picked up the other end as well. The result is that they hold a potentially powerful tool but render it useless, if not dangerous.

## Realistic Empowerment

My next concern involves empowerment, or the lack thereof. Consider how the precipice, storm, body weight, and illness metaphors can promote powerlessness and passivity. Comparing the economic downturn with the edge of a precipice has been used to predict a future in which many nonprofit organizations will not have the money to sustain themselves and will go out of business. The perfect-storm metaphor generally invokes the combined challenges of serving more people with reduced funds and increased accountability. And the physical illness metaphor connotes an external threat that has invaded an internal body (in this case, the economy threatening the viability of an

organization). Each scenario attributes control to external forces: an entity being pushed over the edge of a cliff; an inability to control nature's rains, and illness as an unwelcome intruder. Cast as they are, each challenge can make individuals feel powerless.

In reality, however, organizations *can* do something. Despite what these metaphors suggest, nonprofits are not powerless and at the mercy of external forces. Nonprofits have undertaken myriad tactics—including creative collaboration, volunteer forces, and novel fundraising strategies—as part of a "new way" of conducting business. To be clear, though, I don't advocate a Pollyanna perspective, but I also reject a perceived helplessness. What I want to pursue is realistic empowerment: where we can change, we must. One way to change is by challenging the realm of what is possible through the metaphors we use.

## Doom versus Hope

The final source of my concern with the current metaphors to describe the financial crisis is an impending sense of doom. There's not much hope in approaching a devastating storm, a famine, or a cliff's edge. Among the most necessary characteristics in difficult times, hope is near the top of the list, and these metaphors offer it sparingly, if at all.

Behavioral psychologists have proposed that motivation to act is related to how much an outcome is valued as well as the likelihood of achieving the particular outcome. When an outcome is valued but attaining it seems unlikely, motivation to act is low. By promoting metaphors with a gloom-and-doom undertone, motivation among nonprofits to make necessary change is undermined. This returns full circle to Wilhelm's original claim that "many charities and foundations are too complacent in the face of the [current] economic upheaval and

only a few have embraced the radical thinking that is needed to maintain, and potentially strengthen, the nonprofit world." It may well be that motivation to act has been sucked dry; we've collectively used demotivating metaphors, and now the impact of those images has simply played out as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## Empowering Metaphors

At this point, it makes sense to offer affirming, empowering, and hopeful metaphors. Unfortunately, however, I don't have the answer as to which metaphors are the best substitutes (for more on substitute metaphors, see "Hopeful Metaphors for the Financial Downturn" on page 60). I can identify the elements that would make for good metaphors—affirming, empowering, hopeful, vivid, memorable, culturally shared, cognitively understood, and experientially known—but I have not yet found the magic metaphor wand that would create my ideal solution.

And I'm OK with that. Right now we don't need a magic wand, but rather collective, careful, and creative attention to the metaphors we use. Then we need to walk the walk, and talk the talk and share our metaphors with one another. By drawing attention to the metaphors we use, perhaps we can collectively devise better ways of conveying our ideas and solutions. If we can join together to change the paradigm of what these economic difficulties mean, we can collectively change how we respond to the current challenges and, ultimately, create change within the nonprofit system. Instead of relegating ourselves to game over, it's time to step up and say, "Game on!"

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# The Take-Away

by the editors

### When a Donor Becomes Tainted
by Paul Dunn, Ph.D.
Many a donor has fallen from grace and into scandal after giving a nonprofit a substantial gift. This article explores how organizations can respond when a big-ticket donor has been exposed. Should an organization return a donation or keep it? Which variables should be considered?

### Visual Rhetoric: The Powerful Design of Nonprofit Campaigns
by the editors
The book *Designing for the Greater Good* has collected the best social message–media campaigns, which were chosen from a pool of thousands. What made the selected ads stand out, and what can nonprofits learn from these effective advertising efforts?

### The Four Horsemen of the Nonprofit Financial Apocalypse
by Clara Miller
Restrictions on nonprofit reven ue and capital have brought many nonprofits to their financial knees. Combined with high fixed costs and unstable revenue, the results are sadly predictable. With wit and wisdom, Clara Miller gives the straight story on why nonprofits have been particularly hard hit by the recession.

### The Problem of Solo Civic Engagement: An Interview with Doug McAdam
by Cynthia Gibson, Ph.D.
Cynthia Gibson interviews Doug McAdam, who conducted a study on Teach for America's graduates, about his in-depth evaluation of the TFA program. Is this program comparable to Freedom Summer in terms of creating sustained civic engagement, as TFA suggests?

### The State of the States
by Rick Cohen
The states are still in the thick of economic crisis and face little relief, with the federal stimulus funds due to run out in 2011. In this summary of the State of the States, Rick Cohen notes some curious efforts by deficit-ridden states to plug holes in their deficits (for the complete article, go to www.nonprofitquarterly.org/states).

### The Way We Write Is All Wrong: Fixing the Broken Discourse of Fundraising
Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.
In examining thousands of fundraising materials, Frank Dickerson discovered critical mistakes in nonprofit fundraising proposals. Fundraisers' default is an impersonal writing style that lacks a compelling story. This article is designed to help nonprofits reconnect the language of their fundraising efforts with those they serve.

### Dr. Conflict
by Mark Light
Dr. Conflict advises a nonprofit employee who feels unjustly blamed and penalized following a confrontation with a coworker.

### Nonprofits and Metaphors: Using Language to Create Better Outcomes
by Scott Anderson
How many times have you heard the phrase *the perfect storm* or the need to *tighten one's belt* to describe nonprofits' state in the current financial downturn? This article brings awareness to the use of language in shaping reality and proposes a more proactive way forward.

### Fifteen Questions to Certify That You Are a Social Innovator
by Phil Anthrop
This quiz gauges how high you rank on "social innovation"—and whether there's still hope for you.

# Fifteen Questions to Certify That You Are a ~~Good Kisser~~ Social Innovator

## *A pre-grant screening test*

### By Phil Anthrop

WHILE NOT A SCIENTIFIC TEST, this quiz measures 15 variables to predict your success in being a "social innovator" and ability to bring in the big bucks. Answer true or false for each of the following questions.

1. Do you have a degree from an Ivy League university, MIT, Duke, Northwestern, the University of Chicago, or any school in California?

2. Do you consider yourself more forward thinking than the average nonprofit person?

3. Are you close personal friends with at least three foundation executives?

4. Over the past 18 months, have you conferenced at the Aspen Institute, Wingspread, or Pocantico?

5. Do you have an enthusiastic but determined look on your face at least 75 percent of the time?

6. Can you casually drop the following strategic words and phrases into an ordinary conversation with special import?
   - Metrics
   - Evidence based
   - Highly effective
   - Impact
   - Value added
   - New normal
   - New reality
   - Solutions business
   - Catalytic philanthropy
   - Going to scale

7. Did you do at least a minor favor for the Obama campaign?

8. Do you spend 20 percent of your budget on self-promotion, public outreach, and travel to essential national confabs?

9. Do you refer to yourself as the "founder" of something?

10. Are you a private reader of contemporary business magazines and heroic CEO bios?

11. Do you consider high levels of unemployment, obesity, and homelessness as amazingly great laboratories for innovation?

12. Do you feel a need to be discreet about your personal ambitions?

13. Do you consider the work of other organizations to be ultimately well-meaning but pedestrian and not worth learning about?

14. Is your compensation at least 150 percent that of the next highest-paid person at your organization?

15. Do you believe that being insufferably annoying and pretentious is defensible if your cause is just?

**Pre-Grant Social Innovator Scoring:**

✓–✓✓✓ *1–3 true answers*
There's still hope for you

✓✓✓✓–✓✓✓✓✓✓ *4–6*
Time to form an LC3

✓✓✓✓✓✓–✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓ *7–9*
You deserve stimulus funding

✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓ *10 or more*
It's about showing the world results (and not about seeking attention).

PHIL ANTHROP is a consultant to foundations in the G8 countries.

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