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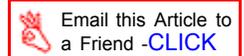**COMMUNITY DRIVEN INSTITUTE**

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Building and Sustaining Strong, Engaged Programs
Part 1 of a 3-part article

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What does it take to build real sustainability for the work being done by Community Benefit Organizations?

If we were talking about building and sustaining a house instead of an organization, we would instantly know the answer. To sustain for the long term, the house would need strong infrastructure - a strong foundation, roof and bearing walls.

However, no matter how strong that infrastructure might be, if the house is to remain strong over time, it will also need people to take care of it.

The same holds true for building and sustaining strong, engaged programs. It will require that we create strong infrastructure for those programs - infrastructure that is meant to stay standing for as long as that program is benefitting the community. And it will require that we build systems for engaging people who care, to keep that program strong.

Sustainability Is Not About Money

Virtually every model promoted as a path to organizational sustainability focuses on building financial strength. Looking back at the example of a sustainable house, we know that all the money in the world will not sustain that house if the foundation is crumbling or there is no one who cares about the house.

It is therefore not surprising that most organizations, struggling towards the goal of financial strength, never feel secure. More typically, whether times are good or bad, organizational leaders spend considerable time and emotion each year trying to fill in the gaps in yet another budget.

The Community-Driven approach to building and sustaining programs takes a broader view of sustainability. That view aims first at the real reason your organization exists: to benefit your community. From there, the Community-Driven approach to sustainability aims to build on the community's strengths to create strong, engaged programs - programs with a sound infrastructure, and with hoards of people who care.

Aiming first at Community Benefit is not semantics. Where we aim our ultimate results changes everything about the way we do our work.

Consider an individual person who is concerned only with his own needs and wants, maintaining relationships only to the extent those relationships will benefit him. When times get tough for that person, he will be on his own, with nothing but his money and possessions to comfort him.

On the other hand, however, when we consider a person who is always thinking of others, we know that when times get tough, that person will always have much to sustain him - friends, family, faith, and all the other non-material things that make our individual lives rich.

The same holds true for our organizations. When an organization's focus is on sustaining the organization, life becomes a competitive struggle. It is not only a struggle against all the other organizations in town. It is a struggle between the call to the organization's mission, and the call for financial strength - the struggle of means against ends.

An "organizational survival mandate" (Example: "If our organization doesn't survive, then we cannot ensure we will be there to help the Community in the future. Therefore, our survival must come first.") routinely puts means (staying solvent) ahead of ends (providing maximum benefit to the community). Like the individual who is always thinking of himself, when times get tough for such organizations, life is not easy.

However, when we consider sustainability from the perspective of the person who is always thinking of others, we aim first at building sustainability for our communities. Because the community is what matters most, the mandate is that we build *program strength* in ways that simultaneously build *community strength*. There is no working at cross-purposes, no struggle. On the contrary, there is alignment. **And when times get tough, the community provides <u>more</u> support.**

That ability to put the community first, to tap on the community's strengths to make our programs strong, and to instill an inspired spirit of interconnectedness directly into the heart of our programs - that is what Community-Driven Program Development and Sustainability are all about.

The Old Way Hasn't Worked
Before describing practical steps to building strong, sustainable Community-Driven Programs, it is important to share some observations about the traditional approaches to "nonprofit sustainability."

Traditional approaches to sustainability focus on organizational strength, often assuming that "organizational strength" is synonymous with "financial strength." Because the root of financial sustainability is money, and money is assumed to be a scarce resource, approaches to "organizational sustainability" have, to date, been competitive approaches.

In fundraising classes and marketing classes, organizations are routinely

cautioned that they must have the answer to this competitive question: "How will we differentiate what we do from what similar organizations do? Why should a donor give to us vs. that other group?" The assumption is that money and donors are scarce resources, that major donors are a far more scarce resource, and that we must therefore think competitively to make sure those donors give to us.

The same competitive logic holds for other supposedly 'scarce' resources as well:

> I was giving a keynote address about Community-Driven Governance in a major metropolitan area. A local consultant approached me after that speech and told me, "I always advise boards to steal board members from other boards. We all know there are only 1,000 good board members in this city, and obviously the only way they'll get someone decent on their board is to steal from other groups."

Assumptions of scarcity, competition and the mandate for organizational survival are at the root of the traditional tools and systems organizations use - from resource development to board development to program development.

Sadly, those systems repeatedly prove that they do not work - neither for providing significant improvement in the quality of life in our communities, nor for building strong, sustainable, resilient organizations. The evidence in both cases is overwhelming.

From the standpoint of Community Benefit, if the traditional tools were working, we would see communities getting stronger, healthier, more vibrant, more compassionate, and more resilient, year after year. During tough economic times, organizations in those communities would not even consider shrinking their programs; they would instead be embarking on ventures to expand those programs dramatically, to meet community need.

From the standpoint of organizational strength, those traditional systems also do not build long-term organizational sustainability, often failing to provide success in the short term as well. If these systems were overwhelmingly successful, after all the years of learning and practicing fundraising, organizations would already be sustainable. Organizational leaders would not still be seeking the "sustainability magic bullet du jour," nor would those leaders still, after all these years, be attending fundraising workshops, hoping to learn what it will take to finally be financially sustainable.

The old definition of insanity comes to mind. Community organizations have been taught that if they just get better at (and/or do more of) what was not working in the first place, somehow the result will be different. We all know that doing the wrong things well does not create success; it creates frustration and self-blame, as we are trying so hard, doing what we have been told to do, and still feeling like we are not getting ahead.

A Better Way
The intent of **Community Benefit Organizations** is the selfless intent of

building a better world. That intent is aimed at helping people and animals, preserving history and our environment, educating and inspiring us, providing outlets for artistic expression and artistic appreciation.

It is time the organizations doing that incredible work had tools and systems that can simultaneously build strong communities and build strong, sustainable programs to serve those communities.

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