

Opinion



Embracing collaboration

To keep community trust, United Way must be inclusive

Patricia Lewis, chief executive of the National Society of Fund Raising Executives, recently told the organization's Triangle chapter that, in the days of the Community Chest, local giving was built on trust.

But today, she said, "that trust is not given, it is won."

This fall, local United Way leaders understandably are occupied with the nuts and bolts of their annual fundraising campaigns. But as they ask their fellow citizens for money, they should be asking themselves how the United Way can reinvent itself to win the trust of the communities it serves.

Local United Way affiliates have tried to distance themselves from the United Way of America scandal and emphasize the good they do for their communities. Still, they have a lot more work to do.

Charities outside the United Way umbrella are clamoring to gain access to the private workplace so they, like the United Way, can solicit employees. Some United Way affiliates, however, have been downright hostile to alternative fundraising organizations.

The United Way also has been slow to embrace the types of partnerships involving the for-profit, nonprofit and public sectors that increasingly are being formed to improve the life and health of communities.

The United Way is at a crossroads. As local affiliates try to overcome the damage of the national scandal, they have the opportunity to reexamine their role in strengthening community philanthropy. By reinventing itself, the United Way can be more innovative and inclusive in meeting community needs.

EDITORIAL

Society is becoming increasingly complex, and so is

charity. Communities are more diverse. Philanthropy includes human services, as well as education, the environment, the arts, social change and spiritual matters. And fundraising has matured into a sophisticated, competitive and professional enterprise.

The United Way must function in that environment at the same time that it's trying to climb out of the hole dug by William Aramony, who was ousted as president of United Way of America in the face of reports of huge salaries and lavish spending. People who for years have given their hard-earned dollars and time to the United Way felt kicked in the gut.

The payback came last year, when annual United Way campaigns fell short of their goals.

The recession and continuing uncertainty about the economy certainly contributed to the disappointing results. But the scandal clearly hurt.

The graveyard of American industry is littered with the corpses of companies that coasted on success and failed to adapt to changing markets. Rather than risk becoming a relic, the United Way should embrace collaboration and inclusion, and find innovative ways to open up workplace giving and community philanthropy.

By going it alone, the United Way clings to its gatekeeping function. It's saying that United Way control is what matters. What truly matters in community philanthropy, though, is not who's in control. What matters is making life better in the community. By focusing on all the people in need in a community - rather than on its own turf - the United Way can be a leader in building a community team.

On the inside

Environmentalists must be vigilant

The elections of 1992 have presented the environmental movement with a window of opportunity. Most environmentalists were overjoyed with both national and North Carolina elections.

After the initial euphoria, most groups then had to develop a plan of action. Nationally, for the past 12 years, environmentalists had been on the outside looking in.

Over a period of time, environmental groups had become accustomed to playing an adversarial role. They continued to search for solutions to problems, knowing that many of their opinions would be contrary to current public policy.

Since the election, most environmental organizations have been working to meet the challenge with which they have been presented. Now they really are on the inside, and that reality requires a different way of thinking. They aren't just making suggestions; they are actually making policy. To a large degree, the future success

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of these groups is tied to the success of the policies and programs they are helping to create.

At the same time, there will still be areas where environmentalists are going to disagree with both state and national administrations. The challenge will be to work with government while at the same time continuing to push for more gains.

This is also complicated by the fact that there isn't really a consensus of opinion on strategy or goals among the environmental groups. They do work together on many issues, but often disagree on major points of emphasis. It is important for differences to be worked out so that a strong, unified voice will be heard on environmental issues.

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Another challenge environmental groups are facing relates to fundraising. Many groups are having difficulty attracting new members as well as experiencing falling renewal rates. There could be several reasons for this. One is the general economy. People worried about economic conditions often

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PHILIP
BLUMENTHAL

In the mountains

Nonprofits mix vision, frugality

Competition for the charitable dollar is stiff. Foundations are stretched. Corporate America is downsizing — becoming more lean, efficient and cost conscious. Nonprofits are doing the same. Accountability is the new buzzword.

But the needs of the people and places of our communities have never been greater or more complex.

As a result, everyone — donors, funders, nonprofit staffs and boards, and especially the clients and patrons of our human service, educational, cultural and environmental organizations — is looking for more bang for the buck.

More so than ever before, the nonprofit sector is realizing that problems can't be attacked in a piecemeal fashion. It's archaic to think that issues relating to housing, health, youth, economic development or the arts can be separated, fixed individually and all will be well.

A new approach to problems is emerging in the nonprofit sector that represents a combination of vision and frugality. As we realize that none of us is smart enough or has sufficient funds to

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tackle the complex challenges we face, emerging and established leaders of diverse backgrounds are coming together to learn from one another, to build networks and to create innovative partnerships.

In Western North Carolina, many groups are working together to seek common ground and wholistic approaches that address the causes versus the effects of problems. Many of these new partnerships are devoting their efforts to strengthening families and reducing risks for our children. Our Children: Today and

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Tomorrow, a collaboration of the seven westernmost counties of North Carolina and the Cherokee Indian Reservation, has identified regional priorities and is developing strategies to meet the long- and short-term needs of children in their area. Children First in Buncombe County is a 20-year commitment of the United Way to mobilize community leaders and service providers to challenge ineffective delivery systems and ask the hard questions in order to empower children to meet their

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PAT
SMITH

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Brush with democracy leaves Smart Start smarting

Democracy can be messy. Smart Start, the state project to improve local services for young children and their families, has illustrated that lesson the hard way.

In pushing for Smart Start, Gov. Jim Hunt had the idea that the best way to make life better for children would be to enlist all the people in a community who care about kids: Put up state dollars and technical support, but leave it to local citizens to figure out how to use those resources.

Twenty million approved by state lawmakers is going to 12 counties or groups of counties selected by the state for pilot projects. Each will set up a nonprofit to oversee the coordination of local early childhood services.

The idea is intriguing. It will give citizens and community leaders the chance to hash out their differences and find ways to work together for an end that everyone wants to accomplish. North Carolina, after all, ranks 39th among the states in the quality of life for children.

ABOUT CHANGE

Unfortunately, the theory that groups can work together to solve common problems can run into roadblocks. In several counties, the process of preparing applications to the state for selection as a pilot project produced confrontation rather than consensus.

In Wake County, for example, when conservatives at a Smart Start meeting asked for a vote to select members of the local team, a liberal county commissioner moved to adjourn the meeting because the conservatives clearly were a majority of those present.

In a letter to the editor on the facing page, John Hood of the John Locke Foundation argues that deciding how to build local Smart Start plans cannot be left to formal parliamentary democratic processes.

Hood says the confrontation of the Wake County meeting simply underscores the pitfalls of asking any one group to speak for an entire community.

On the other hand, Jack Nichols, the Wake

commissioner who moved to adjourn the confrontational meeting, says Smart Start never was intended to operate under formal rules of parliamentary procedure or formal democratic government bodies.

Rather, he says, working informally and in the democratic spirit to find some consensus is precisely the goal. Smart Start, he says, calls for the formation of nonprofits to oversee the local early-childhood plan. And he says organizations are formed not through confrontation but through consensus.

The promise of Smart Start is to help children. To do that, the many people and organizations within communities are being asked to pull together and knit together all the resources at their disposal. The process is intended to bridge the diverse preferences within a community, and that takes time and patience.

Democracy is indeed messy. That's the beauty of it.

Todd Cohen