

*“Working in the nonprofit sector, where you are expected to have and voice strong values, ideologies and beliefs, has been my vehicle to take a stand for working for humanistic values and democracy.”*

# The Nonprofit Sector – Allies for Democracy

*By Beth Applegate*

CIVIL SOCIETY IN the United States has many aliases: third sector, nonprofit, volunteer to name but a few. The missions of nonprofit organizations in the civil society sector are based on social movements, religious values, political convictions and community needs. According to *The New Nonprofit Almanac*, in 1998 there were 1.2 million nonprofit sector organizations and religious congregations, and total nonprofit sector revenues accounted for 6.1% of the national income. These nonprofit groups are also referred to as the “independent sector” to emphasize their unique role in society, distinct from business and government. However, I believe that it is the pursuit of democratic values and ideals, which most distinguishes the nonprofit sector.

I have spent my entire professional career working with and among the civil society sector as local organizer, state executive director, national field director and now as an OD practitioner. I have focused my OD practice on advocacy organizations in three social change movements – reproductive rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) civil rights; and environmental and conservation rights. In my experience, what is distinct about the advocacy portion of the sector is its legacy and commitment to democracy.

Following World War II there was a reveling in democratic

principles and a commitment in the philanthropic world to further institutionalize the tenets of democracy throughout the civil society sector. Large foundations like Ford and Rockefeller began to reassess their program initiatives in the nonprofit sector, which up until that point had primarily focused on health-related problems and medical advancement. Two of the Rockefeller Foundation’s central funding focuses began to revolve around the question of human behavior and on ways of ensuring a more effective application of democracy. Their counterpart, the Ford Foundation, began focusing on fundamental values and social responsibilities, and through their program initiatives offered a sweeping reaffirmation of the principles of freedom and democracy. Coincidentally, at the same time in the social sciences field, Kurt Lewin and Kenneth Benne, two of the architects of OD, focused their careers on “planned social change” methodology in the service of social science and democracy.

Today, building on the forethought and work of social change advocates before them, many advocacy organizations define democracy as a culture-wide, systemic view of interactions and relationships among people and institutions. Freedom of expression, equality of opportunity, participation, separation of church and state and “life, liberty and the pursuit of happi-

ness” are widely held as democratic values by the institutions I serve. They believe that when there is an equitable distribution of resources including wealth, education, power, participation, nature, etc. there is social justice. These nonprofit organizations see their institutions as part of society and not disconnected from it. They believe that all organizations can and should be powerful agents for social justice by reflecting democratic and humanistic values in all aspects of their endeavors, and that organizations must assume collective responsibility for making our society work for everyone. Overall, the nonprofit sector serves as a vital part of the network of cooperation that permits our democratic society to operate effectively to the benefit of all of us.

This description offers a stark contrast to the headline reports of greed and corruption demonstrated by some of the largest corporations in the United States. Unlike the nonprofit sector, the business sector is an economic-market based model, whose values derive from the goal of maximizing profit and serves only the interests of a few stakeholders.

Unfortunately for all of us, the market place is the ultimate paradigm for measuring progress and success in the United States. As a result, The United States nonprofit sector is facing unprecedented competition from the for-profit sector, in areas such as health and education, and must address the challenge of competing with for-profit enterprises without losing sight of their primary purpose for existence, that is, the public good (Weitzman and Jalandoni, 2001).

This unprecedented competition is coupled with the increase of the for-profit vanguard making both successful and unsuccessful transitions into leadership positions in the nonprofit sector and bringing with them the influence of business sector consultants. Business-based models, language and strategies such as increased fees for services, attention to the bottom line, “the talent mind set,” and venture philanthropy are increasingly being transported from the for-profit sector into the nonprofit arena. These models have been enthusiastically promoted to the nonprofit sector with the overt and oft-times boastful message that nonprofits are expected and should strive to become more businesslike, a.k.a. lean, efficient and effective.

I have been gainfully employed as an OD practitioner in

the “after market” of business consultants who enter the nonprofit sector with an air of superiority, assuming they already know “the best way.” Often, in this scenario, the consultant has not bothered asking what the client wants because they assume that they already know what they need based on their knowledge and experience from the business sector. Instead of assisting the client in fact-finding, diagnosis of the organizational issues, and co-leading the process, the business consultant serves as the “expert.” Thus the role of the client and consultant remains unbalanced and inappropriate from an OD perspective. Instead of holding an objective mirror before clients as they experiment with solutions, the business consultant, accustomed to the expectations of the for-profit sector, provides solutions, thus keeping the client dependent.

Additionally, it has been my experience that the consultants from the business sector are not accustomed to navigating the nuances of the cultural norms in the nonprofit sector where consultants are often expected to share common values, ideologies and beliefs. Nonprofit clients not only are interested in the skills and abilities of the consultant, which they hope will bring added value, equally as important they want to know that a consultant shares their politics and commitment to the mission. This runs counter to the bottom-line fixation of the for-profit sector and in my experience has proven to be disarming to a for-profit consultant accustomed to working in a world where political ideologies in the workplace are off limits, and where instead the bottom-line rules. Finally, unlike the for-profit sector where often making money for the company and for the individual employee is the key motivating factor, in the nonprofit sector money is not a driving force. Instead what often most motivates the staff are less tangible things like social justice, commitment to service, and their ideological beliefs. Again, for the for-profit consultant where if you can’t measure it, it isn’t important and where perks and bonuses can yield results, this can be unknown and misunderstood territory.

The encroachment of business leaders, practices and consultants into the nonprofit sector is not necessarily all negative. I believe that it would behoove us, where appropriate, to incorporate useful business practices (i.e., business scale and capital) into the nonprofit sector while continuing to honor the democratic value-based legacy of the field of OD. It should be noted, however, within the nonprofit sector with the increased application of business values and models, and the pressure to measure success in narrow numeric forms, nonprofits risk “mission slide,” the loss of their core constituencies and becoming surrogates of the for-profit sector.

During the last decade, the United States’ nonprofit sector has become a beacon of hope internationally, particularly among global leaders seeking sound economical solutions to dogged social problems that persevere in the midst of growing democratization. Given this, I would argue that in lieu of incorporating for-profit principles into the operations of nonprofit entities, the United States should focus on exporting nonprofit core values and principles into the for-profit sector and use

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them as a foundation for shaping the inevitable reality of globalization. We need to ask our business clients what it is that will help build and sustain our communities and our world? We cannot afford, in the aftermath of September 11, Enron, and World Com, to serve the economy while destroying democracy and the planet.

Working in the nonprofit sector, where you are expected to have and voice strong values, ideologies and beliefs, has been my vehicle to take a stand for working for humanistic values and democracy. One of the tools I use to reinforce these values in my work is the freedom line. The freedom line states that there is a line above which a group has social acceptance and power and below which a group is marginalized and oppressed. For example, through my work with the LGBT community, my perception of the general attitude is that it is most important to get "sexual orientation" above the line, and then below that "gender" and then "race" etc. However, for every identity below that line, it's often believed that it's a waste of time to try to get one of their other "identities" above the line because they will still have other marginalized identities below. By asking my clients to view race, gender, class and other issues through the freedom line lens, my goal is to encourage them to see the opportunities to unite around the oppressions, rather than to cling to each of the identities they represent. Clinging to each identity results in a zero-sum analysis (I win, you lose), uniting around the oppression offers the opportunity for social change action. If we export the nonprofit acumen outside the boundaries of the sector, we have the opportunity to begin a dialogue in other sectors about joining with the nonprofit sector in their commitment to social responsibility. We have the opportunity to present an invitation to use the significant skills and resources in the other sectors to share power and responsibility that move all of us closer towards democracy and helps ensure everyone is above the freedom line.

Whether you are a nonprofit, for-profit, governmental consultant, thought leader, or an academician, I believe OD professionals have an obligation to return to the basics of our field and the nonprofit sector's commitment to humanistic and democratic principles. To do this, I believe we need to re-examine our roles as OD consultants and intentionally resurface and utilize the knowledge, values, strategies, methods and skills, which have been developing since the 1940's. Like our forefathers in

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the OD field, I believe OD practitioners must work towards extending the values and ideals of democracy and positioning social science in its service. We can no longer afford to turn our collective cheeks from the direct assault on these core values, in exchange for a world organized solely on the bottom financial line. One of the greatest memorials we can offer to the travesty of September 11, is for the United States to continue to invest in and promote a strong, sustainable nonprofit sector and export the principles, knowledge, and values outside the sector.

As OD consultants we must respect and honor the distinctive role that the nonprofit legacy and its commitment to democracy has served in preserving democratic values, and build upon the work of two of the architects of the field of OD, Kurt Lewin and Kenneth Benne. Benne's epitaph states "...But if love glows among the ash of time where we kept watch together on time's flame, save me from death, grant immortality. Remember me, my friends, remember me". In the Jewish tradition it is said,

"never forget." I plan to honor and remember the work of Lewin and Benne by consciously and intentionally choosing to work with nonprofit groups that are committed to a just, humane and sustainable society in which people are responsible for themselves, their communities, and the global environment. I hope fellow practitioners who work in the for-profit sector will import the traditions, knowledge and values of the nonprofit sector to strengthen the leadership, management, structures and clarity of for-profit organizations that are working to build a just, caring, and peaceful world. ■

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