

Three Common Traits of Failing Non-Profits

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Helping non-profits thrive is fulfilling work. There's nothing like the feeling of witnessing an organization build momentum, hit its stride, and, ultimately, reach or exceed its goal. But overcoming non-profit challenges and getting on the path to success isn't always easy. **In fact, leaving the status quo can be so tough that leaders—volunteers and staff alike—accept decline over change. Why?**



Some people say it's because change is hard. While that's certainly true, it's not the only reason some non-profits would rather fail than change. **In 15 years of working up close and personal with boards of directors, executive directors, and volunteers, I've pinpointed three traits that many failing non-profits have in common.**

1. It's Nobody's Fault

When it comes to non-profit fundraising, everyone always has the best intentions. **But the sad truth is that for some struggling non-profits, no one really owns successes or failures.** That's a problem—a BIG problem.

Bear in mind, it's about more than accountability on an org chart or job description. **I've coached many organizations through turnarounds, and the most critical element proved to be individuals who felt personally accountable for the outcome.**

Who are these people and how can you identify them? Candidly, they are usually volunteers, but sometimes they're staff members. **Here are some easy ways to recognize them:**

- They use language like this: "Not on my watch." Or "Whatever it takes."
- They seek professional input where they are lacking in knowledge. In other words, they are smart enough to know what they don't know and to know the limitations of staff and other volunteers.
- They recognize that the biggest risk is doing nothing.
- They are not pennywise, pound-foolish—they understand the difference between an expense and an investment.

In a word, they have COURAGE—they aren't afraid to make tough decisions. In words and actions, they illustrate the difference between "a problem" and "my problem."

If you want to save a sinking non-profit, you'll need to work on attracting and nurturing these types of people while letting go of the ones who are content with waiting for "the man behind the curtain."

2. Butts Facing Forward

In office jargon, we call it “the institutional mindset”—the tendency toward internal vs. external focus. In other words, you spend more time looking at and talking to each other—your staff, your board, your volunteers—while turning your backsides to donors and prospects. **Here are some signs you might be stuck in butt-facing-forward mode:**

- Newsletters always broadcast information about “the organization” rather than celebrate the outcome of activity made possible by your donors.
- Solicitations revolve around need—what the organization needs, how much the organization needs—rather than about the vision your donors have for their gifts.
- Articles provide “recaps” and “news” that hold as much interest for a donor as what you had for breakfast.

Remember, thriving non-profits correspond regularly with their donors and other external stakeholders, and they know how to use their feedback and insights to generate compelling, effective content.

3. Living in Victimhood

Having a victim mentality is similar to lacking ownership, with this little nuance: the permeating belief that outside forces, which cannot be controlled nor combatted, are working against the organization.

If you think I’m joking or being facetious, I assure you that this mentality is as real and as serious as a heart attack, and can make or break your non-profit. **How do you know if you’re dealing with victim mentality on your staff, board, or within your volunteer ranks? Here are some telltale signs:**

- Suggestions for improvement are met with responses like “we’ve tried that before and it didn’t work” or “we can’t do that because (insert convoluted, logic-defying reasoning here).”
- Decreases in donors and dollars are attributed to vague circumstances such as “the market,” “donor fatigue,” or “other non-profits stealing our donors.”
- Efforts to seek feedback from donors, board members, and other stakeholders are vehemently opposed.
- “If only” statements about more resources are commonplace, e.g. “if only we had the budget for X,” “if only we had another full-time person,” “if only we had access to that new whiz-bang technology that (insert international non-profit organization with billion dollar budget) uses.”

While these signs of a victim mentality might seem irrational to some people, they are extremely common, especially in non-profit organizations that rely on motivating donors and prospects to act.

Successful non-profits shoo away the negative forces by implementing a results-based culture where everyone acknowledges shortfalls, but also recognize these shortfalls as learning opportunities.

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