

July 16, 2009

To the Editor,

Since the recession started, thoughtful reporters have told us about the leadership, innovation, and often desperate resilience of Arizona's nonprofit sector. However, as individuals, it is easy to wring our hands in despair when we hear reports about one nonprofit organization after another facing the danger of closing or drastically cutting its staff—all while the need for their vital services dramatically increases.

It is tempting to blame nonprofits' struggles on the economy—if only the economy was stronger, corporations could increase their contributions and government support would return. It is tempting to say there is nothing I can do as an individual or that my meager contribution would not make a difference.

We want to propose just the opposite. We believe that, ultimately, it is up to us, the individual members of our communities, to provide support and leadership to the nonprofit sector. People are often surprised to learn that more than 80% of all charitable gifts—in good times and bad—come from individuals. Less than 20% comes from corporations and charitable foundations combined. This means that when we talk about the effects of the current economy on nonprofit organizations, we are really talking about how we have changed as volunteers, donors, and ultimately, stewards of our community.

We suggest that each of us ask ourselves the following questions: “How have I altered my philanthropic participation? Am I giving as freely to organizations as in the past? Am I more thoughtful about which organizations I support and how much I give? In what ways am I involved with the groups to which I give?”

When answering these questions, it becomes clear that the charitable organizations that will prove most successful in these challenging times are those that develop genuine relationships with us as valued partners in their mission's work. They present us with a cause that we care about and that sincerely needs our help, inspiring us to rise to the occasion through active and meaningful involvement.

As a result, when we Arizonans accept this vital role of community steward, we accomplish much more than simply raising money. We give our opinions, time, and talent, offering insightful ideas to more effectively advance our nonprofits' missions and visions. We extend our organization's reach to involve more constituents and supporters. We even bring excitement to often difficult and thankless work. When used effectively, we are constantly making new friends; creating trusted advisors; and most of all, we are building the next generation of philanthropic activists by acknowledging our collective efforts.

Conversely, we should encourage the organizations we support to avoid strategies that only rely on passing the collection plate, filling the donor box or buying raffle tickets without developing any significant relationships with donors. The organizations we support must always help us understand our importance and relevance to the cause, no matter how large or small our gift.

Finally, and perhaps the most critical requirement for any organization during this economic downturn, is courage. Some organizations, no matter how developed their network of supporters or how critical their needs, seem to have experienced a crisis of confidence.

Community stewards cannot back away from asking for contributions just because times are tough. The only way to get support is to ask. Remember: If you don't feel the cause is worthy of asking for support, then those you are asking won't either. Some people will be able to give at this time, others will not, but you will only know if you ask. As the saying goes, "whatever we predict... we will be right." If we determine that we can't raise money before getting started, then we can't. It's that simple.

To put some facts behind the philosophy and to give some reassurance to those individuals actively raising funds, here are a few things to remember. During the past two decades, there has only been one year where the amount of charitable dollars did not grow in the United States. That was in 1987, when total giving fell by only 1.2%. Traditionally, about 75% of Americans give to charity each year. That number is even higher among people who are asked. In addition, more than half of people who give also volunteer, which is important given that volunteers typically give more than donors alone.

Of course, it can be argued that these days it's different – that this time in our modern history is so unlike any previous era that the trend of growing generosity will for the first time dramatically decline. This only brings us back to our original point.

We *are* the nonprofit sector; and its success, failure, or falter ultimately rests with us.

It is up to us to define these times in which we live and the Arizona we want to build for our children. Continue to give generously and wisely of your time, treasure, and talent. Be courageous and be caring – the results will be evident.

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