

September 28, 2011 by Mark Haas

Helping a Nonprofit Find Its Soul

Nonprofits value consultants for their expertise but also for their independence and objectivity. In no process are these characteristics more critical than in helping an organization outline its values.

Values are what a nonprofit stands for, the principles that an organization would defend and follow no matter what the consequences.

But it is not an easy process, and many nonprofits fail to achieve the following when spelling out their values:

Authenticity. Many groups state the values they aspire to, not the ones that are part of everyday practice. This disconnect is usually obvious to employees and others. You must find ways to ask your client to list the values that everyone would say describe the group today.

Usefulness. Often nonprofits make lists of values to share with employees and the public, but they don't include anything that really counts as a value.

For instance, when a nonprofit says it puts its "focus on members" or pursues "continuous learning," it is talking about strategies, not values. Strategies don't help much when it is time to set priorities or make tough tradeoffs. So you must help your clients find ways to ensure their strategies and performance objectives are built on their true values.

Pervasiveness. Even when a nonprofit's values are authentic and useful, many employees are unaware of them. They don't hear leaders talk about values. They don't see values discussed in communications with clients, members, or others, and they aren't asked to think about values as they design or evaluate programs. Figure out how to make sure values are visible and realize that no value statement will make a difference unless it becomes embedded in the group's culture.

Priority. A warning sign that an organization is not values-based is when it offers the public a list of eight to 10 "values," or even more. Because values are supposed to show what a nonprofit cares most deeply about, it is realistic to have three to five of them, and the organization's leaders should be able to rank them in importance.

For example, is innovation so important it could be sacrificed for equality? Is avoiding a deficit more important than transparency? Ask the organization's leaders whether priorities are so clear that everyone would automatically put the list in the same order.

Crafting a set of values is a difficult, heart-wrenching exercise. If the organization hasn't thought deeply about values, it may take months for leaders to work through them. Then they must see if the chosen values make sense to the organization's supporters, clients, and others who care about it.

Because most organizations have not had the difficult discussions about what they really stand for, consultants often need to encourage a vigorous discussion over values.

Once the values have been identified, it's time to help make them part of all aspects of the culture and operations, including programs, hiring, training, and relations with the community.