
HOW TO COMMUNICATE OUR VALUE TO OUR COMMUNITIES

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TIME AND TIME AGAIN WE HEAR THE CLAIM: “THE NONPROFIT, CHARITABLE, community sector helps to build resilient, healthy communities – in fact, we are leaders in doing so!” As a practitioner in the sector for many years, I myself have made this claim. There is truth to it. Indeed, it is a firm belief in this truth – that our work betters communities – that compels so many of us to dedicate ourselves to this work and this sector.

The reality is, though, that my words were often met with quizzical looks. Confronted with the obvious question (“Exactly how does the sector do this?”), I have found myself faltering. I know that many others in my situation have too. Why? I have noticed that I, and others like me, often fall into the trap of explaining our role with vague, process-oriented descriptions that try to capture the essence of the sector in the absence of concrete stories of our own work and its benefits. I find that often we fail to understand the community context in which we are working and serving. I have found that often we believe we are talking to Canadians rather than talking with Canadians. We will continue to stumble if we insist on doing things this way without taking pause to re-think about the way in which we look at and talk about our sector amongst ourselves and within the broader community.

In this short paper I will explore three key themes. The first is the notion that we are a sector that needs a communications goal: we need to learn how to make a case for a strong sector so that others will finally understand why we are so important and why our communities need us to be strong. Of course, a greater understanding of our importance and purpose will make others more willing to provide support and funding. The second is to understand the nuances and differences within the sector, largely shaped by context. The third is to propose that conversations will be most fruitful when we invite Canadians to take part in them. This will require us to move away from an emphasis on talking amongst ourselves about our role and impact.

Let me clear – I am not suggesting that all past behaviours and traditions have been failures and need to be abandoned – many have been successful and have other worthy benefits. But I am suggesting that we step back, assess the way in which we have traditionally communicated our contributions to society, and commit ourselves to thinking creatively about how we might approach “communicating” in a new and different way.

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A COMMUNICATIONS GOAL

I am convinced that the sector's case, at its foundation, should be focused on stronger communities instead of prematurely jumping to define ourselves by the notion of a stronger "sector." This will ensure that the conversation remains focused on the people we serve. Telling our own stories built on our own contexts will be our most effective way to communicate and co-operate as a sector and the best way in which we can serve each other. It is about recognizing that although we are all broadly working towards a common goal, it is our individual voices and unique stories that make us, as a sector, stronger.

All too often I have heard pleas, sometimes from external groups like governments and funders and sometimes from within the sector itself, calling for the sector to figure out how we can speak with one voice that can communicate our collective value. Such requests are problematic for a number of reasons:

- Speaking with a common voice presupposes we know who "we" are. Of course, we have numbers and statistics, but they do not really do justice to the contribution that each of us makes to the sector and that the sector makes to the wider community.
- The discussion about "the sector" consumes an enormous amount of time, mostly talking to ourselves. This does have value in that it links us and helps overcome some of the isolation many of us work in, but it does not really produce any significant, game-changing communication results. It takes time away from more action (what we need are oriented thrusts to identify our value to specific audiences) and may inadvertently come across to others as being self-absorbed.
- The idea of "the sector" may create divisions among us, as some (for various reasons of their own, perhaps having to do with competition for resources or huge gaps in capacity within the sector) prefer to focus on their own endeavours rather than operating as part of a sector.
- Importantly, a sector-based dialogue conveys that we care more about making ourselves bigger and better, without being able to rationalize why. It fails to communicate the real reason we want to be visible and strong: so that we can serve communities (geographic or communities of interest; the definition is broad) effectively.

In short, we exist to serve communities. It only makes sense that we agree to engage in dialogue that most effectively conveys this. This can only strengthen us as a sector.

IT'S ALL ABOUT CONTEXT

Let's continue with the notion of "the sector." Our attempt to divide the sector into categories such as health, the arts, social services, environment, and so on, makes sense for many reasons, but not for the purposes of communicating value and effectiveness to Canadians. Grouping the sector has not, in my view, adequately captured the true essence of who we are. That is because a settlement agency, a literacy program, or an initiative to encourage healthy lifestyles will be different in Halifax than in Whitehorse. And the reason is simple: Halifax is different from Whitehorse! Context – past, present, and future – matters more than almost anything.

There may be common principles and values and even program strategies in similar organizations, but they are expressed and are played out differently because the context

is different. To truly work toward meeting our mission as a sector, which includes effectively communicating the mission, we'll need, as individuals and as organizations, more fully to understand our context. I do not mean simply the demographics of the population we serve or the nuances of the issue around which we are advocating, important as they are. I mean the broader backdrop to our work: the economic and social reality, the who's who in formal and informal leadership and networks, the assets and strengths and worries that our particular community has, and what is on the minds of the people that we serve. Those things, and perhaps others, matter in the work that every single one of us does, no matter how we define our community. Once we get our head around our context, we'll be better able to articulate how we fit in, what we are offering, and how we are doing that. And we'll have a clearer sense of what we are going to say about ourselves to others.

There are lots of ways to get a picture of context. Governments at all levels have data. Many municipalities have developed plans based on current information and profiles. Networks, planning groups, and think tanks can inform us. The media is full of information. Businesses, especially through their local Chamber of Commerce or Board of Trade, are great sources. And some organizations have programs designed to tap into the voices of the community around the very domains in which most sector organizations work. My long association with community foundations in Canada has shown me over and over again how valuable the snapshot of community life is in identifying and communicating what is working and what is not working so well. Vital Signs, an initiative of Canada's community foundations, does more than simply give a picture of local community. It tells stories of what is underway to address the issues raised and it invites engagement, conversation, and action by as many who want to take part. That includes individuals.

Not many of us take the time to have the conversation about our local context when we gather around the board or staff table. We have information at our ready reach – it would be a good place to start. The more we learn and talk about our context, the clearer our message will be. After all if we do not know what is really happening in our community, we will not be able to communicate the value we add to community life.

THE CONVERSATION

Talking is the third thrust of this article. Traditional avenues to get our messages out, such as media messages, annual reports, and e-newsletters, will remain important, and we'll need to rely on national organizations and associations for some overarching messages that pull the broad Canadian context together. But the most important way to reach Canadians is to talk with them in your community, at events we or others hold, at community dialogues, in faith groups and schools and service clubs, with social media, and much more. Set up a conversation corner in a local mall. Tell stories. Have open and transparent community or annual meetings where we pick up the phone and call people and invite them to come to talk with us.

We should make sure to talk with other organizations in our communities. This will help break down any notion that our sector is competitive rather than collaborative. Be clear that this is a conversation and not just another request for support. We must realize that we will have to put effort into getting the conversation going – time, human resources,

and likely a little money (but not much) – but that the rewards will be tremendous. Our mission will be communicated.

BUILDING BLOCKS

Finally, I believe that the stories and experiences we have in our own communities will add up to a larger story. It will be a story that points concretely to the results of our work, the challenges we face, and the value that we add – individually and, ultimately, as a sector. We will need strong national organizations to support us at the local level and tell our stories on the national and, perhaps, the international level. Those stories, built on understanding our own contexts, placing communities' interests before our own, and drawing on the conversations we have had with Canadians will be our most effective way to communicate as a sector.

None of this will be easy or quick. It will require that we as a sector commonly agree to take action ourselves – each of us in our individual settings – and collectively. But if we take up the approach I am suggesting in this article, which at its heart is about collaborating with others to learn about our communities and tell our stories, we will be seen by others as real builders of resilient and strong communities, and indeed we will be.