

When Half the Neighborhood Is Missing

Gus Newport

Local nonprofits too often compete with each other for power, turf, and funds. The author, formerly director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, advocates for a collaborative process that engages the local community in defining and executing new initiatives. Governance for the good of the people must rely on sound research, sound principles and values, and the understanding and support of the community.

If we are truly concerned about the effectiveness of community-based nonprofits, we must ask ourselves whether the governance of individual community organizations enhances or interferes with good governance on a community-wide level.

I believe the behavior of individual organizations often inhibits comprehensive community development. I come to this opinion after a lifetime in positions of public trust.

I cut my teeth on the civil rights movement. We were constantly planning while in motion, sorting out goals, strategy, methodology, and process. We didn't focus on administrative systems because most of our work was done through a working cooperative and not a nonprofit organization. I am constantly reminded that we didn't get paid for the work of social justice in those days, so we didn't focus on sustenance, hierarchy, or differences.

What guided us was the pursuit of principles, values, and ethics. Our process, therefore, was inclusive, and looked to involve everyone who was affected, or necessary to achieve the best outcomes — both in planning and decision-making. I developed a belief that the only way to correct immoral conditions was through moral and inclusive approaches, and this deeply informed my approach to governance.

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Governance for the Good of the People

When I was mayor of Berkeley, California, I spent time with a group of older thinkers who played major roles in the development of public policy during the 1930s. Congressman John Conyers convened this group over a number of years to think about social policy together. One member shared a report with me called “Our Cities: Their Role in the National Economy.” It was prepared for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and it laid the groundwork for the New Deal.

The New Deal was Roosevelt’s political response to the depression of the 1930s. At his request, a team of academics and social analysts surveyed each state in the union to discover programs and public policy to deal with a multitude of social and economic ills.

One passage from this extraordinary document moved me:

Of all our national resources — natural and man-made — the most important, and the one in terms of which all the others have to be judged, is human life. The safety, welfare and happiness of the men, women and children who compose the American people constitute the only justification of government. They are the ends for which all our resources . . . are merely instruments. The manner of life of our people, the problems they face, and the hopes and desires they cherish for improvement in their existence and the advance of their civilization should be the supreme concern of government.

The essence of these words moved me on a spiritual, ethical, and intellectual level. I realized that in order for government to function properly in the midst of change, it has to be based on sound research, underwritten with sound principles and values that everyone engaged with it understands.

Engagement in Good Governance

Nonprofits were originally created as places where people could associate with one another to pursue a common endeavor in the public interest. Currently, nonprofit work offers increased access to healthcare, childcare, and jobs, and essentials such as food (when we are too poor to afford it) heating fuels, housing, and job training. Our efforts in this sector regarding culture and the arts assuage the human spirit in many different ways, encourage intellectual exploration, and augment our peace of mind. For these and many other reasons, I have always believed that the nonprofit sector is the difference between chaos and a tranquil society. We make things grow in the gaps where the private sector doesn’t go and where the public sector fails miserably in both knowledge and approach.

But is there a down side to all of this saintliness? Does the net effect of so much nonprofit activity actually promote fragmentation and undermine public accountability?

In short, yes. We often address and to some extent cover up the results of inequitable public policy and bad governance at the municipal, regional, state, and national levels. We do so in ways that allow interconnected issues to be dealt with too separately, and work on issues at scales that can't possibly effect real change. And we do so in ways that disrespect the very people to whom we are most responsible.

When do we make the pursuit of policy change to promote healthy communities a primary responsibility of nonprofit governance, and what stands in our way? Laws, by the way, don't restrict nonprofits from working actively to change policies and hold the public and corporate sectors accountable.

Without an active constituency, those of us concerned with building and maintaining healthy, vibrant communities have little chance of affecting these large forces for the better. And without networks of equally active nonprofits commonly focused on larger scale change, we are hamstrung.

At their best, nonprofits engage people in taking wise and powerful civic action. Engagement gives us credibility because if we are successful at it, we generally act in a community's best interest. How or why have we devolved to think we can design and maintain meaningful programs without including the people that these programs are meant to benefit?

Can a doctor prescribe prescriptions to patients without examining them, or better should one? Can a lawyer defend a client without conducting interviews and researching the situation for which he or she is defending a client? Can a judge render a decision without hearing all of the facts?

Why do some of us serving on nonprofit boards feel that we have enough information at our fingertips without engaging those we seek to help? Isn't it a right of our clients to assist in informing the methods and processes that should be used in upgrading their quality of life?

We have a special charge. Nonprofits often provide the irritant to move stagnant or ineffective systems — our charge is not about helping to mollify and maintain control over marginalized communities.

Nonprofit board members should always be in a state of visioning new ways to engage constituents, because circumstances change and we must, in turn, revisit those external factors that affect people's lives.

Rigor in Good Governance

Responsible governance of any institution for the public good, whether public or private, should involve people in a deep dialogue about what matters to them. It should also have a serious practical side that applies basic bottom line

analysis that is periodically updated. Situations and conditions change, and strategies devised by governance bodies must change along with them.

Research is important. In public policy, for instance, one has to look at successful approaches and examples, and study the effects on real-life situations. Where have public policies made the desired difference and, when they haven't, what were the underlying assumptions?

Public policy and social programs are too often developed simply to respond to a symptom of the moment. This may make it appear that the governance body and staff have responded. The program might indeed have a rational theory behind it. But if the theory doesn't prove true, the problem will continue, or it will shift or become worse.

The needs of those who create policy or run programs may be met — in turn, they look like they have acted on the public's concern. In fact, they are employed to do so. But in reality, the proposed solutions may only have prolonged the problem that the policy was supposed to fix. This practice must be looked at in relation to nonprofits that are growing at the same rate that the communities around them are deteriorating.

Governance systems have a problem when nonprofits ignore such things as the interconnections between issues, causal factors of social problems, and larger systems concerns, but instead look only within a narrow categorical purview and focus more on the institutional health of the organization than the health of the community. Nonprofit organizations — and that includes their boards — must constantly remind themselves of the purpose for which they were founded. If they do not, they are not simply acting inadequately, but are adding to the public's sense that some social problems are intractable.

When a Community's Faith Is Inadvertently Abridged

I became the executive director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) in Boston in 1988. The area was already served by a number of nonprofits, and was divided up by issue and purpose (housing, youth work, labor and job training, multi-service centers, childcare, and so on), as well as by ethnic group, and even by a combination of personal and organizational histories. Despite the presence of all these groups, the area was a picture of urban devastation and contained many abandoned lots full of waste and playgrounds where children would be at risk. There was widespread evidence of public disinvestment in the area and in its people. On first sight, all I could think was that this was the third world — in the first world — and this did not happen by chance.

Having been involved in the international political scene for awhile, I looked at the DSNI area as simply one more example of the colonial effect that results from apartheid-like policy approaches.

But what was most troubling in the situation was that the nonprofits, in not advocating for meaningful change through common strategies and rigor, had become party to the ongoing poor condition of the community. Where were the boards of these organizations? Were they asleep at the helm? Did they not take their responsibility seriously enough to evaluate the conditions that their nonprofit organizations were charged with correcting?

A site visit to a neighborhood nonprofit by the Mabel Louise Riley Foundation led to the idea for DSNI. Upon seeing a map of the area, one of the trustees inquired what all the dark spaces were. “Abandoned lots” was the reply.

The trustee’s response: “We come out here to award a grant to replace some worn furniture when half of the neighborhood is missing?” This good-sense approach was to continue throughout Riley’s relationship to the neighborhood.

The Riley Foundation provided money to a core of nonprofits serving the Dudley area. The charge under this grant was to conduct town hall-type meetings to examine the issues that most concerned residents, and to create a process to engage the community in organizing, planning, strategizing, and implementation. The founders specifically stated that they didn’t want to duplicate any of the existing service-providing nonprofits, as they didn’t want to compete with other nonprofits for dollars.

The core neighborhood organizations suggested that nonprofits comprise 60 percent of the new board, and residents comprise 20 percent, leaving five percent each for small business representatives, community development corporations (CDC), and religious institutions, plus a compliment of local elected officials. The residents disagreed with this formation, suggesting that they should control two-thirds of the seats.

The residents figured that the community had been going through a state of decline despite the existence of nonprofits. As residents, they didn’t believe that these organizations should control the discussion of how their community should be rebuilt. Many of the community’s organizations understood the residents’ concerns and cooperated.

The fact that residents had different perceptions tells us something about the disconnect between these organizations and the people they served, and it tells us something about local boards’ lack of stewardship.

The working structure that DSNI adopted after the visioning, purpose, and mission established an atmosphere of inclusiveness and trust among all categories and classes of players.

Inclusive Rigor at DSNI

As DSNI got started, staff and residents went door-to-door, gathering information on what residents liked and didn’t like in their neighborhood. They were gathering data that would later prioritize steps to take, while creating depth and specificity in the demographics. Students (mainly from the Massachusetts

Institute of Technology in the early days) converted the data into useful tools. These early activities helped develop working agendas with which to engage the community, academics and private sector people with various skills and talents, and government. Such entities have the resources and capacity to complement nonprofits and residents when the situations are both challenging and structured.

These partners eventually helped realize residents' dreams by working with them to define, for example, the number of housing units desired, height limitations, open space requirements, appropriate businesses, multipurpose centers, and safety traffic standards — all to be addressed in a village-like atmosphere in a plan that reflected the overall culture of the community.

Armed with numbers and data, DSNI hired a firm to translate the neighborhood vision into a plan that could be developed. Because of the context and the contents of this plan, DSNI was able to apply to the city for special study status, which allowed the plan to establish zoning for the area. With zoning approval, DSNI was able to work under a seldom-used statute that gave nonprofits the power of eminent domain under certain defined conditions.

Armed with this designation and a thorough plan actively backed by residents, DSNI was able to attract broad pro-bono assistance. Three prestigious law firms assisted DSNI in the cost evaluation of vacant lots that DSNI hoped to acquire. Another firm assisted in the land-trust strategy and process.

In addition, a law firm filed the *intent to take* suit that gave DSNI the power of eminent domain. DSNI also received assistance and directions on how to apply, and get through a morass of environmental impact reports, including toxic analysis — very important to a neighborhood that had been used as a dumping site. The DSNI annual audit reflected the fact that the pro-bono work provided annually by private firms amounted to at least \$1.5 million.

Because of presentations that I and others were able to make to professional groups such as the Harvard Club, of which Newell Flather (then executive director of the Mabel Louise Riley Foundation) was a member, DSNI received vital pro-bono assistance from one of the big eight accounting firms, which not only gave us a great discount on our annual audit, but also developed a system to allow us to monitor any construction-cost overruns. Through the Harvard Club, IBM also assisted DSNI with hardware, software, and systems development.

In addition, as a result of this rigor, community and city government crafted a policy to develop affordable homeownership, to stabilize the lives of the people participating in the process, and not to subject the area to gentrification. Trust between neighborhood residents and principled professionals is another outcome of this type of rigor. The community learns research, systems, new strategies, and thinking outside the box. These achievements are needed for true sustainability in community-building. To date, vacant lots have been transformed into over 440 new homes, with a town

common, gardens, space for urban agriculture, parks and playgrounds, and 500 housing units have been rehabilitated. Business is growing, and rebuilding continues today.

How do we inspire such processes to wake up the sleeping giants that many community organizations have become? Our inner-city communities and other marginalized areas that nonprofits serve lose heart and hope when nonprofits function aimlessly, without rigor and without the engagement of their constituents. And when inner-city communities lose heart there has been a massive failure among nonprofit governance bodies.

A Challenge to Nonprofit Boards

There is plenty of room to rethink the role that nonprofit board members fill in the community. I believe the third sector — the community of nonprofits — should be a place of vibrancy, constantly inventing new and better ways to approach our work. We need to create larger and more complex agendas with interlocking parts. We need to learn from one another no matter where we are located. Our common experience and skills are great gifts that render us more resource than we are aware of. We need to apply our collective social capital across organizational, issue-specific, and geographic borders.

And let's examine the strength and approaches of international organizations. Through examination, planning, and discussion, we might come up with organizational hybrids to strengthen our sector. Maybe we can create loosely knit collectives through which we can blend interactive methods. With each successful venture, we should celebrate, publish, and ask others to share their stories with the network.

If ever there was a time for us to step into the national breach, it is now. Let us gather groups around the country that include recipients of services, service providers, interested professionals, policy-makers, academics, government representatives, and foundation personnel, and go for the gusto. I am beginning to get goose bumps just envisioning such a process. We might begin by commissioning a number of concept papers to inform the discussion and the process. We might write the next version of "We Are the People." I make this a call to all nonprofit board members: let's pursue those greater heights of purpose. I look forward to the challenge, and to working with as many of you as are prepared for this venture.🌸

I have served on the Board of Community Teamwork (CTI) in Lowell since early in 1993 as Treasurer, Clerk, and President. The breadth of programs offered by CTI and governed by the Board is both startling and comforting, both traditional and cutting edge. From fuel assistance, senior services and child and family services to small business assistance, “youth corps,” and creation of affordable family housing, CTI enables clients to get the necessary tools, participate in training, build the skills, influence the dialogue, access the housing, and gain the confidence to achieve the goals of self-sufficiency and productive citizenship. The many stories and instances of client and family achievement that result inspire the Board and the entire community.

My involvement at CTI has been a highlight of my volunteer life. The ability to influence state and federal legislation and policy as well as to contribute to the improvement of the over-all quality of life issues in the Greater Lowell area and beyond is both daunting and rewarding.

I am grateful for the vision of President John F. Kennedy, for the action of President Lyndon Johnson, for the vote of the 88th Congress and for the courage of the “great society” advocates.

*Marie P. Sweeney
Community Teamwork, Inc.*

