

Energizing New Growth With Shared Vision

In jazz, hierarchy is determined by your ability to play, not your position in the band. –Winston Marsalis

“When a group of people working together trust that all are concerned for the common good, then they continue to be in sync no matter what happens... It's the feeling that our way is more important than my way. This philosophy extends to how to treat audiences, consumers, staff or dysfunctional families. Groups who work together ‘swing.’ They believe ‘we’ is more important than ‘me,’ and by doing so, absorb mistakes.”

The philosophy of jazz artist Winston Marsalis applies as well to creating shared vision within nonprofit organizations.

A sense of community is no stronger than when collective energies are focused on a common goal. When that goal is for the greater good, the momentum is magnified and positive outcomes are only a matter of time.

Sworn enemies move closer together when they share a goal, says Johann Olav Koss, four-time Olympic gold medalist in skating. In his skating career, Koss broke 11 world records. “As a professional skater you ride around and around the track. You ask yourself what you’re doing it for. At a certain point you want to see the greater meaning—the greater whole.”

Koss found meaning by forming Right To Play, an international organization that uses sports and games to promote health and safety in poor areas of the world. By making teammates of children from different ethnic or religious backgrounds Koss sees them forget their differences and focus on a collective goal with positive outcomes for the whole team.

“I can’t not do this,” is a familiar refrain when someone has a vision stirring in their heart that serves the greater good. And this passion bubbles with increasing volatility until some action step is taken. Ignoring it doesn’t work - it continues pushing from the inside out. When the vision serves more than any one of the people building it, the energy takes on incredible force.

As it combines with the vision and passion of more and more like-minded people who are also fueled by that driving force, creativity,

ingenuity, and focus all increase exponentially and the goal becomes accessible.

Innovative nonprofit programs for emerging challenges are seeded by such passion. If you're reading this article, you know it well.

Astronaut Edgar Mitchell acted on that passion when he returned from outer space and founded the Noetic Sciences Institute, a nonprofit membership organization that promotes universal connectedness.

Molecular biologist Candace Pert researches non-toxic cures for AIDS, schizophrenia, and autism. Her passion burns boldly as she cultivates donor networks for the nonprofit that supports her research through her speaking engagements, best seller *Molecules of Emotion*, and the documentary film that swept across the country in unexpected popularity- all generating momentum she needs to advance.

Large nonprofit institutions we know today started with seeds of passion. Little did the late Bonnie Cone, founder of UNC Charlotte, realize the outcome of her work 40 years later would be a regional university – all she knew was that returning soldiers needed education. She became the bridge between the veterans and the resources to provide education they needed. Joining her were corporate leaders and influential civic citizens who shared her vision for accessible public education and continue to pass it on to others.

Local nonprofit leaders act on it everyday resulting in humane sanctuaries for animals, home-like environments for people at the end-of-life who have no insurance and no one able to care for them, conservation initiatives, pilot programs for non-violent young offenders, cultural arts and faith-based organizations, shelters for homeless families, and so many more.

The key to growth and sustainability is understanding that the vision is beyond one person's dream – it is a common vision under construction by a community of like-minded people, open and inclusive. And the vision is fluid – so that it's adaptable to shifting pressures like the economy, natural catastrophes, and basic human needs.

When the vision is shared with ever-expanding networks of creative, caring people, attracting resources for growth is inevitable – and it is a principle of sustainability.

Creating shared vision is an on-going process with variables. It's more than a retreat agenda. It's the difference between handing out a report to the board and facilitating debate among diverse viewpoints. Compare the difference when board members walk away with copies of reports in hand versus new questions in their heads and different perspectives to discuss.

It's why board leaders choose service. It's what motivates staff everyday to address issues and patterns of unhealthy lifestyles. It's why volunteers gather for hands-on experiences in service and the love people get on the receiving end. It's what happens as a result of all of these things that changes cascading crises into upward spirals, breaks self-defeating cycles, improves lives, creates relief and happiness. And, how effectively these things are communicated to the public determines expansiveness of the shared vision that then seems to take on a life of its own.

Principles of Shared Vision

1. The nonprofit vision is beyond any one person; it must be shared by a collective.
2. The vision is fluid.
3. Energy behind the vision increases as the network of resources expands.
4. Shared vision attracts resources.
5. Shared vision is an on-going process embedded in all activities.
6. Creating shared vision in service to others aligns with global goals of connectedness.

Start with your nonprofit.

1. Does your board share a vision?
2. What meaning does the organization's purpose hold for them personally?
3. How closely aligned are personal values of the board and staff with the core values of the organization?
4. Where is the board in synch and where are areas of conflict?
5. Do activities relate to the mission?
6. How might pressures of the next 3-5 years challenge the vision?
7. What do you know about the vision of stakeholders not on the board?

These questions might serve as guidelines for gauging the role of shared vision in your nonprofit. What do you learn from the answers?