



Five Fowl Facts That Benefit Nonprofits

When asked why he so extensively studied behaviors of geese, Milton Olsen, this county's authority on geese, responded that it was because geese never work alone and that principles for organizational leadership might be revealed.

Natural models for working collaboratively and cooperatively exist in nature and suggest metaphors for how organizations can function more effectively. Cultural anthropologist, educator, and award-winning author, Angeles Arrien, highlighted research by naturalist Milton Olsen, this country's authority on geese, in her talk about living in transformative times.¹ During their discussions, five facts about geese were identified that benefit organizational growth.

Both Olsen's and Arrien's observations also apply to nonprofit leaders who seek to unify the vision of the board, staff, volunteers, and donors. Aligning vision with values gets complicated as leaders try to incorporate more and more cultural and socio-economic diversity, transparency, inclusiveness, and compassion into their goals.

Here's a little wisdom from nature to keep things in a simple perspective.

Five Facts About Geese: Wisdom For Nonprofit Visionaries

1. As each goose flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the birds to follow. By flying in v-formation, the whole flock adds 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

Lesson: People who share common direction and sense of community get further quicker and easier because they travel on the thrust of each other as they move in the same direction with the same focus.

2. When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of flying alone and quickly gets back in formation.

Lesson: If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those headed in the direction we want to go and accept help and give help.

3. When the lead goose tires, it rotates back into formation and another goose flies to the point position.

Lesson: It pays to take turns doing the hard work and sharing leadership. As with geese, people are interdependent on each others' skills, talents and resources.

4. The geese flying in formation honk from behind to encourage those in front to keep up their speed.

Lesson: We need to make sure the home team is encouraging. In groups where there is encouragement and acknowledgement, the production and creativity is greater. It's easier to stand by our heart and core values and that of others with encouragement.

5. When a goose gets sick, wounded, or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it can fly or it dies and then they launch out with another formation or catch up with their original flock.

Lesson: To have as much sense as a goose means that we will stand by each other in the hard times as well as when we are strong.

Nonprofit leaders in a time of exploration and uncertainty are pressured to learn new things in an environment that is challenged on multiple fronts. The opportunity to question perspectives and attitudes of competition, territorialism, scarcity, and fear of the unknown, also invites new partnerships, creative questions and deeper compassion into our lives. Looking at things from new perspectives, seeing potential in the confusion, risking an unknown outcome from experimentation.....these are marks of new leaders in a new age, and they will create new solutions.

Universal rules for growth and sustainability already exist in nature. Considering what works there is a step when the next step seems obscure.

So, start here: Is your organization as smart as a flock of geese?

ⁱ Arrien, Angeles; *Walking the Mystical Path With Practical Feet*, Institute of Noetic Sciences; June, 2005

