



Carl Sylvestre Consulting

Practical Solutions for Managing and Growing Organizations

Facing Uncertainty: A Survival Guide

By Carl Sylvestre

September 14, 2010

As the summer ends the headlines are still puzzling. Some say that the economy is steadily improving, then the next set of data tells us “not so fast,” in fact forget recovery the economic outlook is far from certain. We’ve always lived in uncertain times, but these headlines are paralyzing us. The trick is to simply move forward and make the best decision while confronting the following anxieties: fear, lack of confidence, anger, caution, worry, spend less, don’t hire. I’ll stop here -- it can be a long list. Yet, in spite of all this, the principles of good fundamental fundraising management have not changed and here is a quick reminder.

- Focus on your current portfolio, which means stay close to home and pay attention to your current funders and your best prospects. They are still here. They may be less evident, but they have not gone away.
- Rethink your plans in terms of the new economic reality and keep expectations in check. The word is that flat is the new up. Who knows what it will be a year from now?
- Continue focusing on creating a coherent message. It is not only your external audience who is listening; don’t forget about your internal team.
- Look for opportunities to continually diversify your donor base. Well-thought out creative approaches will win the day.
- Consider the structural issues that are holding you back. A common concern for many organizations is that a major grant is scheduled to come on the last day of the fiscal year and if it fails then all the year’s work has gone down the drain; confidence has been shattered. Knowing that this is a possibility should you be looking at a new budgeting scenario for future years? There are other models to consider. Is the staffing model that worked five years ago serving the needs of the organization today?

- Talk and listen to your patrons, staff, artists, program participants and volunteers. The concerns of all stakeholders are essentially the same. They want the organization to succeed, even that long time funder that turned you down when you really needed that money. Keep the lines of communication open and learn what you can from the grapevine.
- Is it time for you to fundamentally rethink how do things, rather than going through the tried and true process of budgeting, cutting as if there are any more places to cut without sacrificing your outcome? Just maybe now is the time to change that structural bad habit you've been meaning to address for years, but just never got around to it. Your team is ready to listen to new ideas.

I believe that a positive attitude has great power in bringing about clarity. Be aware of the realities of today but remember the words of Fleetwood Mac (and Bill Clinton's campaign song from 1992), "don't stop thinking about tomorrow."