

Sustaining Your Mission for the Long Haul

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These days it seems every new fundraising approach is dubbed “the road to sustainability.” There is the “individual donor” movement. There is the “entrepreneurial nonprofit” movement. Each of these, as well as others, claims to be the ONE approach an organization needs to ensure its financial future.

This article isn’t about any of that.

That’s because we know that sustainability isn’t just about money.

We also know that once organizations start focusing their sustainability beyond just money, they begin to not only become more sustainable, but to simultaneously create more impact in their communities.

That’s why sustainability is a critical part of the Community-Driven approach.

What is Sustainability?

How would your board and staff answer the following question:

What matters more - whether or not your organization survives, or whether or not the community is a better place?

This is not a trick question. Rather, it gets to the heart of what sustainability is really all about.

Those organizations that see sustainability as being BIGGER than just them - they are the ones who will have far fewer worries about “survival.”

And that is because the financial sustainability of one independent organization doesn’t matter a lick if you can’t answer the bigger question: Sustainability towards what end?

Nonprofits have had to focus so much of their efforts on raising money, that it is easy to forget that money is just one of many tools we use in our quest to build a better present **and** future for our communities.

The problem with the focus on money, though, is that it pits “us” (our organization) against “them” (all the other organizations working to attain the same community goals). In truth, though, that is not at all what our organizations are about. They are about improving the quality of life in our communities. And for that, it doesn’t matter if your organization is strong - it matters if EVERYONE doing this work is strong.

No man is an island. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. There is strength in numbers. Choose your cliché - the truth remains that sustainability of mission will succeed BETTER when it does not focus on a competitive approach. And while all organizations need money to do their work, focusing sustainability **solely** on money will always lead to a competitive approach - and that means your organization may actually be creating its own sustainability at the expense of creating more benefit for the community.

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Therefore, our definition of sustainability is as follows:

Sustainability is your organization's assurance to the community that they will always be able to count on your work to make life better for them. It is about reliability and dependability for the services they count on and the change they want to see.

Not sustainability of your organization, but sustainability of the work the community needs to be done. That subtle difference will have a huge effect.

4 Steps to Sustainability

If the important thing is finding a way to sustain the work the community needs us to perform - whether that is ensuring a riparian area remains intact, providing interpretive dance performances, or feeding hungry kids - then we must begin to look at our approaches to sustainability in a different way.

Step 1: Focus on the Community

The first step in creating real sustainability is to refocus - NOT on your organization, but on the community. What benefit are you providing? What tangible things can they see you are accomplishing? Are you helping to create a future that is amazing for the community, while also addressing today's issues? Does your work come from the perspective of "This is what the community needs; we must figure out a way to provide that"?

When we focus on the community, we realize that we cannot do this work alone. More to the point, we realize there are others who also want our communities to be amazing places, and that if we work with others, we are far stronger together than any one of us could be on our own.

And that can only happen when our goal isn't organizational survival, but community strength.

Step 2: Shared Resources

Once we are focused on the community and seeing other organizations as allies in making our communities great places to live, one of the next steps in creating sustainability is to begin sharing the resources we need to accomplish common goals.

This could be as simple as combining accounting work, or sharing facilities, or sharing a volunteer pool. Or it could be as complex as sharing contractual obligations to provide service together.

When you begin your next project, BEFORE you create your budget, list out everything it will take to perform that effort. Then ask, "Who else in the community is doing any part of that work?" For example, you might consider, "We will need a truck and drivers. Is there anyone in town that has trucks and drivers, with whom we might partner?"

By using resources that already exist in the community - untapped excess capacity - it enhances sustainability of your mission. That fact, however, doesn't simply come from making the program more cost effective, although that will happen. The sustainability comes from the sharing itself - the sharing of responsibility for making the community a better place. Shared responsibility is a big part of sustainability.

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Step 3: Asset Based Resource Development

While not everything about sustainability has to do with money, some part of it will indeed include financial sustainability. And while some insist that sustainability can be found in a magic bullet - whether that bullet is individual donors, a new for-profit venture, or whatever the latest fundraising trend may be - the truth about sustainability can be found by looking at how wealthy families have sustained their own wealth over multiple generations.

And that is to let your assets create your revenue stream.

Asset-based fund development simply means that you will analyze everything your organization already has, and everything it already does, to determine how those assets might generate more revenue. Your organization's assets will include:

- The work you are already doing to accomplish your mission - the programs, their operational flow, the day-to-day workings of your organization.
- The people you know, and your board knows, and your volunteers know, and your staff knows.
- The physical resources - facilities and equipment and other hard assets you own or have access to.
- The community assets you may not own outright, but do have access to.

Once you've listed out these assets, it is easy to see where some of them can begin to generate more revenues. If you have a board of 20 active community members, are there ways each of those board members can generate more income? If you have a hospital lobby where people sit, waiting for a loved one to come out of surgery, are there ways that lobby (and the people waiting) can generate more income? If you have 1,000 young people come through your program every year, are there ways those young people can generate more income? (Clue: teenagers may be broke, but they will almost always spring for snacks!)

The key is to base your revenue development efforts on everything your organization does, is and has. The best part of this approach is that it encourages you to build on those assets - get more people involved, have more people attend, increase the programming, increase the bond with the community. The stronger your asset base, the stronger your mission can grow, the more you can accomplish for the community, and the more those assets can continue to support the organization, all while you just continue to do your work.

This cycle is affirming and regenerating - the very essence of sustainability. As your organization gets stronger and accomplishes more for the community, those assets will generate more revenue, all while your mission work continues to be strengthened.

[For details on Asset-Based Resource Development, Click here](#)

Step 4: Community Engagement

Finally, as you go through the process of identifying your assets, and you realize all the "people assets" your organization has, that is when the last step becomes clear - Community Engagement. When you engage your whole community in the issues your organization cares about, the community will sustain BOTH the community impact you want to create, AND your organization's ability to fight that fight.

Community Engagement happens when you stop seeing the community as "stakeholders" or "donors" and you instead start to see that, as one of our workshop attendees put it, "Everyone in the community is part of our family. Our job is simply to let them know that!"

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What that means in practice is that you take a good look at the strong relationships your organization already has, and that you further engage those individuals with your mission. This perspective replaces “We don’t know any rich people!” with “We have an abundance of people whose lives we touch.”

Community Engagement does not mean asking for money. It means asking for friendship. And no, not “*friendship* as a euphemism for *donor*”, but real friendship - the kind that means this person cares about your mission and helps however he or she can. That could mean volunteering or making connections, it could mean helping you move your office or yes, it could mean donating cash. As it is in life, it is in our organizations - there is nothing like strong, solid friendships to make life ok.

Once you have identified who you want to engage, you will find there are as many ways to engage them as there are individuals. You might ask to give them a tour of your facility, or simply have breakfast. You might address a whole group at a Rotary, or just one individual at a time.

[For more information on Community Engagement, !\[\]\(05be7c7a8995decd503647c99211f7c2_img.jpg\)](#)

Where FriendRaising Meets Fund Raising

In this article, we have used recognizable words such as FriendRaising and Fundraising. But what we are really talking about is Community Engagement (FriendRaising - building an engaged community), and Resource Development (Fundraising, as well as raising all the other resources you need to do your work).

The key to sustainability of your mission will be that combination. On the one hand, you will be engaging your organization's extended family in the mission work you are doing - the work that benefits them - simply because they are part of your community. On the other hand, you will be focusing on ALL the resources your community has to share with you, once they are engaged.

In the end, sustainability all comes back to the community you serve. When your focus is on the community, sharing resources makes sense. When your focus is on the community, you find you have even more assets to build upon. And when your focus is on the community, it is easy to engage friends in that work.

When you have accomplished that, you will have created a path to ensuring your community can continue to benefit from the work you are doing. And in the course of identifying the community's assets and engaging them in your mission, that very effort will be making your community a better place. And isn't that what it's all about?

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