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Transformation Isn't for the Faint of Heart

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Filed under [Managing Your Nonprofit](#)by *Nanette Fridman*

The combining forces of the great recession, the proliferation of nonprofit organizations over the last decades and years of organizations content to maintain the status quo have resulted in a self-acknowledged need now by many nonprofits for transformation.

In working with clients and witnessing true metamorphoses, the following seem to be necessary steps for organizations setting off on a successful transformational process.

1. Stop Playing the Blame Game

It is much easier to point fingers than to fix problems. It is the executive director's fault. The board president isn't a strong leader. The board is weak. Our competition encroached on our territory or poached our best fill-in-the-blank. The next generation doesn't share the same values. True or not, spending time blaming others does not more than attempt to assuage the speaker and audience of responsibility. Looking for a scapegoat is counterproductive and bad for morale. The first step on the road to renewal is to stop the blame game.

2. Tell the Truth

The truth hurts sometimes. Is your mission complete or irrelevant? Is your service delivery model outdated? Has politics eroded your core? Do you have a great organization but lousy pr and marketing? Why aren't you attractive to the next generation or users/volunteer/donors? What is the real story of how you got to this crossroads?

3. Take off the Rose Color Glasses and Conduct an Unbiased, Accurate As-Is Baseline

You need real numbers. Make sure they are accurate and not artificially inflated or deflated. What are your actual costs? What are your real revenue streams? Make sure to note what is conditional or finite in time and any assumptions made in calculating the numbers. Whatever your measures for success, how have you done over the last 10, 7, 5, 2, 1 years. You can't map a course if you don't know your trending and where you are starting from.

4. Scan the internal and external environments

You are looking to identify internal and external partners. Who already gets "it" and embraces change inside the organization? Who is on your internal A team? Do you have people on the team who are pivotal? How can you ensure they will see the transformation through? Where are their misfits between people and positions? Can their jobs be adjusted to better fit their skill sets?

Who are outside partners with whom you can work? Who are you serving? Who are your donors? What volunteers have skills sets that are needed for the process? Who are your potential partners at other organizations? Who are your competitors? Are there any politics of which you need to be cognizant?

5. Make sure your Leadership has Vision, Strength, Stamina and Courage

Without a brave leader to lead the process, no change can be effectuated. Does the leader of this enormous undertaking have what is required? Does he or she have the time, dedication, strength and resourcefulness to take on this reformation? Can they clearly, passionately and effectively lay out the vision and communicate? Do they have followers of the necessary caliber and mass to truly bring about a change?

6. Assess the power politics

What are your assets? Do you have any leverage? Are you willing to play hardball? What short-term hits are you willing to take?

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7. Remove, sideline and neutralize inhibitors of real change

If possible, the first choice is to remove those who are impediments to change. For those who can't be removed or who are obstacles, they need to either be sidelined or neutralized. Organizations are bigger than any one person or group of people and once the board has approved a strategy, dissent must be quelled.

8. Appoint a whipping boy/girl

Every successful process that I have ever been part of or witnessed has someone, who isn't looking to win popularity contest, cracking the whip, holding up a mirror and otherwise keeping the organization on course. This person better have thick skin and a strong sense of purpose and vision.

9. Set attainable and realistic timeframes and goals

Transformation has to happen in stages and be broken down into achievable steps set on a realistic timetable. It makes the process less daunting and allows those leading the charge to measure their progress along the way.

10. Bring people along

One of the biggest mistakes leaders make is not communicating enough with their various constituencies – staff, donors, members, volunteers and communities-at-large. Get buy-in from key constituencies. Talk about the process. Keep everyone informed each step of the way. The various audiences will require a different communication plan.

Transformation is not for the faint of heart. To successfully transform any group, especially one that has a long history and continuity of donor families and/or volunteers, requires honesty, vision, strength, courage, discipline and excellent communication. If you are willing to manage the arduous process, deal with some headaches along the way and take a few short term hits, your organization can redefine, recreate and reintroduce itself to be current and relevant for 2011 and beyond.

Nanette Fridman is President of Fridman Strategies, a firm that provides consulting services to mission driven organizations. She can be reached by email at fridmanstrategies@gmail.com.

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