
A CRISIS OF CONVERSATION: SHAPING A NEW NARRATIVE FOR CANADA'S CHARITABLE AND NONPROFIT SECTOR

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I HATE DINNER PARTIES.

Actually I hate a certain moment during dinner parties – that moment when two people who have just met reach that inevitable point in conversation where *the* question comes up: “So what is it that you do?”

“I work for a nonprofit,” I respond – with audible reluctance. In my mind, I am preparing myself for one of three possible scenarios.

The first – and most frequent – is the classic avoidance scenario, which is typically employed by people who are more interested in talking about themselves or things that they are most familiar with, which is not usually the nonprofit sector. Having inadvertently stumbled into the nonprofit abyss, my new acquaintance will try to take evasive action by segueing to a more neutral topic of conversation – say the ethics of assisted suicide or the results of the most recent election. If in the company of another individual, my new acquaintance will look to that other person to rescue him from this crisis of conversation. Invariably she does, usually by sharing that she is a dental hygienist. Her perfect teeth seal the deal and the conversation carries on.

The second scenario, although more frequent, is arguably more challenging. Instead of avoidance, there is a palpable sense of curiosity in my acquaintance's voice. Then the questions start. Do you get paid to do that? You must really love working with people. Doesn't the government do that? How much of my money actually goes to those starving children in Africa?

Finding myself on the defensive, I respond to the litany of questions as best I can, conscious of the fact that while my responses reflect my own individual experience, they are likely to be perceived by my new acquaintance as indicative of the entire sector. Yes, I do get paid to do that. I like people just fine. Have you seen the results of the last election? The government most certainly does not do that and will most certainly be doing even less of it. At this point I'm exhausted. I concede defeat before even getting to the question about those starving children in Africa, leaving them yet again to fend for themselves as I take a rather large sip from my glass of wine.

The third scenario offers a rare reprieve and a little hope. Although infrequent, these unexpected interactions with people who genuinely get it – who appreciate the nuances of

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the nonprofit sector, who can read beyond a sensational headline, and who understand that sometimes you need to spend money to raise money – validate my perspective. The trouble with this scenario is that in most cases I’m preaching to the converted and the conversation may not broaden to include people who we are more likely to encounter in scenarios one and two.

It really is a crisis of conversation. And it’s not just at dinner parties. If Canada’s charities and nonprofits – and the people who are engaged in their work – do not make a more concerted and collective effort to better define our sector and the impact of our work, others will continue to define it for us. They will make assumptions and presumptions of fact, often with little or no context. They will share their perceptions with others, who will share them with others still, until they become the status quo.

How can we change the often deeply rooted (mis)perceptions of our sector in the minds of governments, the media, donors, funders, and the general public – perceptions that organizations can deliver on missions with little or no overhead, that people working in nonprofits could not make it in the business world, and that all we do is feed the hungry and clothe the poor? At first blush, it’s overwhelming. But the solution is simple. In fact, it’s exceedingly simple. At the risk of being charged as a heretic amongst my fellow communications professionals, the solution does not involve a national public awareness campaign. No press releases, no interviews with the media, not even a letter to your Member of Parliament. Why? Because they are not the problem. We are the problem – and as simple as it sounds, we are also the solution. Let me explain.

For too long we have blamed external audiences – whether the media, funders, or the general public – for not understanding us, what we do, how we work, and the contributions we make to Canadian society and the economy. While there may be truth to this, I would argue that a deeper and more profound truth is that we don’t really understand ourselves as a sector. While we may clearly understand the missions and mandates of our own individual organizations, we often struggle, or don’t even bother, to reconcile how our piece fits into the larger picture. And for good reasons. There are far too many things on our plates as it is. There is not enough time. We do not have the resources (whether human, physical, or financial). We do not know where to start, or we are too busy “doing the work.” But without this clear understanding of ourselves, our scale, our influence, and, indeed – our collective impact – how can we expect to create a clear, coherent and strong narrative for the charitable and nonprofit sector?

The truth is, we can’t. We have no hope of shifting the conversation until we realize and begin to leverage some important facts about ourselves as a sector.

WE ARE AN ECONOMIC POWERHOUSE

We are a formidable sector. Just look at the numbers. They are daunting – and, dare I say, impressive. Canada’s charitable and nonprofit sector is huge. In fact, per capita, it is the second largest in the world. Only the Netherlands has a higher ratio of people who are directly involved in charitable and nonprofit work (HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector, 2008). Many people (including more than a few who actually work in the sector) may be surprised to learn that more than two million Canadians earn a living while working at a charity or nonprofit, and that our sector contributes more than \$106 billion or 7.1% of

our country's gross domestic product each year. Paid employees in the sector outnumber the total combined workforces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland and Labrador. They also outnumber employees in the country's entire construction and hospitality industries combined (HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector, 2008). We also leverage the support of millions of volunteers every year, a distinct characteristic of our sector that alone contributes the equivalent of \$14 billion to the Canadian economy annually (Hall, Lasby, Ayer, & Gibbons, 2009).

WE FACE SIMILAR CHALLENGES

Another critical fact that we must understand about our sector is that despite our differences, whether in scope, scale, budget, or mandate, Canada's charities and nonprofits are facing many of the same challenges and that collective approaches are necessary in order for any real and lasting progress to be made to address them.

Over the past 18 months, I have had the opportunity to participate in several of the Imagine Canada regional forums and community conversations that took place across the country as part of its National Engagement Strategy. Whether in St. John's, Toronto, Saskatoon, or Whitehorse, I was struck by the similarity of the experiences and of the challenges that organizations and regions were facing. Regardless of scope, mandate, size or budget, organizations across the country were dealing with securing stable and reliable funding, recruiting and retaining qualified staff, and finding ways to meaningfully engage volunteers.

It was interesting for me, having had the opportunity to sit in on a number of these forums, to witness those moments when people would realize that they were not alone, that there were other organizations in their community who were dealing with similar issues, and that perhaps they could work together, share ideas, or at the very least exchange business cards with a promise to connect. We need to do more of that.

WE ARE DIFFERENT AND YET THE SAME

As a sector, we often define ourselves in terms of what we are not (nonprofit or non-government) and on an individual level; organizations often slot themselves into sub-sectors or niche categories based upon their principal area of activity or the people and communities who they serve. We identify ourselves strongly with the arts, with the environment, with social housing, or international development, for example. While there are plenty of valid reasons for us to latch onto these particular areas of activity, sometimes this narrow scope prevents us from seeing the bigger picture and feeling a sense of belonging and connection to a much broader sector. When you peer out of the silos, you can see that despite our different missions and mandates, charities and nonprofits have a lot in common. We are present and actively engaged in every single community across this country: large and small, urban, rural, and remote. We are committed to making things better, to improving our environment, our cultural identities, or the lives of individuals. We are, in essence, part of a vast and often untapped network, one that is uniquely positioned and able to positively impact people, communities, and causes across this country and around the world. So why not use that network and each interaction with each other, our beneficiaries, our funders, our volunteers, and other stakeholders to reinforce and promote the idea that our sector and our work have collective value and impact? We must realize that each one of these interactions is an opportunity to shift the conversation.

These are just a few of many points to consider – there are countless other reasons for us to concern ourselves with building a stronger and more compelling narrative for our sector. And while the end goal may be to change the hearts and minds of Canadians and external stakeholders, we need to start by having that conversation with each other.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Having a better understanding of the bigger picture and seeing how we are all part of a broader sector is a good place to start – but it is not enough. We need to leverage these things and be much more deliberate and intentional in how we talk about our work and demonstrate our impact both with each other and with those external stakeholders.

Imagine how much more effectively we could communicate the collective impact and vital importance of our sector to governments, funders, donors, the media, and the general population if we just shifted the conversation from misperceived, vague, and often incorrect notions about our sector and our work to a more deliberate and conscious dialogue about our impact and vital role in Canadian society and to Canada's economy; to a conversation that is not afraid of tough questions but rather tackles them head on – that debunks myths, presents a sound argument, and appeals to reason. This is something that everyone can do – no matter if you are a program co-ordinator at a small nonprofit or the head of a national organization with thousands of members. Each of us has a role to play and a voice to be heard. Just imagine the responses you could get the next time you are at a dinner party and someone asks you what you do for a living.

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