

THE THIRD SECTOR REPORT

## Taking The Calculated Risk For Your Cause

By Jeffrey R. Wilcox, CFRE

When was the last time you heard those immortal words, “*But we’ve always done it this way,*” as the key reason to avoid a discussion that could result in a significant change?

For those causes that we believe in, volunteer for, and contribute to, the notion of change can be daunting. First, because it challenges tradition. Second, because it evokes emotional reactions. And, third, because it will most certainly require conversations, consensus-building, and conflict resolution. That’s hard work, and for many of us, we’re not looking for that in our community activities.

No matter your stance on the recent health care reform discussion, the processes associated with and the impact of discussing, proposing, and implementing changes to programs and activities that impact communities and affect the lives of people became evident.

The truth is: Nonprofit organizations face this same challenge, with equal passion and drama, each time a change to the core of their cause surfaces.

This column is the fifth in our series, “The Nonprofit Leader of the New Decade.” It is going to strongly suggest that the successful leader will have no choice but to take a calculated risk if their causes and the organizations that sustain them are to remain viable in an ever-changing community.

As Dr. Elisa Nicholas, chief executive officer of The Children’s Clinic in Long Beach, so aptly put it: “It’s a matter of knowing when to grow, when to slow and when to let go.” And, Elisa ought to know based on her 22-year track record of success.

The Children’s Clinic took a calculated risk as parents were turning to Elisa and her staff for information and help, not only for their children, but also for themselves and other family members. “We had to really take a good look at our cause. It was vital that we evolved our original view of a child in medical need into a holistic view of a healthy child living in a family and community context.”

The Children’s Clinic made some extremely difficult decisions to redefine and expand their services to assure that children were living in a healthy environment which would include defined services to adults and family members.

There is no doubt that this was not an easy decision. But, it is a decision that clearly represents a unique loyalty to the cause of children’s health in our community.

Patrice Wong, executive director at Long Beach Day Nursery, began her position at a time when one of our community’s longest-standing nonprofits was at the crossroads in its fiscal viability and long-term sustainability.

Providing affordable care for working parents is a challenge to not only all nonprofit organizations dedicated to the cause, but also to employers who recognize the financial and family impact of quality care while away from home and school. Long Beach Day Nursery, like so many other care providers, also

found themselves faced with a myriad of situations challenging the children in their care. There were health, financial, safety, and family conflict issues, among many others, that demanded attention.

“We made an incredibly difficult decision at a time when other similar organizations were expanding services,” Patrice explains. “We decided to deepen our services to children rather than to broaden them.”

For the board of Long Beach Day Nursery that meant reducing the number of children served as well as closing a service site. Some could say that decision flies in the face of need, but others, including me, would say that says something about loyalty to a cause.

Patrice explains the calculated risk best when she remarks, “We decided the stretch should occur in quality of care, not a stretch in slots of care.”

There is no doubt this was a painful decision; but, the results of that decision has maintained an accreditation for Long Beach Day Nursery that is the highest in our nation for quality care. It also has paved the way for an organization that stands at the threshold of its centennial of service to our community.

The board at Musical Theatre West knew that the cause of preserving a uniquely American art form would be challenged if growing audiences of Generation X and Generation Y theatre-goers were not part of the organization’s sustainability planning. Last year, Musical Theatre West opened the production of “Rent” which would symbolize the most significant departure from its typical seasons that have entertained and educated audiences for decades.

Founding executive director and producer, Paul Garman, will tell you that this was a significant risk and was the center of lively discussion. The result was a business development decision that dramatically changed the demographic of a Musical Theatre West audience.

The biggest learning in this process according to Lucy Daggett, chairman of the Governance Committee, was the organization’s need to change its evaluation criteria. “Using old criteria, some would say our risk wasn’t worth it. Using new evaluation criteria, it was priceless.”

Every nonprofit leader realizes that the idea of the “nimble organization” is a whole different ballgame when there are volunteers, community leaders, contributors and stakeholders involved. But, the nonprofit leader of the new decade reminds everyone that the great organizations serving our community were the result of a few people willing to take a huge risk because they believed so deeply in their cause. The future generation is expecting nothing less of us.

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