
To be Discussed over Lunch

Posted by Paul Shoemaker - 2008/03/10 14:59

I felt like I've read this piece before, i.e. Bruce Sievers' 1998 piece "If Pigs Could Fly." Or that is the way it felt for the first 80 pages (I'll get to page 81 in a moment). Let me start this way ... Many of us – Mario Morino, Vanessa Kirsch, Jed Emerson, and other people I would proudly call colleagues – would each readily acknowledge, and we have, that we said a few things in the late 90's that showed we were a little "too far out on our skis." That was the distant past and we are now all doing the hard, day-to-day, on-the-ground work to help effective non-profits better achieve their missions. I have a few issues with Mr. Edwards' piece and one area of strong agreement.

I look forward to having lunch with Michael, just like I did with Bruce awhile back. Among the topics I'd like to discuss –

- * "Business" practices are not about changing a non-profit's mission or forcing it to generate revenue, etc. It is about recognizing that non-profits are organizations, yes businesses, with vital social purposes. And we should strive to help them build the strongest possible organization to optimize their mission. There are so many ways in which the terms "business, markets," etc. are misunderstood

- * Keep the private and civil sectors separate? Certainly in some cases, but I think Mr. Edwards misses a big opportunity if that is the default m.o. for the future. The only way our biggest social problems are going to get solved is by the non-profit, for-profit, and public sectors coming together in, e.g. public-private partnerships like www.thrivebyfivewa.org in WA state.

- * I worry that pieces like this can do more to burn, than to build, bridges

- * And I so often wonder, after reading pieces like this, how much time the author has spent working directly, first-hand with those that he criticizes. If he did, I'm not sure how could have that many misperceptions

As I was making notes to myself in the margin, I felt like the piece was more of a) a criticism of the media's portrayal and hyperbole vs. actual practice, b) an expose about harmful private sector approaches, and c) and most importantly, a rallying cry for more investment in social justice funding. All 3 of those might be valid propositions, but the opening assertion is a criticism of "philanthrocapitalism." I read more about a, b, and c than I did about philanthropic practices.

I continued to make such notes until I got about 1/3 of the way down page 81 and then all I could do for the next several pages was write "Yes, yes, yes!" in the margins. I loved what Michael wrote on the next 4 pages and I definitely agree with the principles he suggests. So I'm ready and willing to pick up where the piece left off instead of dwell on much of the first 80 pages which I felt had a good deal of misperceptions and side agendas. Michael, I look forward to lunch!

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