

OPINION

## Strong Messages Mean Strong Leaders

By REBECCA K. LEET

**T**HE PRESIDENT of the United States spends part of almost every day working on the messages he wants to get out to the public. Hillary Rodham Clinton, John McCain, and Barack Obama know that to become the next president they need to devote a good part of their days to developing and delivering specific messages.

Yet few presidents of nonprofit organizations spend time each month—or, in most instances, ever—working on their message. They ignore this task but then are confused about why grant makers, policy makers, or journalists ignore them. They bemoan poorly attended programs yet forget they were too busy to create a message pitching the program to participants' desires. They complain about board members not "talking up" the organization without acknowledging that they haven't given them sharp messages to deliver.

Nonprofit leaders don't create and use messages, even though they acknowledge their importance. A 2005 survey found that two-thirds of nonprofit organizations don't use agreed-upon messages, even though they recognize the need for them.

Yet the right message can help organizations achieve ends they could now only dream of. In 2003, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, in Washington, wanted to radically change the way America prevents child abuse by focusing primarily on the early child-care system to do the job rather than relying on the judicial system.

When it started a collaborative effort to make that push, the center armed itself with a strategic message—both one overarching message and related ones directed at the desires of the people they hoped to activate.

The strategic message helped its audiences—early-childhood educators, government agencies, and child advocates—quickly and clearly understand how the change would help them achieve their own goals. As a result, those educators, advocates, and agencies joined the center at a remarkable rate: Within three years, active efforts were under way in 23 states and within the federal government to support the fundamental change.

In today's challenging communication environment, the failure of nonprofit executives to assume leadership responsibility for developing a message arguably borders on malfeasance.

We are living through the fourth major communications revolution in human history; the primary responsibility for navigating an organization through the increasing upheaval lies with the chief executive. The development of a strategic message—that set of statements that lays the foundation for conveying in-depth information—is no longer a task to delegate to a charity's public-relations expert. It is now a fundamental responsibility of presidents and executive directors.

It is as fundamental as strategic plan-

ning. Development of a charity's message complements and completes strategic planning.

Planning helps an organization align internal resources effectively and efficiently to meet goals. "Strategic messaging" helps an organization attain goals by aligning it with external resources—people outside the organization whose actions cause the changes the organization seeks.

Both are essential for success in a world of information overload, increased competition for resources, and shrinking resources caused by recession.

The importance of a strong message is reason enough for a chief executive to be accountable for developing one. But the chief executive needs to play a key role for other reasons. Developing a message often challenges long-standing elements of an organization's culture. In the process of creating a message, a group may realize it must change how it spends money and where people devote their time. And in most cases, conceiving a strong message requires the active involvement of people from a range of departments in an organization.

Nonprofit leaders may have to take the initiative in changing deeply ingrained corporate cultures and, in some instances, moralistic attitudes if they want their organizations to develop successful messages. Following are the most common cultural traps that charities must escape to create effective messages:

- Expecting people to do the right thing for the right reason—as the group defines the "right reason." This mindset leads organizations to ignore the reality that self-interest drives what individuals pay attention to and act upon. Not surprisingly, organizational messages fall on deaf ears when groups try to catch the attention of audiences by speaking about what interests the charity instead of the audience.

- Nonprofit workers are strangely blind to the fact that they themselves operate from a self-interest orientation. That's why an environmentalist is more likely to work for American Rivers than the Children's Defense Fund. Self-interest is not, inherently, a character flaw, and its importance cannot be ignored in developing a persuasive message.

- Telling people what they need to do rather than connecting with what they want to do. People are often more motivated by their desires than by their needs. That's why some people who need a car buy a Hummer, not a Honda, and why some people with depression forsake their medication because they want to be "normal." Continually focusing on what people should do because

they need to do it and ignoring the power of desire as a motivator may seem righteous, but it is a recipe for failure in getting across a message.

- Assuming that creating awareness or providing information will, by itself, accomplish a charity's mission. In fact, most nonprofit groups rely on people to take some kind of action as part of carrying out their missions. Creating awareness, informing, educating, and persuading are only steppingstones on the path to action. Unfortunately, many nonprofit groups cannot articulate what action they are trying to effect. Others may be able to articulate it but shrink from doing so because clearly articulating the action may cause conflict in the organization. Developing a message that succeeds in moving people to take a desired action requires a clear focus on what that action is.

- Deciding to do something—like create a new program—without fully assessing the financial and other implications of doing so. An organization must be certain that it can and will deliver what its audiences desire or it won't get sustained action from them. Once a group has identified what people want, it needs to determine that it has the time, money, expertise, and other re-

sources to deliver results that match up with those desires—or its message will be empty words that fail to generate the sustained action needed to make change.

- Providing the maximum amount of information as quickly as possible in the belief that that is key to communication success. The truth is that more is often less when it comes to communicating. That is especially true when developing a strategic message, whose purpose is to connect with and engage key supporters while laying a foundation for delivering the organization's in-depth information. The process of capturing and holding attention relies upon a listener being able to easily grasp what is being said—and that is easier to do when sentences are short and simple.

- Making communications a second-tier function, not a strategic component of a charity's mission and not worthy of attention from the highest levels of the organization's inner circle. As anyone knows whose technological problems have cut them off from e-mail for a few days, when you aren't heard, you disappear in today's world. It moves on without you. The best programs, the most persuasive policy positions, the most worthy causes—are invisible if the messages that carry them into the world are not as strategically crafted as the programs and policies themselves.

Businesses are increasingly recogniz-

ing the importance of strategic messages, and that same approach can benefit nonprofit organizations without undermining their focus on charitable causes.

Ann Cramer, director of IBM corporate community relations and a former member of the national United Way board of directors, urges nonprofit groups to embrace the development of strategic messages as a standard operating procedure.

"You remember when we all got the managing-by-objectives mind-set: mission, vision, goals, objectives. They became a mind-set. And diversity: You enter a room now and you notice whether there are any women, any minorities. That's a mind-set. Nonprofits have to get the mind-set when thinking about messaging," she says.

Strategic-message development today is where strategic planning was in the mid-1980s, when it was just emerging as a function that smart chief executives and boards were embracing but others struggled to understand.

Large numbers of nonprofit groups embraced strategic planning when hundreds of new organizations were sprouting and creating competition for existing ones. Long-established organizations found themselves struggling to maintain their place in the world. Newer entities began to siphon off grant makers, volunteers, clients, activists, employees, and board members who had once been "theirs." They had to change the way they had always operated. Most well-managed groups eventually adopted strategic planning as an essential way to maintain and expand their competitive position. It became a standard practice in the nonprofit world.

Just as strategic planning taught nonprofit groups how to organize and focus their functions internally to achieve their missions, developing a strategic message teaches them how to organize and focus externally by recognizing who their supporters are and linking the organization's goals to what drives those people to take the action it seeks.

Today's challenge is more difficult than what faced nonprofit groups starting in the 1980s. The attention and energy of the people whom charities consider "theirs" is being sought not merely by other nonprofit groups but by virtually every entity in society. The ever-growing tidal wave of information that engulfs every person every day drowns out the messages of all but the most skillful nonprofit organizations. Those that survive will be led by chief executives who—like the individuals who want to be president—recognize that developing the message is a key component of leadership.

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**MY VIEW**

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