

# Ten Nonprofit Myths – and How to Debunk Them

Be sure you're not, consciously or unconsciously, giving credence to these misconceptions.

By Don Knapp



Many nonprofits underperform because they act on assumptions that are really myths. Here are some of the myths and the realities that, if addressed, can help improve your organization's performance:

**Myth 1:** Quality management policies and practices don't apply to nonprofit organizations.

**Reality:** Perhaps the most vital resource for nonprofits is the work of Dr. W. Edwards Deming, who taught the importance of quality management ([www.deming.org](http://www.deming.org)). Eliminate fear in the workplace, and constantly improve your organization through continuous learning, he said. View the organization not as a collection of separate elements but as a complex system of components that interact with each other and their environment. That's the best possible advice for anyone leading or managing a nonprofit.

**Myth 2:** Nonprofits should maintain the operating tactics they've always used.

**Reality:** Organizational strategies must change with changing condi-

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tions, which could occur if, for example, a need has been met, an executive director leaves, or a donor provides a major gift for a specific purpose.

**Myth 3:** Boards should select and retain members they know and with whom they're comfortable.

**Reality:** Boards should rotate their members, using staggered terms, to create a constant infusion of new blood and fresh perspectives. They should make an effort to seek out board members with diverse backgrounds and insights.

**Myth 4:** Teams stifle the contributions, recognition, and advancement of individuals.

**Reality:** Teams, including thinkers from inside and outside the organization, can accomplish far more than individuals alone. A team leader should tap people's insights, engage them in dialogue, and guide them toward solutions. Anonymous peer ratings help evaluate the contributions and collaborative skills of members.

**Myth 5:** Innovative results can be produced only by creative people.

**Reality:** Anyone with average intelligence can be innovative, given the right conditions. Supervisors

should let employees collect information and propose their own ideas about how to achieve goals.

**Myth 6:** Customers don't know enough about nonprofits to evaluate them.

**Reality:** Regular feedback from customers, visitors, employees, donors, volunteers, and other stakeholders keeps nonprofits on course. Listening to your customers' input is one of the best ways to keep improving your organization's performance.

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**Myth 7:** Marketing means that if you promote something, people will embrace it.

**Reality:** Marketing means more than promotion. Promotion may attract visitors once, but if nonprofits don't manage the four Ps of marketing—product, place, price, and promotion—people may not return. In the nonprofit world, the "product" may be a program, exhibit, or service. "Place" is more than a facility. It's the organization's delivery system. Marketing means everything the consumer experiences en route to an engagement or transaction.

**Myth 8:** Donors are useful only as financial contributors.

**Reality:** Donors have talents, insights, and stakeholder interest that

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can be useful on boards, in advisory roles, and as survey respondents. Most donors are more interested in substance than recognition. Their ongoing, positive engagement with your organization will build a positive relationship.

**Myth 9:** Volunteers can't be treated in the same way as paid employees.

**Reality:** Hold volunteers to the same high standards of performance as your paid employees. When you do so, you'll enhance volunteers' motivation and effectiveness.

**Myth 10:** Sustainability is too nebulous, idealistic, and costly.

**Reality:** Sustainability means balancing economic, environmental, and human needs for present

and future generations. It can begin with simple acts such as recycling solid waste and expand into resource conservation of all kinds, including green building practices. ■

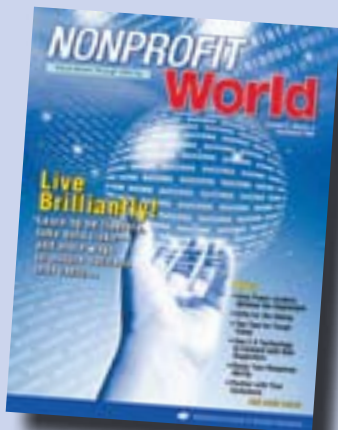
*This article has been adapted from a presentation by Don Knapp (www.innovative-nonprofits.com).*



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