

Engagement and Nonprofits



INTRODUCTION

Although *Enterprise Engagement: The Textbook* focuses primarily on the for-profit sector, the principles are no less critical for nonprofits and not-for-profits – in fact, they’re probably even more important. Many people involved with nonprofits and not-for-profits (although certainly not all) work for less than the going rate for their profession, and many of their constituencies are volunteers and donors. Charities may have the toughest engagement challenge of all: getting people to donate their time and money.

By nonprofit or not-for-profit, we mean any organization that qualifies for such designation under relevant tax laws and whose prime goal is to advance a cause, candidate, group, or other related effort. For purposes of brevity, we will hereafter refer to all such organizations as “nonprofits.”

The Enterprise Engagement framework is entirely relevant to nonprofits, as are all of the tactics outlined in this edition, and some others not yet covered. What differs is the nature of the constituencies or audiences and their relationships to the organization rather than human nature.

THE NONPROFIT FRAMEWORK

Here’s a quick overview of how the Enterprise Engagement framework applies to nonprofit organizations.

Leadership and Coaching. If leadership and coaching are important in the for-profit world, they’re mission-critical in the nonprofit world. The driving force for people willing to work for nonprofits often is their conviction that they’re doing good. On the one hand, nonprofits have to engage people based on a vision and purpose. On the other, since nonprofits don’t always pay as well as organizations in the private sector, they often have to recruit people who lack the critical management skills to properly engage people at the front lines. These front-line people are critical to fundraising, recruitment and volunteer/people management. They need even more coaching and assessment than typical managers because in this case the audience they’re managing often consists of over-qualified, under-paid employees or volunteers.

Audience. The audience in the nonprofit sector is obviously different because it includes volunteers and donors who have no direct financial reason to engage. And in the case of those nonprofits that can’t pay rates competitive with for-profit organizations, they have to find other ways to attract quality people.

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Assessment. Because engagement is so critical to the success of nonprofits, gauging how people feel can provide invaluable information for executives in terms of detecting problematic front-line management or other issues affecting performance. A non-intrusive strategy for “taking the temperature” of your organization and donors and identifying the best ways to engage with them provides invaluable insight into potential problems and solutions.

The Engagement Business Plan. Just as with any other business process, engagement strategies merit a formal plan that addresses all of the applicable issues in the engagement framework with the best possible tools. Generally, top management representing all parts of the organization determines the strategic vision and “brand” proposition – i.e., what the organization is promising people it will do. Then each department is charged with having a plan for its own group related to its specific business goals, from volunteer recruitment and fundraising to delivering the promised services of the organization, etc. As with any engagement strategy, it pays to have not only a specific objective, but also single out a couple of behaviors critical to achieving that objective. The key to connecting these is to have department heads in regular contact to maximize alignment and minimize obstacles.

Communications. Nonprofits face all of the same communications issues as for-profits, except even more so in the sense that resources are often limited. Social media has created a powerful new tool to build communities and communicate on a permission basis, but it also places a greater burden on providing true value to the participants. Again, engagement forces a fundamental shift in communication from the old focus on selling to engaging, informing and empowering people and providing the satisfaction that can come from being part of a community. Having an engagement web portal for the community is critical to engagement, because it becomes the focal points for assessment, learning, collaboration and other tactics that foster alignment and commitment.

Learning. One of the great benefits of working in any capacity for a nonprofit is the opportunity to learn. Because of some of the factors outlined above, these organizations sometimes put relatively inexperienced people in relatively important positions, creating the opportunity to address higher-level issues than what that person might encounter at a larger, for-profit organization. This in turn means nonprofits shoulder the responsibility to continually focus on how best to equip people with the capabilities they need and who can realistically apply to their jobs. Building learning into nonprofit engagement strategies can have long-term benefits by creating more capable people.

Collaboration and Innovation. Almost no engagement tactic is better suited to the nonprofit community than collaboration and innovation. Many nonprofit positions require laborious work. Giving all employees the opportunity to be part of a continual brainstorming process provides a welcome break and fosters task value, more positive work communication and, even more importantly, invaluable ideas for organizations.

Recognition. By itself, recognition can appear an ineffective band-aid; in fact, it's a critical part of an overall engagement strategy when it's built in the culture, overseen by well-trained managers and sincerely attempts to make people feel good in a way that also rubs off on their significant others who so often are affected by one's work.

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Rewards. No empirical evidence better supports the importance of rewards than the role they play in the nonprofit sector, where compensation is often below average compared with the for-profit world. Because of this, nonprofits have to be particularly mindful of how they use rewards, as the risk of success and failure are heightened. It's also a challenge to justify their use to board members concerned about, budgets, compliance with tax laws and ethical behavior. The most effective nonprofit reward programs are those used as part of formal programs available to all audiences - create special lasting experiences, memories or carefully selected rewards that live on in their homes; become reminders of accomplishment; use inventive rewards tailored to the demographics of the organization. There's an entire industry of rewards program providers that specialize in this domain.

Return on investment. The same ways of measuring engagement and its benefits apply in all sectors. Engagement strategies yield highly meaningful data on actual behaviors and provide measurable results in terms of fundraising, membership, volunteer activity, etc. Having such data is also important in terms of compliance with possible ethical standards related to efforts to engage donors, employees and volunteers.