

Episode 10: Programs as a Core Strategy

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This is a transcript of Nancy Bacon, Sarah Brooks, and JoAnn Crabtree talking about program development on the Nonprofit Radio Show podcast. You can listen [here](#) or however you prefer to listen to podcasts.

Nancy Bacon

Hello, and welcome to the Nonprofit Radio Show, a podcast with tips and tools for small nonprofits. If you feel in the dark about how to run a nonprofit, sunshine is on its way. I'm Nancy Bacon. And I'm joined by Sarah Brooks and JoAnn Crabtree. So far we've been talking about strategy, fundraising, financial strength, and boards. And each time we have a conversation, we keep going back to the same underlying principle that we haven't yet talked about. And that is good programs as a core strategy.

Sarah

What do you mean by “program,” Nancy?

Nancy

What you do to deliver your mission. I think a program is the work of the organization. So, for example, a food bank that is delivering fresh vegetables in culturally responsive ways, a community festival that is bringing together multiple generations, an educational program that's introducing children to state parks. That's what I think a program is. Now you might be asking, “What is a good program?” And I think a good program is a program that makes a difference, you see the difference, and you're able to describe it to someone. It's delivered at a high level of quality and integrity. You feel really good about it. It's created in relationship with the people that you're serving. So, you're not just doing it because somebody at your board had a great idea to do something. You have built that program in partnership with the people that you're serving.

Sarah

When I think about a good program, I think about those where you say, “oh, why didn't I think of that. That's such a brilliant idea.” And I also have been around nonprofits enough now to know that that means there was a lot of trial and error, and thought and redesign, and evaluation and redesign that went into making that good program. In my opinion, a good program is one that in the end has this elegant, simple, straightforward clarity about it. But that behind the scenes was a whole lot of discipline, and work and effort in making sure it actually was helping move the needle on progress on your mission.

Nancy

I actually also think that good programs is a core strategy, as well as a core *fundraising* strategy. It so happens that in my career, I've raised a lot of money. And I've always done it as a program person. I've always run the programs for which I was raising money for. And so I was able to tell funders about the people that I was serving and the looks on their faces. When I explained this, or we did that, I was able to provide strong information about the data that we were pulling in together. So, I've been raising money as a program director with a strategy of running good programs.

Sarah

Well, it's funny, Nancy, because I'm sort of the direct opposite. I've always had fundraising or development or something like that in my job description or job title. And yet, I always make sure I have my hands in programs. It's one of the superpowers I think we have working at a small nonprofit organization -- that we all have to make sure we're providing a good program for our mission. And that makes fundraising incredibly more straightforward. I have all the stories right at my fingertips. I can't imagine working for an organization where I would have to go take a tour of what we do. It's just present right in front of me. It makes the telling of those stories incredibly authentic. I can talk about what isn't working with a lot of honesty. And also what is working with fresh, clear “I was there” examples. And that makes fundraising so much easier. I actually have started to tell people that part of your fundraising strategy and your work plan should include spending a chunk of time where you just analyze, do I have good programs?

Are we running the right programs for our mission. And if we are, that is a fundamental basis for great fundraising.

Nancy

And to go back to your board strategy and fundraising having your board involved in those programs is also very powerful. I served on a board with a board member who never quite got it. And he was asking funny questions at board meetings. He was challenging the budget and all of that. Finally, a few of us said to him, "Come join some of these programs. Attend that Wednesday event, and go to that thing on the weekend and get involved in the programs." And you know what-- he did, and he became the biggest champion for that organization. He was able to raise money, he was able to build community because he deeply understood what the organization did. It's a great board strategy.

JoAnn

Programs invite innovation. Right now we're in a highly innovative time. The way we've been delivering our programs may no longer apply at all. We may be able to tweak that program and still deliver it in a different way. But in other ways, we've had to totally redo and come up new programs. Now we're going do this. Now we're going do that instead. So during this time of forced innovation, let's remember to carry that forward as we move out of the pandemic and make it standard practice-- to constantly innovate and improve our programs,

Sarah

I think that's a really important point, JoAnn. I can tell you you're not running a good program if you're running the same program you've been running for the last five years in the same way. You only can run a good program if you're constantly listening, constantly having your antenna out for how can we make it better. What can we do different? Who are we not serving that we want to be serving? What needs are we not yet meeting, and then adapting it. So, you can have the basis of a good program that stays the same over a really long period of time. But a good program is one that's constantly adapting.

Nancy

I think good programs is also a great communication strategy. You're almost a laboratory of ideas and data and feedback. You're collecting information constantly, when you're running good programs. We talked about the importance for small nonprofits, to engage in advocacy and to talk to funders about their work --your good programs is producing exactly the kind of information that they need to hear. So, integrating your communication strategy into your good program delivery is really powerful.

Sarah

I also think it's the best way to attract a collaborator. We're seeing so many great examples right now in this COVID time of organizations finding new and innovative partnerships. And I'm finding that in most cases, someone is coming to organizations that they know do good programs. That's the first place you turn when you think who do we want to collaborate with on this? First question is who's out there who knows how to run high quality service delivery for a mission?

Nancy

Now I know that good is subjective. So what is good to me may not be good to you. And to me, that's an invitation for conversation. That would be a phenomenal staff conversation, board conversation, community conversation. What does good mean?

Sarah

A few years ago, I worked with a board member who, at every meeting, when I would say I think this is a good program, that I think this is a good thing for us to be doing, he would question me and say, Sarah, whose definition of good are we using? How do you know your definition of good is the right one. And instead of becoming defensive, I learned quickly to open the space for conversation and say, "Well, let's talk about it. Who is it serving? How effective is it? Does it seem to be moving us toward our mission? Are there these cumulative benefits we

didn't even know about? And let's talk about it.” So, I love the word good. Use it strategically, as this great way to spark conversation, as it will the minute you say, I think this is good. Hopefully, someone in your organization will say “Well, what do you mean?” And then you get to have this bigger conversation.

Nancy

It also invites the ability to talk about what is good enough. We're such overachievers in the nonprofit world. And sometimes we don't go to market with our ideas because we're holding back. We're waiting for it to be better, better, better. So it's also important for us to know when is it good enough.

JoAnn

Yeah, so the “good enough” piece, absolutely. We do want to take our programs to market, and by market, I’m really talking about serving our community. We want to get there, we don't want to just keep fine-tuning. Instead, let's do the best we can get it out there, get some feedback, go from there, and continue to refine and build that program to be better and better all the time. And then if we find out that it doesn't meet the needs of our community, perhaps that is the program we need to reconsider and even drop.

Sarah

Sometimes a good program is one that was good 10 years ago for that time period and for that need in the community, and it's not good anymore. And as an organization, acknowledging that and moving on is a wonderful source of communication with your whole community about how things change over time.

JoAnn

Absolutely. When we hear the words, “We've always done it that way,” that's a great conversation starter for us to step back, take a look and say, “Hey, is this something we still

want to do? Is it still relevant? Is it still meeting the needs of our community?" And if not, reconsider.

Nancy

Our Word of the Week is obviously "Good." What I've been noticing, as I've been asking people recently about their programs, and I'll very innocently asked, "Is it a good program?"

JoAnn

That could be really threatening. Because in some ways, I almost feel like you're saying, Is it good enough? But I kind of get the feeling, that's probably not what you mean, Nancy?

Nancy

Not at all. I truly want to know, do you feel good about that program? And the curious thing to me is recently, people have been kind of cagey about it. They're like, well, it's, it's okay. It was good. Some people think it's okay. And I'm getting these indirect answers back that are not making me confident in their programs. Good is good. We aren't saying that your programs are the best. I'm not saying you need to be better than anyone else. That's suggesting competition. And that's not what I have in mind. What I have in mind is when you think about your program and the difference that it's making, you can honestly look back and say it is good.

JoAnn

So next steps that we have for you today are: take an honest assessment of your programs, invite feedback from the outside to know if you truly have a good program. Invite your board and leadership to participate in your programs and to really focus their support of the shift to making your programs better as one of your core strategies, and for your board members to understand your good programs by participating in them so that they can be advocates for your work outside of your organization. Share with your large network or community of practice what makes your programs good. Speak at conferences, send notes to funders in policymakers to share what's working. Talk to the people you serve. You know so much about what you're

trying to achieve. You care so much about why you're doing this work. You have a board and community who wants you to succeed and is helping you get there. You've got this.

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