

# Trust, Authenticity, and Community: *Our Vital Assets*

by William A. Schambra

**Editors' Note:** This article is adapted from prepared remarks before the Nonprofit Congress, held in Washington, DC on October 16–17, 2006 ([www.nonprofitcongress.org](http://www.nonprofitcongress.org)).

I'VE JUST FINISHED READING A BOOK WHICH I highly commend to you—*Applebee's America*, by journalist Ron Fournier, Doug Sosnick (who was pollster for President Clinton), and Matt Dowd (a Bush pollster). Their point is that in these times, people are extremely anxious, unsettled, and uncertain because of massive changes introduced by social and economic forces that seem to be beyond their control. At the same time, they've lost all confidence in the ability of the nation's large institutions—especially big corporations and big government—to do anything about that uncertainty, to restore some sort of order in their social universe.

For the authors, this presents a challenge that all major institutions of our society have to deal with. The organizations that rise to this challenge are the organizations that will thrive, going forward.

The key is this: Successful organizations will respond to the widespread sense of unsettledness and uncertainty by creating for their members and clients a new sense of community, belonging, and higher purpose. That goes for everybody—political organizations, businesses, houses of worship, everybody.

As the book notes, the restaurant Applebee's doesn't do well because of its wonderful cuisine—in fact, that's pretty mediocre. It does well because it aspires to be a true neighborhood bar and grill—in 1,700 neighborhoods across the country. Its slogan is “eating good in the neighborhood.” Its walls are decorated, not with the usual phony antiques you find in chain restaurants, but with pictures of the local little league teams, the local volunteer fire department, the neighborhood heroes. It presents itself as a genuine social center, not just an impersonal place to eat.

Similarly, one of the most successful churches today, Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in California, is a massive, multi-thousand member congregation. But it avoids seeming huge and overwhelming by centering its

life in hundreds of small groups. They meet frequently, bringing together in intense, face-to-face interaction people with common interests—single mothers with teen children, young professionals in between jobs, Bikers for Christ.

Whether it's selling mediocre food or a powerful religious message, the key is this: success depends on building a genuine sense of community and belonging, of answering widespread unsettledness and anxiety without becoming a large, impersonal organization like the corporate and government structures people have come to distrust so deeply.

Why is this important for the nonprofit sector? Because when the organizations in this room do your job right—and this applies particularly to you smaller nonprofits with genuine roots in the neighborhood—you have a corner on building community, purpose, and belonging. It's not just a means or an instrument for you to sell food or to fill church pews or to win elections. It's the very heart and soul of what you're doing. Business and politics have to stretch and contort themselves to achieve what you do every day in your regular work.

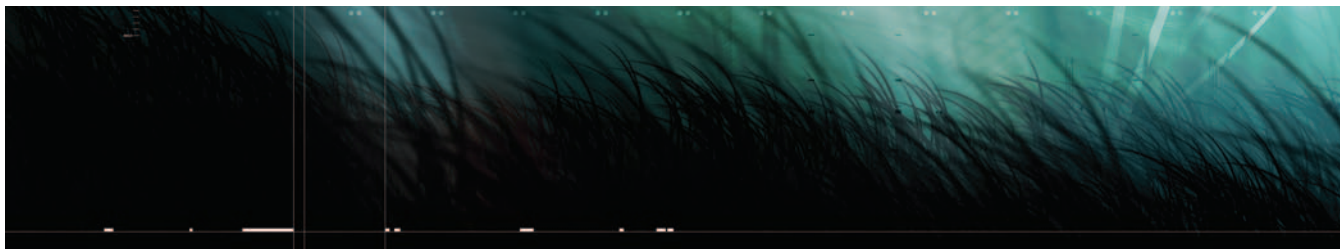
That distinct community-building mission is the proudest heritage of the nonprofit sector—it's been at the heart of civil society for centuries. As Mr. Walczak from the Codman Square Health Center reminded us yesterday at lunch, it was Alexis de Tocqueville who first observed that Americans have a particular genius for coming together in community to solve common problems, in spite of the fact that they may have been total strangers beforehand. He was trying to reassure his readers that democracy wouldn't mean total, dog-eat-dog individualism, but that Americans had figured out how to reform communities even where they hadn't existed before.

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tating or identifying too closely with one or the other of the two major institutions that have come into such disrepute today. Those are very real temptations, and they need to be resisted.

First, there is today a huge temptation to imitate business. So much of the discourse in the nonprofit world today takes its bearings from the corporate world. We need a business plan; we should call contributions "investments;" we need to be more entrepreneurial; we need to focus on generating revenue. I understand where a lot of the pressure to adopt this language and approach comes from—it comes from members of your boards; it comes from some of your larger supporters, especially foundations; and it comes from a large and growing body of consultants and advisers who specialize in this sort of service.

But let me point this out: ironically, nonprofits may be turning to the language of business at the precise moment that Americans are fed up with corporate snappy patter. For many Americans today, all that talk about efficiency and streamlining and the bottom line is just so much code for my neighbor losing his job today, and I'll probably lose mine tomorrow. Americans have already been unsettled and disquieted by an overdose of slick and dishonest corporate chatter about the wonders of dynamic change. The last thing they want is another dose of it from nonprofits, where they expect to find a safe haven, a sheltered community, in a world that otherwise seems to be forbidding, alien, and out of control.

Of course, you should become more efficient and effective in what you do. But don't let the language and techniques of business and organizational management push you into looking like just another big, bureaucratic machine at the precise moment that Americans are hungry for the sense of community that you truly offer.

The second temptation is the temptation to

imitate and identify with government. I understand that a considerable portion of nonprofit funding comes from government agencies. And I've heard some of the presenters at this conference suggest that the nonprofit sector won't be better off until government comes to be held in higher regard. Their argument is that you should lend your energies to persuading people that government is good. Granted, that's not exactly how they put it, because that advice comes with all sorts of fancy talk about reframing the issue and persuading people that we're really talking about public structures and not government. But it seems to me the bottom line is the same: you're being urged to push for greater government taxing and spending, however cleverly concealed by reframing, because you need the income. Even though government funding may be shrinking or you're level-funded, you're still dependent on that money, so, you are told, you should embark on a campaign to restore trust and confidence in government.

Again, big mistake, in my view. The nonprofit sector is identified with small, immediate community and compassion; government is viewed as distant, alienating, and unresponsive. It's been that way for decades, incidentally, through administrations from both parties. Skepticism about big government is often thought to be the hideous spawn of the Reagan Revolution. But in fact, the first shift toward skepticism came from the New Left back in the '60s, when it attacked Lyndon Johnson's Great Society as a manipulative, inhumane monstrosity, and opted instead for local, participatory democracy. And participatory democracy is exactly what the nonprofit sector provides, when it's at its best—it provides immediate, face-to-face civic engagement. You shouldn't compromise that by attaching your reputation for local democracy and community—your credibility—to a hulking derelict of

an institution that Americans have long since decided doesn't care about them and can't do anything to address their anxiety and unsettledness.

But now let me put in conservatism's bid for your friendship. There is a strain of conservative thought, going back to a booklet published in the mid-70s by theologian Richard John Neuhaus and sociologist Peter Berger called *To Empower People*, which argues that public policy has to devote itself to revitalizing what they called the "mediating structures" of American life—families, houses of worship, neighborhoods, ethnic associations, and voluntary groups. Note this well: it rejects the libertarian notion that the individual should look out only for herself—this is not dog-eat-dog individualism. These mediating structures in fact celebrate public life and public obligation, as they manifest themselves in local communities and neighborhoods.

Some of us have worked hard to incorporate this strand of conservative thought into public policy. In this Administration, the community and faith-based initiative was the effort to capture that in public policy, however inade-

quately things worked out for it. But this kind of conservatism will live on and, given the argument of *Applebee's America*, I suspect it will flourish and prosper and come back stronger than ever in the future. This strand of conservative thought is a natural ally for the nonprofit sector.

But for that friendship to bear fruit, you will have to remain true to your best self, and do what you are uniquely equipped to do. You answer as a matter of course the yearning for community and belonging experienced by so many Americans today. Even business and government have to scramble to figure out what you already know. Don't be persuaded by the siren voices of efficiency and the bottom line, on the one hand, or increased government revenues, on the other hand, to sell your inheritance for a mess of pottage. America desperately needs the sense of community and purpose that has traditionally been the heart and soul of our nonprofit sector.

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