

“The Development of Large-Scale Corporate Caring” **By E. S. Heckathorn and Mark Gibbs**

The following essay was prepared as a position paper for consideration in the planning of the 1973 German Kirchentag at Düsseldorf. Here Heckathorn and Gibbs call for the combination of compassion and competence in nonprofit leadership.

A. Both Human and Efficient

It is clear that our society requires the development of large-scale non-profit and charitable organizations, which can match the complexity of governmental, business and economic and social life today. Such organizations have to develop what has been called a style of statistical compassion; preserving a genuine humanity in their operations and yet at the same time developing managerial competence and financial efficiency.

Nonprofit organizations are certainly now called to remember that they are expected to be human and flexible in their style of work, not just in the flowery language of their charter of operations and their general aims and principles, but above all in their day to day operations. As William Blake insisted, “He that would do good to others must do it in minute particulars,” and the one thing on which institutions are now challenged throughout the United States – as in Europe – is “Do you care about people?” Many of our hospitals, and schools – and churches – have been replying “Yes,” but in fact have implied in their answers “Yes, *if* ...” If you fit in with our plans for regulating help, if you are agreeable to us for some sort of reason like your race or your religion or your interesting kind of illness. Today society is, quite rightly, requiring that nonprofit organizations do a better job than that.

For instance all over the world people are now claiming health care [1] not as a special privilege but as a *right*. They point out the considerable proportion of Gross National Product and taxes which goes into health services in one way or another; and they insist that governmental and legislative pressures be put on the hospital and medical organizations. They ask, too, that doctors and hospitals shall not just be concerned with technical health problems within an operating room or an emergency clinic but also with the general social and environmental health needs of the area or region in which they operate.

B. Nonprofit Organizations Lag Behind

Such social pressures are now experienced by all institutions in society and are familiar enough to business firms and government departments. Unfortunately, it is apparent that nonprofit and charitable organizations often lag behind the best industrial and government practices in these matters, despite the fact that in view of their exalted and noble aims and goals, they should surely prove pioneers in developing human patterns of large-scale corporate caring. It is distressing to

find many religious and “do-good” institutions caring for people in sloppy, unthoughtful and even callously mechanical ways. It is very important to work out why this so often happens.

1. They can suffer from various forms of excessive individualism and religious pietism. Notoriously, these kinds of religion can exist and have flourished side by side with horribly inhuman social structures.

For example, in the past pietistic slave-owners and industrial capitalists treated their work-people very badly, but nevertheless built them chapels and insisted on attendance at church twice each Sunday. Today there are in different parts of the world deeply “religious” and fundamentalist racists, who support government, social, and even charitable organizations, which deeply oppress people. There are also, perhaps particularly in North America, many “progressive” religious people who nevertheless will only consider “loving deeply” those whom they know face-to-face – and who will not face the problems of achieving justice and fair health and educational structures for those whom they will never meet personally.

2. Even those who recognize the need for large-scale nonprofit organizations and indeed work in them may have a kind of superstitious reverence for “given” structures inherited from the past. They accept a kind of infallibility of the Roman Curia, or the Massachusetts mental health system, or an order of deaconesses. It has been said that in modern society “there are no sacred cows any more,” but quite a few seem to survive still in the barns and byres of charitable organizations!
3. From an attitude implying that “our structures are really divinely inspired,” it is distressingly easy to move to “therefore we know what is good for you.” The ruthless do-gooder is a familiar figure in either government or private health structures. Leaders of charitable organizations seem so often unable to listen to the people they are so vigorously trying to help – to patients/poor people/the elderly/the young/prisoners. It is they who may particularly resent criticisms from public interest advocates.
4. Such resistance to criticism and to change may be especially strong when questions and comments come from employees and staff members. They are not expected to be “disloyal” and to question the traditions of the institution concerned. Often they are made to feel guilty if they do so. The kind of vocational masochism which is endemic in some religious orders, missionary hospitals, and the like inhibits the open discussion and indeed controversy which is necessary to provoke change.
5. For these reasons, many large nonprofit organizations seem unable to “learn from the world,” despite all the theological talk about this in recent years. For example:

- There have been many important secular studies about the problems of dehumanization in large government or commercial organizations. Yet these are often ignored by leaders in nonprofit bodies.
- If secular “know-how” is sought, it is sometimes accepted uncritically and wastefully. If an authoritarian leader is fascinated by the idea of having a computer data bank, or a new piece of complicated (and expensive) equipment for a hospital, then this is bought.
- Very many nonprofit organizations are still financial innocents. They are slow to discover where they are losing, or even making, money. They are even slower to understand the deep problem of providing a high quality of personal service when labor costs keep on rising.
- In particular, there is available much secular know-how about leadership and communication, which charitable organizations still very often ignore.

Consider:

The importance of top leaders in a large organization, and their "charisma" in getting the best out of middle and junior employees. How many bishops understand this?

There are still religious and nonprofit organizations where only a closed few are allowed to know the financial situation, and the prospects for future staff. Suddenly – or sometimes very suddenly – you’re promoted, fired, or moved a thousand miles away.

There is much now known about the importance in large organizations of junior management/foremen/typing pool supervisors/ “non-graduate” people, both in maintaining morale and in improving work performance. This is still forgotten in charitable organizations where the traditional “middle class” flavor is still very strong, (especially perhaps in Europe).

The need to make the most of less-than-superb management and employees. Charitable organizations nowadays do not easily attract first-class management, anyway.

6. Many nonprofit institutions are not, in the short run, very accountable to anyone. They are not expected to chart “results.” Any critical examination of historic structures may be very slow to develop, and this is perhaps particularly true in church structures. There is always the excuse that there are so many other plausible reasons for present difficulties – the decline in religion and moral values generally, the continuing economic inflation, the familiar problems of finding enough volunteers, and so on.

C. Some First Hints Toward Dealing With These Problems

1. *Get the theology “righter.”* We are called by God to seek both a deep love for those we know personally, and also real justice for very many people we shall never know at all. This

implies that there is no solution to our problems in either (1) personal individualism or (2) dreaming after tiny rural communes. [2]

It is entirely proper - and indeed our loyal duty to ask awkward questions and to offer constructive criticisms regarding the institutions with which we are involved. To remain silent is to be *disloyal*.

Christian theology maintains that God often speaks through secular people and institutions quite outside church structures and organizations. Therefore it is very necessary to learn everything we can from the most helpful secular wisdom we can find – and we must make deliberate efforts to look for it.

2. In practice such “*learning from the world*” will involve for a church or charitable organization:
 - The allocation of staff time for this. Many of their employees work too hard in old-fashioned ways. They need opportunities for retooling, for study leaves, for the chance to interchange with other management people.
 - The seeking of advice from laity who are themselves deeply involved in secular life. They are often only asked to help in relatively trivial ways.
 - A continuous attempt to apply secular wisdom appropriately and as economically as possible. A nonprofit organization needs to beware of any uncritical fascination of elaborate and expensive (and probably out-of-date) business techniques.
 - In particular, a willingness to grapple with the problems of working together with government organizations – in a spirit of critical but common responsibility. Perhaps particularly in Britain and in the United States, there is still a need to realize that nonprofit organizations are bound to be increasingly regulated by and intertwined with public and government programs.
3. All nonprofit institutions have to *think very hard indeed about finance* for the future. Blind “loyal” giving for charitable institutions is bound to decline (and the cushion of legacies will sink steadily). Hopefully people will be prepared to give for intelligent and understood purposes; but they are now – rightly – skeptical of many charitable appeals, whether for home or for overseas programs. Government finance will often be available in the future, but with a complicated (and not always satisfactory) network of ground rules and regulations to be mastered.

Both government and private givers may expect a certain modesty in nonprofit organizations, and a continuous cost-consciousness. There is always a temptation to give priorities to building and to equipment, and to forget the need to invest in people. In their

salaries/pensions/study time/further education – and especially in appropriate management skills. For, as John W. Gardner has written, “Accomplishing social change is work for the tough-minded and the competent.” And this is particularly true of those who lead and work in nonprofit organizations.

Notes:

[1] With which Vesper Society is particularly concerned, since it operates Memorial Hospital in San Leandro, California.

[2] The work of Professor von Oppen is very relevant here, and in particular his *The Age of the Person*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969. Original German text *Das personaler zeitalter*. Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag, 1960.

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