



Fight, Flight, or Freeze?

Non-profit Survival Strategies in Times of Political Uncertainty

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Background

- Nonprofit human service organizations spent the eight years of Barack Obama's presidency operating under a democratic president with an inclusive agenda to promote the health and well being of all community members.
- From a mission perspective, nonprofit organizations enjoyed a time of symbiosis with the government and the resulting certainty that their meaningful work was supported, particularly in terms of healthcare and immigration.

November 8, 2016

- Donald J. Trump was elected to the U.S. Presidency on a conservative platform with promises to repeal President Barack Obama's executive orders, build a wall between Mexico and the United States of America, deport millions of illegal immigrants, and repeal the "disaster" that is Obamacare.
- The election of a conservative President-elect with views differing widely from those of nonprofit human service agency missions provides an opportunity to explore how leaders of nonprofit agencies think, behave, and strategize to further their organization in a seemingly hostile environment.

Method

- In-depth interviews – 45 minutes to one hour
- February – March 2017 (within the first 100 days of the Trump Presidency)
- N=8 Executive Directors of nonprofit agencies in the San Fernando Valley, California.
- Questions about leadership, communication, collaboration with other agencies, strategies used historically to survive and thrive, and agency culture/mood

Agencies

ED Pseudonym	Agency Pseudonym	Interview Date	Agency Description	ED Length of Time	
Andrea	Org A	1/16/2017	Rehab/barriers transitioning to employment	11 years	at org for 15 years
Charlotte	Org C	1/23/2017	Comprehensive family resource center	30 years	at org for 42 years
Brian	Org B	1/17/2017	Hospital	29 years	at another similar org previously
Kathleen	Org H	2/22/2017	Eliminating sexual and interpersonal violence	3 years (+2 interim)	at org for 18 years
Lucy	Org D	1/26/2017	Education, healing, self-care for veterans	6 months	running another org for 4 years (familiar with agency)
Elyssa	Org F	2/8/2017	Counseling and family support	14 years	at org for 34 years
Mark	Org E	2/6/2017	Child (and family) services	13 years	familiar with org before becoming ED
Isabel	Org G	2/15/2017	Community empowerment center	7 years	at org for 11 years

Findings

- Executive Directors are people, too!
 - Personal feelings/values vs. professional self
 - Protect staff
 - Protect organization
 - Strategies
- Mission / Funding / Collaboration / Board of Directors
- Organizational Resilience
 - Freeze!
 - Been here before – keep on keepin' on

Executive Directors are People, Too!

Just like everyone else, each had their own feelings about the election

- *I guess the next day was such a profound sadness that half of the voters of this country could have believed that this person could make an adequate president, that he had any of the characteristic attributes, skills, knowledge, personality to be even an adequate president. Oh, that made me so sad, and the ones even that I—cuz I know some people who voted for Trump. – Charlotte*
- *I had been in England during Brexit. I knew in the summer. I had in the summer, “Whoa. I feel like he’s gonna win.” I felt like I could just see how Hillary was just—it’s like she was tryin’ to hold onto a slippery pole, and she just kept slipping. I had these feelings that things were gonna get scary for us as an organization and for the population that we served. When he got elected, I realized that things may look really different for us 12, 18, 24 months from now. That I went on the White House website, and they already removed the dropdown button for violence against women. - Kathleen*

Personal Feelings vs. Professional Self

➔ *I feel like, as the leader, I can't let them see me being concerned. – Mark*

Staff

➔ *People ask me do you—I mean, I think people know that if I knew something that was concrete I would share it. 'Cause we have regional meetings and we did meet with all the staff. I mean, but I have to be careful. I can't be too partisan, right. I have to just say, "Oh, well the outcome of things—we have certain..."*

Interviewer: Why can't you be too partisan?

Not with our direct-service staff. I mean, with our management staff we can. Not with the direct-service staff.

Interviewer: Why not?

'Cause I can't assume that everybody feels the same way. - Elyssa

Personal Feelings vs. Professional Self

Staff

- *I think the staff, in a sense, is already aware. I try to always give them the news, but also say, this is what we're doing to help. There's hope. We could still continue until we can't. – Isabel*
- *I crafted an email and sent it out to everyone. It was within days of the election. Just saying I understand that we may all feel many different things as a result of this election. Some of us will be happy. Some of us will be sad. Some of us will be afraid. Some of us might be confused or overwhelmed. What I would ask of each of you is to stay laser focused on our mission, because if we stay laser focused on our mission, then we will continue to do good no matter what. - Kathleen*

Personal Feelings vs. Professional Self

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- *I actually feel, probably, better organizationally because I'm having a space more open to Trump and his presidency organizationally, than I am as a woman. – Lucy*
- *We consider our organization a sanctuary organization. We don't believe that there is anything that prohibits our organization from advocating for civil rights positions. – Charlotte*
- *So sometimes you have to say what you think is best for the business even if you don't think it's best for you. - Andrea*

Strategies & Considerations

We've been here before

- *This conversation probably won't be much different than when the economy took a dive so this same conversation, same fears, saying do we do more with less again? Although we never came up, we just got more people... Andrea*
- *Even at the time of the great crash and the recession and President Obama coming in and doing so much for which he was not recognized at all, and even to this day, but the one thing that they never did, that Administration General, was anything to help restore the nonprofit sector to health. For many, many nonprofit organizations, whatever meager reserves they'd had had been wiped as a result of just trying to stay afloat. - Charlotte*

Strategies & Considerations

Personally – Reaching for the familiar

- *This is it. This is what you have to work with. Make it work. Rather than I don't think it's gonna work, I don't know if it's gonna work, is it gonna work? – Lucy*
- *A Maya Angelou quote: "You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them." I guess that might be our strongest strategy is that we don't allow this to reduce who we are, how we're willing to take a stand, how we're willing to fight for our people, and I think that that would be the guiding light. – Charlotte*
- *I think that then nothing changes, right. Then people organize around well, we're gonna get through stuff together. I think everything's—I think things are pretty much overall okay. I think so. I mean, I think at some point if something happens then, then you're in a whole different—people are obviously are gonna feel very vulnerable. – Elyssa*

Strategies & Considerations

Professionally – **Mission**, Funding, Collaboration, Board of Directors

- *we make sure we have a high-quality service for the client. That you're committed to the mission. That with all of our flaws, ultimately, will that end-user feel that they have been served well. Now I can live with the rest. - Lucy*
- *We changed our mission statement from being about "quality childcare," 20 years ago, to, now, the word "childcare" is not in our mission statement at all. We cultivate "child, family and community well-being." That gives us much more latitude to look at revenue diversification. It's also the right thing to do.*

Interviewer: Why is it "also the right thing to do?"

Well, we've got 50,000 families and kids that we're serving. Ten percent of those kids have other issues that they're dealing with. If we can provide other services to them, we're looking at more of a "one-stop shop." - Mark

Strategies & Considerations

Professionally – Mission, **Funding**, Collaboration, Board of Directors

- *I've done a lot of seeking smaller contracts because if I go for the large ones we're not in a financial position to get the large one. So I either try to find somebody to sub-contract or go in as something underneath a larger agency...or go for the smaller contracts – Andrea*
- *We are not funding whores. We really don't, for the most part, go after things that don't support our mission. - Charlotte*

Strategies & Considerations

Professionally – Mission, Funding, Collaboration, Board of Directors

- *I like to be cross-sector in my approach, cuz I think we all work together. I think non-profits have a tendency to think that they are immune and alone and nobody understands them. – Lucy*
- *yeah, we have a lot of collaboration. Now it's like to the point where I'm going "okay, I'm not volunteering anymore, you have to come up with some money." Like we just started a construction training reentry program with AGENCY and that started with them wanting a last-minute letter at 7pm at night, and I was like "so you want a letter from me saying that I'm an expert in what I do and that I'm going to say that you're doing it." Doesn't make sense. And you left me out. AGENCY said "we've already done the budget, if we could put you in for a small amount will you be willing to do some pre-screening, and I said "Yes, I will." - Andrea*

Strategies & Considerations

Professionally – Mission, Funding, Collaboration, Board of Directors

- *We had to bring it down and just run more lean agency. The funny thing is that we've expanded in other areas. Even though we're cutting down budget-wise, we've created some partnerships in terms of the L.A. regional food bank, the San Fernando food bank, different grocery stores. We've created these partnerships, and now we've been able to expand – Isabel*
- *...the rule of unintended consequences. You change one variable and you're not really certain how that may change the rest of the system operations. Because these things are interdependent. And that interdependence is more vital than we sometimes suspect. - Brian*

Strategies & Considerations

Professionally – Mission, Funding, Collaboration, Board of Directors

- *We have, I think, done a great job over the last in particular five years to build a board that's very generous. That's very much embraces our mission and their role as ambassadors. As a result, I think that we're doing better in our fund-raising efforts and our donor support. - Elyssa*
- *I obviously work with the Board to make decisions but usually it's most of them – I'm presenting what I think is the correct decision and making my case or not making my case. - Andrea*
- *I think without the board being solid and strong, we would not be anywhere close [to operating]. - Isabel*

Organizational Resilience

Planning/Preparing for the Future

- *I'm intending to build – Lucy*
- *Trying to stay as nimble as possible, construct programming that it can be flexible, looking to more local sources of funding in the longer term. – Charlotte*
- *I feel you have to be more innovative. You have to be able to—especially now more than ever it's not about just preventing something. I feel those of us that survive are gonna be, maybe because we've been able to demonstrate that we are really happy helping to create those pathways. There's a whole lot of other people that just wanna know that they're not draining their swamp. – Elyssa*
- *We're piloting something, and we're doing some of the work around creating this bridge program at the state level. I like to get in on the front-end of things, and build them up, and build them right. When they put this program out, we benefit from the funding coming down to us.- Mark*

Organizational Resilience

Planning/Preparing for the Future

- *I was gonna move the administrative office. We were gonna move to a place in Studio City that gave us a nice rate and would have been much nicer. I didn't do—I talked to my Board. I said, "I just don't think we should make an investment right now." – Elyssa*
- *I felt like there was a promise from the Obama administration there was gonna be preschool funding, all these millions of dollars to go to preschool. I know that's not gonna probably happen anymore. – Isabel*
- *We're already looking at what would be the minimal amount of staffing that AGENCY could continue to meet its core obligation, which would really be 24/7 services. – Kathleen*
- *I feel once you kind of say "well this is what I'll do if the worst thing happens." I'd like to set myself up for that and then once I've decided this is all done- then I can move on and move forward. - Andrea*

Considering the Future

How do we access the aspects of our culture that are really wonderful and harness them and integrate them into the solution without simply making this all dependent on resources that we aren't really accountable for- and that we aren't participating other than the way we pay taxes? There are other countries around the world where that is the case. The richness of the American culture has included individuals who accept responsibility to make things better, and that's part of the nobility of the American culture. - Brian