

Are you investing enough in leadership?

by Sam Pettway

The current economic crisis has every nonprofit focused on funding. We think leadership is the more important target for attention.

Two things came together in the past 30 days to focus our attention on investments in nonprofit leadership. The first, of course, is the country's financial calamity, a development that has every organization—whether corporate, nonprofit or governmental—scratching its collective head over the impact of the downturn on services and constituents.



The second was our own investment in nonprofit leadership via the BoardWalk Governance Fellowships announced elsewhere in this month's *smorgasBoard*. Since every one of our clients is a nonprofit organization susceptible to the vagaries of fundraising, we could have been forgiven for dialing back on this annual sponsorship.

Instead, we increased the number of BoardWalk Fellowships from six to seven.

We chose this course for two reasons. One, of course, is your faith in us. 2008 has been a great year on the BoardWalk. We've worked with over three dozen clients this year alone, and the fourth quarter will be our strongest yet, despite the downturn.



More fundamentally, though, we increased our investment in our governance fellowships because we genuinely believe in the impact of effective leaders, and we believe investment in nonprofit leadership is more important now than ever.

Anyone can succeed in good times, but only the well-led can weather a storm. Like you, we've got our umbrellas out and will no doubt get a bit wet in the tempest ahead, but we're continuing to invest in our future—and yours—every day.

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October 2008

Page 2 of 2

In the past month alone, we have been privileged to launch or conclude assignments with a fascinating array of nonprofits. These organizations provide leadership and support on issues of voluntarism, disease (arthritis, juvenile diabetes, cancer), music, education (both secular and theological), youth and family development, empowerment of girls and women, nutrition, and health in the broadest sense.

Despite the differences in their missions, their communities and their funding, these organizations have one thing in common—a tangible commitment to leadership during the toughest economic times imaginable.

Nonprofits with cautious boards or vacillating leadership may escape the pitfalls of Pollyannaish planning, but they may also miss the opportunity to stand out from the rest of their peers. In our experience, good ideas and organizations succeed not because of the money they attract but because of the leadership they exhibit. Will your organization hunker down and protect your base, or will you find opportunities for leadership in the crisis? Will you merely survive, or will you thrive?



The Greek root for crisis is κρινω (*krino*), “to separate, to decide, to judge.” You can *separate* your nonprofit from its peers by how you *decide* to react to the current crisis. With a strong investment in leadership—bold, decisive, and caring—you can be confident that your colleagues, your constituents and your funders will *judge* you well.

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Sam Pettway is the founding director of BoardWalk Consulting, a firm committed to “Finding leaders that matter for missions that matter”® through executive search, board enrichment and leadership strategy.

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