

The Nonprofit Hunger Games, and what we must do to end them

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Katniss-Violence-Mockingjay-2A while ago, at a leadership seminar I was a participant in, I sat down at a random table and met a really nice older couple, along with another participant in the program, “Jane.” We all got to talking, and it turned out the two seniors were major donors to Jane’s organization who also happened to like Vietnamese food. I said, “Hey, I know a great Vietnamese restaurant! I’d love to take you sometime. Maybe the four of us could get lunch together.”

There was a 20-second stare down between Jane and me. The breeze died. Tumbleweeds rolled in the background, and a horse snorted nervously. Vultures circled overhead. “Yes...” said Jane, “I’ll connect all of us.” She never did. I ran into her at another event, and she introduced me to others as “The guy who tried to poach my donors.”

Why am I telling this story? One, to warn Jane that I will not rest until I find those donors, and I will have lunch with them, and I will persuade them to donate to my organization, and she won’t be able to stop me, because I will not sleep or eat until I share spring rolls with peanut sauce with them and a check is in my hands, muwahahahahahahah! MUWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!

Two, to illustrate the fact that the Nonprofit Hunger Games are going too far and are destructive to our sector’s collective mission of making the world better.

The Hunger Games, for those of you who may not know, is a series of books by Suzanne Collins, made into movies, about a dystopian world, controlled by The Capitol, where 12 poor districts are forced to randomly select two kids each annually as “Tributes” to fight to the death inside a large arena that is televised live for others to watch as entertainment. The protagonist is a girl named Katniss, who volunteers to enter the games in her little sister’s place when her sister gets chosen. There is only one “Victor,” meaning the compassionate Katniss will have to kill all the other Tributes just to stay alive.

That, unfortunately, is what it often feels like in our field. But before I get into that, more often than not, there is an inspiring sense of camaraderie among us nonprofit types. Other EDs pass grant opportunities to me all the time, and many even introduce me to their donors. Even “Jane” and I are on good terms—she’s pretty brilliant, and hilarious—and getting lunch with her donors has become more of an inside joke between us than anything. We who dedicate our lives to this work know how hard it is, and we support each other where we can. There are endless examples of nonprofits lifting each other up.

However, due to funding dynamics and other factors, we nonprofits have become more and more like Tributes fighting with one another to stay alive in the Nonprofit Hunger Games. These Games must end, because the longer they go on, the less effective we are in addressing the needs of our world. Because of the Games,

We isolate our organizations from other missions: It really depresses and frustrates me sometimes how disconnected our missions are. Yeah, there are plenty of great collaborations. But more often than not, organizations just stick to their own corners. When does early learning talk to youth development, or youth development talk to senior services, or food justice ever talk to housing, or emergency services ever talk to disability services, or racial justice ever talk to arts, or environmental ever talk to leadership development? Because of the constant struggle for resources, we often become islands focused only on our own purview. But this is not effective, as everything is interconnected, and we cannot address one societal issue without understanding all the others.

We hoard donors: When you're trying to stay alive, you start scrambling for resources. Unfortunately, in the sector, this often takes the form of donor hoarding. As with Jane, above, we nonprofits are often fiercely possessive of our donors. But, as mentioned in my argument for "Community-Centric Fundraising," (instead of donor-centric fundraising), this practice is counterproductive. Introducing your donors to other causes will increase their knowledge of community challenges and possibly giving, generates good will and collaborations among nonprofits, and leads to all us being able to do our jobs more effectively. Donors are people interested in working with us to solve problems. We need to stop underestimating donors and hoarding them like peanut butter in a zombie apocalypse. Same goes for volunteers.

We develop shadow missions: While the majority of nonprofits are awesome, there are a few crappy ones. No matter what they put on their website, some nonprofits seem to have what I call a "shadow mission," which is often to get as much funding as possible, grow as big as possible, even at the cost of program quality or staff morale, and screw anyone who gets in their way. I've partnered with some of these organizations, and they blatantly suck (though they usually have amazing branding!). The problem is that as the Hunger Games continue, more and more of us are at risk of developing an unconscious shadow mission. We forget that our mission is not our nonprofit's survival, that our job is not to sustain our job.

We become biased toward those who survive: In the Hunger Games, the youngest kids, the sweetest, kindest ones, are usually the first to get killed. Everyone bets against them. In the Nonprofit Hunger Games, funders bet on which nonprofits are the most "sustainable" and invest in those organizations. Instead of holistically looking at problems and systems, society just funds those organizations we think will be strongest and most likely to survive. And since we fund these more "sustainable" organizations, then of course these organizations are likelier to survive, while the smaller, "weaker" organizations (often led by marginalized communities) are left to struggle. We start to believe that those organizations that survive deserve it, that those who fail also deserve it. But simply because a nonprofit is good at surviving, it does not necessarily mean that it is most effective at solving community problems

We think that this is normal: The worst thing about the Nonprofit Hungers Games is that the longer we play them, the more normal we think they are. We think it's normal to only focus on our specific mission and longevity, to hoard donors, to reward organizations that have proven survival records. We don't take enough time to think that maybe this is all wrong, that this system is not working, that this is not

the way the world should be, that we cannot possibly hope to address entrenched global problems this way, that we need to do something different.

As our world's problems get more and more numerous and intense, I see the Nonprofit Hunger Games getting worse. Resources seem to become increasingly scarce, and instead of banding together to find solutions, many of us think of it as a zero-sum reality and so we hunker down and focus on our organizations' solvency. But this is totally the opposite of what we should be doing. The more we buy into that survival mentality, the stronger and deadlier the Hunger Games become.

Fortunately, the Tributes in the Hunger Games start realizing that the Games are profoundly wrong. They realize that the fate of their world is vastly more important than their individual fates. And they fight not with each other to stay alive, but to dismantle the system. And they do it by working together.

Well, I propose we do the same, except with way less violence and death and weird hairdos. The Games cannot exist if we refuse to play.

Funders: Sorry, funders, but you have to admit that you are a huge reason that the Nonprofit Hunger Games exist. In this metaphor, you are basically The Capitol, the all-powerful entity that everyone fears, that sets the rules, that squashes insurrections. (You do have way better hairdos and sense of style, though). By isolating yourself off from the nonprofits who are forced to play by your rules; by rewarding the organizations who are most likely to be "sustainable"; by setting arbitrary or difficult rules of engagement and processes, you are unintentionally perpetuating the Nonprofit Hunger Games. What can you do? Recognize your role in this, stop rewarding sustainability and instead do the much more difficult work around equity, provide multi-year general operating funds, fund existing programs and staff, take more risks, knock it off with the ridiculous "safe space" mentality, and get a beer once a while with us Tributes who are fighting one another in the arena you help build.

Nonprofit staff: Do some soul searching to see if you have a shadow mission that is creeping up on your actual mission. Ask yourself, "In an ideal world, would we even exist?" If the answer is no, start working on a long-term plan to put your organization out of business. At your next staff meeting or retreat, lay out your issue area and brainstorm how other issues affect yours, and then discuss how to strengthen connection with organizations working on these other issues. Yes, all of us must still focus on one or two key things and do a good job in those areas, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be talking to one another and being aware of what everyone is doing. We must also believe that it is good for the community when other nonprofits fulfill their missions, so we should help each other where we can. Development Directors and EDs, check in with your major donors and volunteers and ask if they are curious about other causes, and offer to introduce them to other nonprofits.

Board members: You play a critical role in strategic direction, but because of your fiduciary responsibilities, you often are focused primarily on the survival of your nonprofit. You must inspire your ED and your organization to think beyond just sustainability/survival, to think of what is good for the entire community in the long run. This means getting your organization to work in collaborations with not just other nonprofits, but other sectors as well. And since you are better connected to other sectors, usually the business world, you should start using your connections to build bridges.

Donors and volunteers: Sorry some of us have been hoarding you, often at the cost of informing you about other societal challenges you may be interested in helping solve. Since you are so valued, you have a lot of influence, though, so use it where appropriate to encourage nonprofits to work together and think broadly about the community and not just their corner of it. In order to do that, you too must understand the connections between different issues, so while you may be focused on a couple of particular areas, get exposed to other issues as well.

I want to end by repeating that I truly believe that most nonprofits are awesome and supportive of one another. Still, clearly there is a survival situation that we are forced into. Thrust into the Nonprofit Hunger Games each day, we play because we know that if we don't, our organizations won't exist. But we need to find a better way to work together, because ultimately, when we play the Nonprofit Hunger Games, it is our community members who lose.