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Using the Powers You Have

The Power of One

At a recent conference of a state association of nonprofits, the audience was invited not to embrace the latest fad or calls for building better mousetraps. Rather, participants took a journey into “Using the Powers You Have” to explore the unique features of “nonprofit-ness” that everyone in the audience committed to missions already has. Call them inherent strengths, unfair advantages, or super powers, there are things about charitable nonprofits and the people dedicated to them that enable – empower – these organizations to persevere, perform, and even thrive in adversity. The presenter discussed six unique nonprofit powers; this article focuses on the first one: The Power of One.

The notion that one person can make a difference is deeply imbedded in the American psyche. But so is “all for one and one for all,” “it takes a village,” and “one is the loneliest number.” The point here isn’t to refute those idioms/truisms but to explore the special power that drives an individual – someone dedicated to their mission – to take extraordinary actions to make lives better in their community.

One of our favorite nonprofit advocacy stories, which can just as easily be called a programmatic or development success story, comes from the Fairbanks Foodbank in Alaska. Years ago, the independent foodbank got word that their valued partner, a local grocer from a national chain, would no longer be donating food to the

charitable organization. Asked why, they were told distant “corporate” executives had said so out of concerns over unnamed liability issues. The immediate response of the Executive Director (we’ll call her “ED”) was that this decision was going to make it harder for the foodbank to feed community and needed to be reversed.

ED did what all would do – she made calls, set up meetings, and pled the case for helping the foodbank advance its mission through food donations. Those efforts were for nought.

But being dedicated to the mission, she didn’t stop. ED enlisted help. When youth groups and school classes volunteered to pack meals, ED talked to their parents. “Have you heard that [GROCER] has stopped supporting the foodbank and our community? Could you help convince them to support the community?” The parents started asking those questions when they shopped for groceries.

ED also discussed the challenges with the local civic and business groups that regularly used the foodbank’s conference room. “Have you heard that [GROCER] has stopped supporting the foodbank and our community? Would you please help convince them to support the community?” She also reached out to the local newspaper, businesses in the area, local elected officials, and anyone ED could think of.

Word got back to the manager of [GROCER]. And eventually to the Vice President for Saying No back at corporate headquarters. ED got a call from said VP who made clear that [GROCER] certainly loves the community of Fairbanks and they wanted to show it’s true. He asked what it would take and ED said simply, “Go back to sending to the foodbank the wholesome food you aren’t going to sell; our community needs your support.” The VP responded, “Done!”

ED was delighted; the ability to advance the organization’s mission of feeding hungry people was secured. Only later did she learn that the don’t-donate-to-independent-foodbanks rule was revoked not just in Fairbanks but nationwide. Meaning that wholesome food began to flow to hundreds of similar hunger-relieving organizations throughout the United States. The effort of ED to feed her community resulted in her efforts helping to feed hungry people in communities far and wide.

We like this story because it highlights the power of one committed person when they see a policy that disrupts their nonprofit’s mission and overcomes it through perseverance, action, and community spirit. And it shows that nonprofit advocacy

isn't restricted to walking the halls of government – advocacy can be done by anyone, anywhere, anytime, to advance a nonprofit's mission. The point isn't that ED is an extraordinary person – trust us, she is – but that an individual who is motivated by mission can find ways to overcome barriers. For the public good.

Publishers Note: This article is the first in an occasional series encouraging nonprofits to use the powers that they already have.