
c/o Centre for
Charity Effectiveness

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Honorary Treasurers Forum meeting 13th February 2014 - 'Using all your assets'

We had a good turn-out at our February meeting was a lively affair - with many brave souls battling through the proposed tube strikes and floods to make the meeting.

Professor Paul Palmer and Stephen Brooker, both trustees of the HTF presented their thoughts on how to use all your assets within your charity. Paul's theme was thinking beyond financial assets.

He started by focussing on people assets: the trustees, paid staff and volunteers. Paul talked about looking at and making best use of the unique volunteer workforce and quoted one survey that listed volunteering as the second most popular recreational activity in the UK.

As a Professor of one of the world's leading nonprofit and philanthropy academic centre's - it was perhaps unsurprising that Paul picked on under-investment in philanthropic leadership as one of the causes for failing to fully utilise staff assets. However, Paul gave a number of examples where brave leadership was required in straightened times, especially to take firm action when action was required. He cited both the dangers of 'salami-slicing' - where too little action is repeatedly taken rather than making necessary deeper cuts. He also highlighted the need to think strategically and to recognise when something is failing and needs to be excised before it damages the whole organisation.

Paul challenged the attendees on whether 'doing OK' was good enough for the 21st Century. He warned of the danger of getting into a gradual decline if the organisation was not stretching itself.

Paul then moved on to using evaluation as a tool to measure the effectiveness of the charity and making better use of assets. Part of the evaluation was understanding the value of the organisation and being wary of gift horses which might detract from the value in terms of contracts, grants or mergers. He queried why an organisation might contemplate a merger with a weaker charity that would not be beneficial to the purpose.

Paul concluded with an overview of the importance of brand, that it has a tangible value and how it can be used more effectively or changed to meet the demographics of the major funders. He used the example of Sightsavers International which changed its name from the British Empire Society for the Blind during the 1980's. Children were collecting bottle tops as part of a Blue Peter appeal in aid of the charity and it was felt that the charities name - the British Empire Society for the Blind was not user friendly for the 6 year-olds collecting - so it was rebranded to the snazzier Sightsavers international.

Stephen Brooker focused on the harder-nosed aspects of sweating assets particularly concerning property and investments. His strong message was that charities should:

- Be hard negotiators - charities don't have to be 'nice'
- Recognise that you may be part of a group which might have bigger negotiating power
- Think long-term - charities have longevity and most will be around in 50 years' time and that is huge bargaining tool in negotiation, particularly on property deals

He gave as an example of recognising the value of brand and intellectual property when Red Cross negotiated a new deal with Dorling Kindersley on the First Aid handbook.