

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

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NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

The Power and Price of Kony-like Campaigns

Personal relationship building and donor development is critical to the longevity of organizations.

By [John Brothers](#) | 2 | Mar. 22, 2012

When I finally watched the “Kony-2012” video, like so many others, I was moved. I donated, read up on the issue of child soldiers in central Africa, and became a part of what Invisible Children was aiming to do: grab support and momentum for its mission. The Kony video has become the latest in a line of exciting cause videos that grab the hearts and minds of the masses and continue to change the conversation in the nonprofit sector.

The same week, as I was training a group of nonprofit CEOs in Newark, NJ, a discussion of Kony surfaced—could a video like Invisible Children’s help them instantly raise more money and get their message out to a larger network of people? One executive said, “The video could do our asking for us,” and already was working on a video for his organization. Despite the backlash, the Kony video proves that viral videos can make a huge impact on issue awareness. Nonprofits are right to think about how they might take advantage or mimic this approach. The challenge is that this work cannot overtake a more essential ingredient: personal relationships with both each other and our organizational missions.

What I saw in the room of executives was a hope to supplant relationship building and donor development with the potential rewards of an effective video. I was reminded of Robert Putnam’s popular book, *Bowling Alone*, which outlines the reduced role of personal interaction in the social fabric of America and its severe detrimental effect on both civic engagement and political involvement. Combine Putnam’s thoughts with the long line of theorists who argue that technology

alienates individuals and communities, and you might find that many nonprofits would prefer to do the work of forming personal relationships, rather than rely on outlets like videos and social media, if it meant longer-lasting and more powerful results for the organization.

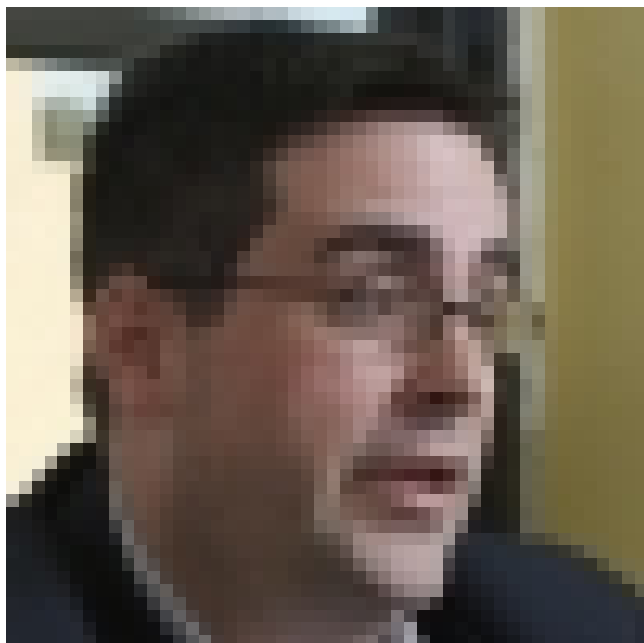
As I work with small- to mid-size organizations and their boards, I increasingly see how challenging it is for these groups to connect to their support networks in a personal way. An over-reliance communicating through e-news, social media, and other virtual mechanisms has a real, long-term cost. You may have heard that most people fear public speaking more than anything, including death. After talking to groups of nonprofit leaders, I sometimes think that asking—whether it's for support, resources, or time—is even more feared than either of those. And so we rely on videos or grant proposals to form our relationships. The nonprofit sector's most prized asset, its ability to rally and bring together communities, is undermined by our reluctance and growing ability to engage in personal interaction.

This makes me think of the recent closing of Hull House. Hull House—a shining beacon of community involvement and interaction for decades in the Chicago area. When Jane Addams envisioned Hull House, I am sure she did not anticipate that the model would take hundreds of communities throughout the United States by storm, generating community and learning networks around history and art, free musical concerts and issue-based lectures, and needed social services for both children and families.

Many have cited an ineffective board and the financial crisis as the central causes of Hull House's demise, and certainly, those issues contributed to the problem. But I would say the deeper problem was that Hull House ultimately did not have enough social capital to save itself. Its board and supporters could not muster the support needed to continue, and I have to believe that a lack of strong relationships built through personal interaction—of stable financial capital—was also a major part of the problem.

So how do we help nonprofits create the social capital they need to succeed—or rather, how do we put the *community* back into *community organization* or the *steward* back into *stewardship*? A good place to start might be in the boardroom. Executives and staff are often hired for their ability to partner with others and maintain relationships; the board of directors should really both embody the community and pound the pavement to build social capital through constant interaction. Unfortunately most research on nonprofit boards suggests that there is an unwillingness to ask, connect, and seize support. As a consultant who starts every initial board introduction by asking what they do and how they “sell” it, I find that most boards have trouble relating to the mission of the organization they serve and conveying that mission to others.

So ending where I started, I feel that the more we focus and rely upon building Kony-like campaigns to make personal connections, the less time we'll spend building important personal relationships. Like most solutions, the answer might be the balance in-between.



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