

OPINION

Beyond the perfect storm

BY HUGH J. RALSTON

Sometimes the phrase “perfect storm” is not strong enough to describe the challenges.

For the tri-county nonprofit community, that time is now. Our state government finds itself awash in red ink and cutting services to our neediest citizens. Donors and funders are reacting to diminished wealth by changing course or re-examining capacity and mission. Technology is roiling the way we learn, communicate and connect. Competition for talented staff is swamping a salary structure that often lags behind the market.

At the Ventura County Community Foundation, we believe these times call for recognizing that success requires a new level of leadership at every level of every nonprofit.

Those in the business of philanthropy know that nonprofits bring entrepreneurial skills, passionate commitment to vital causes and an adaptability that underscores its \$1.5 billion contribution to our local economy.

Even in good times, running a nonprofit takes more than a great mission statement and a desire to do good. As one of my former colleagues, who was a high school principal, once remarked: “I run a \$3 million business, and I was trained as an English teacher!”

The Community Foundation’s Center for Nonprofit Leadership trains hundreds of nonprofit employees every year. From the assistant who keeps accurate records, to the receptionist with a friendly, informed voice, to the development officer nurturing relationships, to the finance officer tracking contributions and keeping honest books, to the communications officer who tells the stories accurately, appropriately and compellingly online, in newsletters and in news stories, to the chief executive officer who leads the staff and serves the board — all require leadership skills.

Over the past several years, our center has developed courses that give every segment of the sector the chance to hone important skills to meet challenges:

- Board leadership, to guide the fundamental fiduciary and oversight responsibility for the organization itself.
- Strategic planning, to set the direction of the nonprofit.
- Fund development, to secure financial support from a wide variety of sources.
- Marketing templates and online communication

skills, to do a better job of telling the organization’s story and why it should be supported.

- Planned and deferred giving, to provide donors with sophisticated tools for estate planning that extend charitable giving.
- A dedicated technology center, to provide a venue to learn how to use the software and hardware that run modern information systems.
- Budgeting and planning seminars, to keep track of critical information to manage the organization.

VIEWPOINT

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In my prior life — working with urban parochial schools — I used to claim that inner-city principals were the best entrepreneurs in America. They managed to combine multiple responsibilities in the midst of great impediments: academic leader and coach, CEO, senior development officer, faith and mission protector, counselor, plumber and electrician, community leader, parent and child advocate. These are some of the most prominent skills we find in this difficult but hugely important job.

So it is with many nonprofit leaders. Enormously talented but stretched thin, they bring new meaning to multitasking.

And nothing that is going on in our world today promises to make anyone’s job easier.

As the nonprofit sector adjusts not only to the tsunami of change from the financial world but also to the competitive challenges within the business world and the nonprofit sector itself, leadership skills will be essential for any charity’s survival, let alone for the chance to thrive.

Thanks to some of our key funding partners, who understand the impact of investing in training, our Center for Nonprofit Leadership provides not only access to the fish, and how to fish, but some of the rods themselves.

Investing in our community means not only investing in the institutions that help hold community together, but also in helping those leaders navigate in these times of historic challenge. In many ways our nonprofit leaders are demonstrating the type of leadership that will serve our communities in these challenging times. The Ventura County Community Foundation is proud of the ways that we can help them become more effective leaders.

• Hugh J. Ralston is the president and CEO of the Ventura County Community Foundation, which is based in Camarillo.