

Getting Rid of Board Members Who Don't Spark Joy

05.14.19 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



One of the nonprofit sector's most prolific and entertaining bloggers, [Vu Le](#) ("voo lay"), is intrigued by the [KonMari craze](#) sweeping the nation.

Organizing guru Marie Kondo tells us all how to simplify and organize our surroundings. Her method is clean and simple: In tidying up, we should pick up an object and ask ourselves: "Does it spark joy? If not, get rid of it." The special appeal of the KonMari method is "that it can be [applied to all of parts of your life](#)": from "folding your clothes to changing your perspective when it comes to your relationships!"

After watching several episodes of Ms. Kondo's show in Netflix, Vu Le has been "able to grasp the basics." "These methods," he concludes, "can be applied to our organizations...."

In [Does this board member spark joy? how to tidy your organization using the KonMari method](#), he offers helpful tips and thoughts. First, he suggests, deal with that ubiquitous "crappy chair" emblematic of the nonprofit sector, then turn to the other irritants: the board members, executive officers, volunteers, and donors who do not spark joy.

Crappy Chairs Don't Spark Joy

"Have you noticed how we in the sector [tend to hoard stuff](#)?"

The usual KonMari procedure is to organize room by room. That won't work when paring down a nonprofit. Instead, Vu Le suggests that we have two phases: objects and people. Phase 1 should be divided into "main categories": "outdated books, useless documents, crappy chairs, expired snacks, random supplies, personal dumpster fires (which each team member must tackle on their own), and 'komono,' which is what Marie Kondo calls miscellaneous, e.g., dying plants, ancient awards, giant

presentation checks, etc.”

He has some pithy thoughts about each category but the crappy chairs are worth a special mention here. While Vu Le curiously did not mention it in his March 2019 post, he had a lot to say on the topic two years ago in *Your crappy chair is not a badge of honor* (October 2017). “The crappy chair is a hilarious trope in our sector. Everyone seems to have some sort of crappy chair story.”

His message was serious, though: “Stop it! Stop it, all right?! We need to get out of this Pride-In-Scarcity-and-Sacrifice—aka, PISS—mentality! It is no-good, very bad.”

Why must this “Scarcity and Martyrdom Complex” end?

- “It creates a chain reaction of crappiness.” It “never stops at the chair” but continues with crappy everything: from printers to staff compensation all the way to the worst of the worst: “crappy snacks” like flax crackers from a discount big-box store.
- Crappy stuff is inefficient; it gets in the way of doing the important work of the organization.
- “It perpetuates uninformed expectations from society.” If you let everyone know you’re ok with a crappy chair, society will expect you and “everyone else in the sector” to “do critical work with inadequate resources.”
- “It causes unfair comparisons among nonprofits.” If organization X has a crappy chair but Organization Y has a better chair, a donor or funder may have second thoughts about supporting Organization Y. Nonprofits are compared with each other, not what goes on in the for-profit sector. The people with the money are – by and large – still mired in the unfortunate mindset that there should be little or no overhead. The nonprofit sector must “arise together and resist the Overhead Myth.”
- “It lowers people’s respect” for nonprofit organizations and professionals and sends mixed and dangerous messages. To some funders, the “ten-year-old chair that is held together with duct tape” comfortably reinforces their preconceived notions that nonprofits can and should operate on fumes and good intentions instead of cash. To others, the “message might likely be, ‘Sheesh, this org is sad and hanging on by a shoestring. If it can’t get its act together, why should ... anyone invest in its work?’”
- Working in a lousy environment is unhealthy.
- Not having the “right equipment, supplies, training, staffing, etc.” is penny-wise but pound-foolish.

“For all these reasons,” Vu Le concludes, “your crappy chair is not a badge of honor.” And since crappy stuff surely does not spark joy, tossing it is a no-brainer.

More on the Overhead Myth

In *Year-End Donor Queries and the Overhead Myth* (December 8, 2016), we told you about the development of the push to defeat this unfortunate mindset, beginning with the 2009 landmark article by authors Ann Goggins Gregory and Don Howard: *The Nonprofit Starvation Cycle*. In March 2013, activist and fundraiser Dan Pallotta railed against the demonization of overhead in a “lively and irreverent” TED talk he called “The way we think about charity is dead wrong.” In the June 27, 2013,

edition of *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, the editors published a seminal letter, *The Overhead Myth* (June 17, 2013) from GuideStar, Charity Navigator and the Wise Giving Alliance “calling for an end to the obsession many have had with nonprofit overhead costs as a proxy for measuring effectiveness...”

In *Rethinking the “Scarcity Thinking” That Holds Back Nonprofits* (June 26, 2018) and *Are Funders Ready to Throw the Overhead Myth Overboard?* (January 16, 2019), we told you about some of the latest developments.

For additional reading, especially if you’re new to this topic, try Guidestar’s *The Overhead Myth: FAQs* and the November 2016 blog post from Vu Le: *How to deal with uninformed nonprofit-watchdogs around the holidays*.

Conclusion

Have you ever noticed that it always takes much longer than you expected to declutter? Here we are at the end of this blog post and we’ve only gotten through the “crappy chairs” category of Vu Le’s insights on tidying up your organization.

That leaves a lot to cover in later posts, especially the (tongue-in-cheek, of course) advice about thanking board members who don’t spark joy for their service and shoving them out the door.

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