

STRATEGIC VISION

Make No Little Plans

Today's nonprofit leaders can learn from history's "big dreamers" by focusing on their organization's important "why"

By Terry Jones, of Counsel

While visiting one of our nation's most exciting cities last fall, I was struck by a quotation on an outdoor exhibit in Chicago's beautiful and expansive Millennium Park. "Make no little plans," wrote Daniel Burnham. "They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably will not themselves be realized."

Hailed as "Chicago's Visionary," Daniel Burnham was a prominent U.S. architect and urban planner, renowned for leading the design and construction of the 1893 Columbian Exposition held in his hometown. Later, he was sought out by Chicago's civic leaders when they saw the need for a bold, strategic plan to guide the growth of the city itself. Burnham challenged civic leaders to think big, envisioning the future of this great city. The results of Burnham's vision are evident today in the expansive system of public parks, open spaces, and world-famous institutions along the shore of Lake Michigan.

While most of us engaged in the nonprofit world are unlikely to be involved in projects of such magnitude, we have all witnessed successful organizations that, defying the odds, have evolved from the thinking of one or two individuals with big dreams and plans.

What separates these successful "big dreamers" from others who are merely ambitious is articulated in Simon Sinek's best-selling book, "Start with Why." In it, Sinek describes the roles of a successful organizational team and, in particular, the leader. The leader – the CEO, and/or president – is responsible for establishing the "why," the vision for the organization. This, Sinek writes, is how great leaders inspire others to take action.

When the leader communicates and "lives" their vision by example, that vision becomes everyone's goal. Without such demonstrated leadership, team members (employees and others) often focus solely on their immediate individual tasks. If they don't understand how their role contributes to achieving the organization's vision, their loyalty, energy, pride and joy in their work suffers. Collecting a paycheck may become the primary motivation, leading to half-hearted performance and staff turnover.

Sinek writes that Steve Jobs said Apple's "why" was not about being a computer manufacturer competing with like firms; instead it was to "believe in challenging the status quo." In Sinek's view, Apple is an anomaly. Most companies in its industry, he says, stress the "what" – "We make computers" – and fail entirely to communicate the "why." The outcomes of Jobs' visionary "why" are now readily apparent in the Apple devices that have become indispensable in our daily lives.



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While Sinek uses examples of highly successful, visionary CEOs at for-profit companies like Apple, Southwest Airlines, Harley-Davidson, and Disney, one can draw parallels to the leaders of highly successful nonprofits, as well. Many of today's nonprofit CEOs also start with answering the question, "Why ... why does my organization and our mission matter?"

A successful nonprofit's "why" might range from "improving our community," to "building the potential of our youth," to "empowering a segment of our population," to "bringing the magic of the arts to everyone," and so forth. The vision statement of a successful nonprofit should not focus on a specific solution, but rather articulate the organization's "why."

In his book *"Good to Great,"* author Jim Collins writes that a leader is one who leads with passion. He adds that passion is the act of demonstrating a relentlessness to achieve the desired outcome.

I was fortunate to have worked with one such visionary nonprofit leader in Las Vegas – Myron Martin, CEO and President of The Smith Center for the Performing Arts, during the center's first few years of development and construction. Mr. Martin unabashedly stated that he was "living the dream of building a better community." He and his board weren't merely building a beautiful complex of performance spaces, they were engaged in a bigger vision destined to dramatically change the cultural and arts education landscape of Southern Nevada. His was a strong, clear, passionate message, providing the "why" that was embraced by his staff and hundreds of donors.

Whether in the for-profit or nonprofit sector, most successful leaders periodically schedule time for introspection and revisiting of the organization's reason for existing – its "why." In the case of nonprofit leaders and organizations, such time for introspection and discussion that goes beyond the day-to-day matters associated with keeping the organization afloat often occur at an annual or bi-annual board and/or leadership staff retreat. Such opportunities are critical to highly successful and sustainable nonprofits, and it can make good economic sense to engage an outside facilitator to help focus the organization's leadership on re-examining its "why." Heeding Burnham's advice, the leadership needs to make sure that there are "no little plans."

The Phoenix Philanthropy Group has facilitated countless Board retreats and strategic planning sessions, and helped many nonprofits to focus, and refocus, as needed, on their organization's important "why."

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