

As seen in...

Hindsight is 20/20: Hopeful Reflections from the Field



BY CYNTHIA ARMOUR, CFRE

 ver the past three decades I've facilitated many strategic planning processes and helped boards and senior staff to explore and plan their organization's futures. Ironically, many final strategy documents were earnestly entitled "Vision 2020" without any inkling of what horrors would unfold.

My brother's quick-witted quip has evolved from "denial... that's in Egypt isn't it?" to "denial works...until it doesn't work". Last March the world certainly faced that reality head on. Despite encouraging clients to be proactive, advising them to have reserve funds and build risk management plans, I must say a global pandemic wasn't on our radar (unless you'd taken Bill Gates' 2015 Ted Talk seriously). Hospitals regularly have to plan for such risks and even these institutions have been ill-prepared for what's transpired.

Holding the fort

Last spring I was contacting my clients, speaking primarily to chief executives, to inquire how they were doing. I had trouble reaching many of them and yet two words summed up what continues to be confirmed by those left "holding the fort". Brianna Salmon, Peterborough GreenUP's young, energetic and bright, award-winning, executive director just sighed and gasped "I'm exhausted!"

While my immediate response to Brianna was "you're my canary in the coal mine!" I'm profoundly aware that so many effective, efficient and seamless responses have been akin to how smoothly a duck floats across the water, with no evidence of how hard it's paddling beneath...but in this case, its wings are clipped and it's hunting season.

Like so many other organizations, everyone was suddenly working or volunteering from home, some rurally- or remotely-based with constantly frustrating

internet limitations, learning new technology while having to examine which programs could continue online, reconfiguring staff responsibilities and making big, quick and ongoing decisions affecting policies, procedures and protocols. The governance/management leadership teams had no choice but to rise to these challenges.

There is an abundance of easily-accessed, excellent resources available that have helped inform me (*see links below*). I also wanted a local 2021 perspective so I surveyed members of the Peterborough Area Fundraisers' Network. I was grateful for the prompt 67 percent responses received. PAFN is a professional group of voluntary sector colleagues working mostly within urban and rural Peterborough County (Ontario). One organization is entirely volunteer-driven, up to the community college, university and regional hospital. Budgets range from under \$30,000 to over \$300 million with 36 percent in the \$1-3 million range.

It's evident from the survey and client conversations that organizations whose board bring engaged and diverse skills, insights and strategic thinking have fared more favourably. What remains to be seen is whether nonprofits/charities that lacked sustainability pre-pandemic will survive and if not, we'll see an increase in collaborations and mergers.

*"For many, we've taken
multi-tasking to new heights."*

Regardless of location, one of the most poignant observations noted everywhere is the extreme differences people are experiencing. Writer Damian Barr highlighted these inequalities in a heartfelt poem captured succinctly by

his summary...*We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar.* I'd venture to add, some are trying to stay afloat with neither boat nor life jacket!

National organizations that relied on big special events either for fundraising or programs (like WE Days) laid-off or furloughed huge numbers of staff early in the pandemic. By last October and prior to renewed lockdown measures in the Greater Toronto Area, I attempted to reach fundraisers in many charities and even if an individual's LinkedIn profile confirmed their position, less than two percent actually answered their phones. Some voicemails provided cell numbers but many office extensions were just dead ends so be sure your organization's donors can find someone. A colleague in the executive search world remarked that she'd never seen so many over-qualified applicants for a mid-level position in all her years of practice.

Coping with increased demands

People who've managed to keep their job in this sector, particularly in frontline healthcare and social services are coping with increased demands for support, with even less human and financial resources than during already-stretched pre-pandemic times. These individuals, many of whom are women, are carrying a disproportionate burden and the risk of burnout is very real. If their position includes working from home, while simultaneously parenting and schooling their children (again inadequate internet services outside urban centres prevails) then they've surpassed being super-moms and dads; frankly I'm in complete awe and also very concerned for their wellbeing.

For many, we've taken multi-tasking to new heights and yet for others who were laid off or had their positions terminated, they are coping with the shock of job loss, the impact of loneliness or conversely too many people confined in one house with inevitable financial worries that are taking their toll. In addition, the intolerance we're witnessing in the U.S. and Canada, cannot be denied and nor should it be accepted. How we handle stress depends on so many factors including how we were raised and our willingness to seek professional help, before we can even consider our ability to pay

for therapy or another coping outlet and the availability of support.

Little did I know that life on an Ontario farm, while working mostly with small to medium-sized charities would train me so well for frugal isolation! I once dubbed myself a "FIF" (fiercely independent female) until I realized that a "lonely FIF" is a self-created contradiction that necessity was destined to change. Within the past decade I've had one hip replacement, two hernia repairs and brain surgery for the successful removal of a benign tumour. I've learned that as long as I appear "capable" and self-reliant, help is rarely offered. People have their own priorities. Yet just as we learn in fundraising that most donors don't give unless they're asked I discovered generosity abounds when I communicated my needs. And again like fundraising, it's not personal if someone says no. Asking for help isn't easy but consider this, it's more strength than weakness to be that self-aware and not mask (or numb) what's real.

Although generosity has been inspiring since last March, Imagine Canada's December/20 *Sector Monitor Study* shows that 68 percent of charities have seen a decline in support since the onset of the pandemic. I was encouraged that more than 36 percent of survey respondents said their donations had increased since the previous year. Sadly, 54 percent had decreased with that majority being dependent on special events as their primary revenue source. Corporate donations and sponsorships are down, but committed individuals, who've remained employed and had reduced expenses have continued to give. Funders have been open and flexible regarding pre-pandemic grant deliverables and some

For more information and a vast selection of resources go to the COVID-19 sections of Imagine Canada (<https://www.imaginecanada.ca/en/covid19>), Ontario Nonprofit Network (<https://theonnc.ca/resources-covid-19/>)

Other Tips & Tools include:

- › <https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/stories/strategy-and-learning/tips-and-tools-for-nonprofit-planning-in-a-pandemic> - *Nonprofit Planning in a Pandemic*
- › <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/organizational-effectiveness/nonprofit-decision-making-in-covid-19-crisis> - *Compass for the Crisis: Nonprofit Decision Making in the COVID-19 Pandemic*
- › https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBqGS-vEIs0&feature=emb_rel_end - TedxGalway - Patrick McKeown - *Buteyko Breathing* (a quick overview of the value of nasal breathing - *Breathe Light to Breathe Right*)
- › <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=woylhwomy1U> - *Why Changing The Way You Breathe Will Transform Your Body and Mind* (a deep dive podcast hosted by Dr. Rangan Chatterjee with James Nestor on his new book "*Breath*")

foundations have opted to support operations and capacity-building opportunities. While many fear when government programs run out, subsidies, rent relief and emergency funds have made a significant difference in organizational survival.

COVID-19 has introduced all of us to untold vulnerabilities including our own (humbling) mortality, at least for those who know this nightmare is real. Our challenge is to understand that like a flight emergency, we need to put our own oxygen mask on first...which literally brings me to breathing. Adults apparently take 25,000 breaths per day...incorrectly, despite years of practice! These life-sustaining gifts don't cost anything and done consciously, they have the power to soothe our souls, reduce our stress, heal many ailments and return a sense of equilibrium in this world of uncertainty.

We also have the affordable and restorative powers of nature. The great outdoors in all its seasons is inspiring and I'm not alone in believing that the addition of four-legged friends adds a comical, frequently entertaining and unconditionally-loving bonus. In fact, I learn from my animals daily and I credit them with teaching me how to breathe properly (along with singing lessons and yoga instruction for the English translation). My horses and cats remind me to stay in the present; considering

Brock the Bronco got fired from the Toronto Mounted Police for bucking cops off, presence is a safety requirement. He's more playful than mean and just doesn't recognize his 1,800 pounds of energy requires constant monitoring and positive channeling. So, if ever you want to commune with a domestic or even wild animal at a safe distance, you need only to be quietly still and match their diaphragmatic breathing to ground and transcend you both. Our pets echo our anxiety so this is a way to relax together.

This storm requires whatever it takes to stay afloat. If you're financially-strapped finding comfort doesn't require any investment except your time. Pay attention to what healthy addictions bring you joy and prescribe them for yourself regularly. Even my wise, nearly-98-year-young father, who's seen so much in his lifetime, exclaimed he's never witnessed anything like this before. Life goes on, our mortality deserves reflection and hope springs eternal. 📖

CYNTHIA ARMOUR, CFRE, is committed to strengthening board/staff leadership teams, strategic thinking and planning, goal setting and inspiring mission-driven results that benefit those you serve. With a lifetime of studies, research and practical experience, "AMA" (ask me anything) at 705-799-0636 or cja@elderstone.ca.

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cja@elderstone.ca • (705) 799-0636

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302-137 Main Street North
Markham, ON L3P 1Y2
905-201-6600 / 1-800-668-1838
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