

**Sense of MKS comments to Aspen Nonprofit Sector Strategies Group
June 14, 1998**

Millennium's practice is focused to a very significant degree on the nonprofit sector, and on clusters of institutions – including foundations – within the sector.

Over the past five years, we have had the opportunity to conduct extended personal interviews with dozens and dozens of opinion leaders – in and beyond the sector. These have probed their perceptions of the sector, of foundations, of individual organizations, of opportunities for growth, and of new roles which institutions of the sector might be called upon, or be able, to play.

We've also commissioned, or read the reports of dozens of focus groups of citizens – “the general public.” We've talked with them about how they see the sector – if they see it – and what they expect from the organizations to which they give their time and talent.

Finally, we've convened, worked with or interviewed literally hundreds of practitioners at the community level – people engaged everyday in the work of rebuilding communities. Our focus here has been on what people see as the opportunities and constraints in their work.

Taken together, this work of listening around issues in the sector has focused on these three areas:

1. New strategies for changing, growing, adapting, the organizations or clusters of organizations in the sector.
2. New strategies for framing the value of nonprofit work, and the contributions of the organizations – and thus for reaching out to connect to communities, and to capture the time, talent and passions of citizens
3. New uses of communications to support this work.

This work has been done for many different organizations --Northern California Grantmakers, the James Irvine Foundation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Annie Casey Foundation, the Council on Foundations and Independent Sector, the Alliance for Justice, CIVICUS, the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and -- the nonprofit's distant 501 c 6 cousins -- the American Society for Association Executives.

But it has converged in some important and powerful ways. It's all about communications to support a change process. And it suggests to us some crosscutting lessons.

Four are offered here, as having some particular bearing on both the content of the work of the NSSG, and the strategies it might employ to leverage the impact of that work.

1. Policy, Practice, and Perceptions: the Practice Opportunity.

Organized efforts to communicate to or about the sector, tend almost always to focus the overwhelming percentage of attention, conversation, and firepower directly on trying either to influence policy makers, or change public perception. They thus aim messages directly at policy makers, or try to get into conversation with people about what policy makers should do, or what “the public” or the leaders of the sector can do to influence policy makers. Alternatively, going directly at “perception,” they aim messages “at the public” to try to change what the people know and how much they know about the sector.

Very little of this sector wide effort is aimed at trying to identify, reach and support change agents in the sector about the actual practice of the work. Yet it's clearly the practice that people in nonprofits need help with – how actually to conduct the work of an organization so that it builds civic participation, for example. And it's the practice of nonprofit work that touches people...rebuilds communities...(etc, etc.)

Additionally, too little attention – and firepower – has been focused on the nexus between practice and policy, and practice and perceptions. Yet there is a huge opportunity here – and one that's its compellingly important for bodies like the Aspen NSSG to address. Because all logic tells us that the practice of the sector's work is what, more than anything else, shapes perceptions and creates the climate in which policy decisions are made.

2. The Default to “If Only they Knew.” We find that communications efforts, on behalf of the sector as a sector (or foundations as foundations...) almost always come from what we call the “If only they knew” perspective.

“If only they knew.... that there were more than 1.4 million organizations in the sector... that there's an organization for every interest...that

nonprofits carry much responsibility for civic and political discourse in this country.... that foundations support all these individual needy groups.... Etc. “If only they knew these things, then they would like us better. Or, then they would deal with us more kindly on the issue of tax exemption. Or, then they would volunteer more and give more.

Our evidence suggests unequivocally that –even if “they” knew ...-- the scales would not fall from their eyes Very often “they” are as critical for what they **correctly** do perceive as for what they don’t. The primary task facing the sector is not to change perceptions – but in many many ways to change reality. In a profound way, the sector needs to listen, and to pay attention to what it hears, because what our colleagues in the business world refer to as “the customer interface” is very bad in much of the nonprofit world. And the great degree of rethinking and reengineering that has occurred in the business sector has not yet reached much of the nonprofits.

3. The New Work of Communications. At the practitioner level, we find the community builders using communications in whole new ways. Their communications talk is talk of listening, building knowledge, providing access to information, drawing people together, listening to new voices, distilling lessons, articulating and moving best practices, doing shared work. Thus the significant contributions of communications to the development of practice – and the job of reengineering in the sector – is coming “up” from the community level, and not in significant ways down from the “leaders.”

4. The Rise of New Life Forms. We speak here of aggregations of people power -- vigorous new aggregations that often have no 501 c 3 status, that know no boards of directors. They are situational, flexible, financially and structurally efficient, increasingly operating across boundaries of time and space because of the internet. They also include new business/nonprofit hybrids. And they have their analogs on the philanthropic side – the new –often young – donors who have significant money to invest, want to have a new connection with the work they fund, and are as likely to go into the Fidelity fund or create their own giving mechanism as to see themselves as part of “organized philanthropy.”

The point here is that it seems increasingly likely that the “intergenerational transfer” of both wealth *and civically inclined time and talent* may not flow into what we think of as the “organized” sector.

So there is real room for new ideas and leadership from sector leadership here – in the sense of the opportunity to keep changes in practice right up at the top of the things we’d like to call attention to – while challenging hard the notion that what we need is yet another effort to focus attention on the policy framework of tax exemption and on the woeful state of what the public doesn’t correctly perceive.