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Doing Things for More Than One Reason

Everyone knows the adage, “don’t put all your eggs in one basket.” In the nonprofit advocacy world, we prefer the reverse corollary of “don’t do something for just one reason.” As in, capacity is limited, there are only so many things you can do to advance your mission; so, make the most of every action to enhance your chances of success.



The real-world example of this advocacy adage occurred in recent weeks when a coalition of national nonprofits sent [a letter to congressional leaders](#) calling on them to do everything in their power to keep the federal government open. If the only purpose was to influence the near-term outcome of macro-economic policies and intra-party nihilism, the letter probably didn't have a direct impact on the 11th hour decision to avert a federal government shutdown, for now. But that wasn't the only

purpose of the letter.

While the short letter focused *primarily* on the dangerous consequences of a government shutdown, it accomplished multiple other objectives.

Bringing the charitable nonprofit community together behind a common message

Many charitable organizations were frustrated by being relegated to the sidelines as factions in Congress argued over spending levels and social policy. There was a profound desire in the charitable nonprofit community to do something to stand up for missions. But with so many competing issues, sign-on letters, and “days of action” proposed, many didn’t know where to start.

The letter from national nonprofits provided a common message that was simple and unifying: if negotiations on appropriations bills fail, “we encourage you to pass a continuing resolution and avert a government shutdown, offering time to complete the budget before the end of 2023.” The letter got everyone on the same page.

Setting a moderate tone that could be heard

If conservative or progressive politicians want to be lectured to, they can listen to their opponents on the other side of the “bargaining table.” It appears from their public comments that most Representatives and Senators have been ignoring the views of “the other side,” including hostile sign-on letters, individual emails, and organizational social media posts from advocacy groups – and not just those aligned with the farther edges of the right and left.

The charitable nonprofit letter differed from others in tone and perspective. It didn’t cast aspersions. It treated all sides with respect and refrained from telling people they were wrong on the substance. The letter focused on the pragmatic and procedural: “As you work to keep your communities healthy, safe, and secure, we once again urge you to avert a government shutdown and pass a bipartisan, bicameral appropriations bill that adequately funds key programs that impact the lives of Americans.”

Providing a reality check

Elected officials tend to focus only on the policy issues and problems before them, not connecting the dots to what's going on in the real world. The letter built that bridge by stating, "at a time when Americans need these services the most, donations and other earned revenue sources continue to decline as demand for many services continues to grow."

Message delivered: Congress can't count on charitable nonprofits to pick up the slack and cover for their inactions.

Speaking truth to power

Too many powerful people kept repeating the canard that a government shutdown would be a minor inconvenience compared to the big goals the shutdown proponents were seeking. The signers of the letter knew better and said so:

"We know from experience that the real-world consequences of a federal government shutdown would be catastrophic for the populations our organizations serve and that you represent. Government programs would come to a halt, and as is often the case, individuals in crisis would turn to our organizations in even greater numbers. Further, payments and renewals for government grants and contracts would cease, causing untold disruptions of programs and threatening the organizations upon which so many rely."

Message delivered: we know what we're talking about and we know bad things would happen to real people if Congress allowed a shutdown.

Educate, educate, educate!

Finally, like another adage everyone knows ("never let a crisis go to waste"), the nonprofit coalition took the opportunity to remind policymakers of the size, scope, and impact of the charitable nonprofit sector. The letter declared, "Charitable nonprofits represent the nation's third largest employment sector, with more than 12 million employees who are at the forefront of helping Americans through difficult

times." Messages delivered: charitable nonprofits are vital to their communities and constituents, and, thus, worth listening to.

While the House and Senate ultimately agreed to "pass a continuing resolution and avert a government shutdown," no one is claiming that the letter from national nonprofits brought about the positive (temporary) outcome.

Still, it certainly didn't hurt.

More importantly, it advanced the collective agendas and priorities of the nonprofit sector in many ways that will help ensure additional results that benefit communities and the people nonprofits serve.