



Four lessons I learned from a global nonprofit

Critical insight to create a greater impact

By: Tom Okarma

International nonprofits give valuable and needed services to a wide variety of people in need. Whether their mission is to provide clean water, healthy food, medical care, spiritual growth, micro loans, poverty relief or some combination of the above they all have a vital role to play somewhere in the world.

And, while most nonprofits share several common traits, when it comes to global agencies, they are distinct in several ways. Perhaps the biggest difference is that most people supporting or volunteering at

international agencies never get to see the agency's work "in country". This can make it very hard to raise awareness, increase donations, develop key stakeholders, and monitor agency impact.

Local nonprofits can easily offer transformative experiences to their partners, volunteers, donors, etc simply by taking them to sites in the community where they are making a difference. Not so with international projects. When it comes to international operations, bringing third-world experiences and "feel" back home may be a huge challenge.

I have been fortunate to have either served on or worked with multiple international nonprofit boards and here are four things I've learned about how global nonprofits and their boards can increase their impact.

Accountability, metrics, and timely feedback are critical for tracking progress against key initiatives.

1. **For the board to be truly effective, it is very helpful if at least a few directors have visited the international sites where the organization has a presence from time to time and then report back to the full board on what they find.**

- While there, they see first hand just how effectively its local partners are performing and how well the agency's programs are working. How better to evaluate progress and the success or failure of efforts than with first-hand accounts? *The same is true for domestic nonprofits. The more you can involve your board in seeing the impact first-hand the greater their engagement and effectiveness.*

Since international nonprofit work can seem so far away and irrelevant to people back home, it's also a good idea to **invite major donors, would be donors, and other key partners on international trips.** While there, they can see the differences their contributions are making. It also helps new donors see how well the agency manages its resources.

2. **For an agency to be successful overseas, it's important to have a clear understanding of what it is trying to accomplish there and how both progress and success are being defined.**

- It takes a reliable feedback system, like field trips and more, to provide assurance to the management team and board that efforts and expenses are on track and appropriate.
- *Having a system for measuring accountability and tracking progress against key initiatives is also vital for nonprofits centered in the U.S. By*

defining clear goals and expectations, evaluating progress, and providing clear and regular feedback to those involved, you will quickly learn what is working, and not working, and you'll be able to adjust as needed to better attain your goals.

3. **Find ways to bring the "look and feel" of the international operations back home.**

- Photos, personal implements, mock buildings or huts similar to what are found in your international work sites, international Skype calls, bringing the international partners back home periodically to meet friends of the agency, etc. All these can help bridge the divide between "home" and where your agency operates.
- *This same is true (on a smaller scale) for smaller nonprofits. Even within a non-global agency, there are likely a variety of stakeholders (volunteers, key sponsors and donors, and possibly even some board members) that don't have an opportunity to witness the impact you are making first-hand. By finding creative ways to "bring the story home" through video, photos, etc. you can help engage those in your organization more effectively.*

4. Successful international agencies understand that not all charity is helpful.

- Sometimes, we tend to do what we think the international partner would find helpful, but it is important to work with the local population to be sure you are providing the services, equipment, and support they need (not what you think they need) that will bring about positive change.
- *This can be a vital lesson for domestic nonprofits as well — especially those in high growth areas, where the need is significant. It can be easy to fall into a mindset of assuming you know exactly what those you serve will find most helpful, but over time this can shift. It is critical to assess the needs of your customers/clients on a regular basis to ensure you are providing the most relevant services.*

To that end, I highly recommend two quick-reading books on the subject of how to provide help that actually helps others. These could be eye-openers for you—they definitely were for me.

- *Toxic Charity* by Robert Lupton
- *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert

While an international nonprofit may seem vastly different than a smaller local nonprofit, you will find that many of the issues they struggle with are quite similar. They may have a different perspective on the world, and a bigger challenge in terms of making the “far away” story impactful for those “at home” but in reality, in many ways, they are the same. All nonprofits are faced with the challenge of sharing their story, in a meaningful way, so others will want to get involved. Take these key lessons to heart and you’ll find yourself able to make a greater impact in your organization.



TOM OKARMA is author of the new book *Break Through the 100 Factors of Nonprofit Leadership*. He has been a successful leader in both the nonprofit and business worlds for more than 30 years, serving and leading numerous boards. He currently serves on the Christian Leadership Alliance Advisory Council in the Board Governance track. Learn more at TomOkarma.com.