

Busting Myths



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During a typical holiday visit with my family the conversation often turns to news of the latest medical, scientific or commercial “myth.” During this year’s July 4th celebration the conversation quickly turned to the recent study on the positive health effects of coffee consumption. Family members offered mixed reviews on the latest “study,” ranging from complete disbelief that drinking four or more cups a coffee could possibly be beneficial, to self satisfaction and relief that excessive coffee consumption might not be as harmful as previously thought.

Excess coffee drinking aside, I’m always grateful when the book I happen to be reading teaches me something I didn’t know beforehand. All the better when the lesson dispels a myth. This week I learned that my knowledge of sushi—from its history to how to properly consume it—was largely mythological. Like many American sushi lovers I mistakenly thought that the essence of “sushi” was raw fish, and that any sushi item without raw fish was “faux sushi.” According to Trevor Corson, author of [“The Story of Sushi,”](#) the essence of sushi is flavored rice. Despite having eaten more than my share of nigiri and sushi rolls, I was unaware that sushi rice contained anything other than rice! Corson writes about the traditional tartness of sushi rice in Tokyo, explaining that “The most closely guarded secret is usually the ratio of vinegar to salt in the sushi rice. It’s said that a master chef can tell the lineage of a sushi bar simply by tasting its rice.” He continues by explaining the American palate’s preference to sweet and sour flavors in sushi rice, adding that in the U.S. “Sushi chefs have noticed that when they add more sugar they get extra compliments.”

As I reached the end of [“The Story of Sushi,”](#) I reflected on the value of myth-busting in organizational management. The pursuit of organizational excellence requires occasional myth-busting. For example:

- **A nonprofit’s financing model—the strategies it uses to fund core operations—may no longer be viable.** Rather than hold on to a relic of the past, leaders must give careful consideration to the funding mix and strategies that will work in today’s world. Reliance on state government reimbursements, for example—which in some states may take six months or more—is a recipe for disaster rather than viability.
- **The simple idea that people who “believe in our mission” are the most effective board members may be a myth for some nonprofits.** Agreement with the principles on which the nonprofit was founded may not be enough to sustain the organization in the treacherous waters of economic recession, changes in donor preferences and fierce competition for clients.
- **The belief that “since it’s never happened here it’s unlikely to ever happen” is a dangerous approach to risk management.** The better approach is to imagine “alternate futures” and plan

accordingly. Anything could happen. Your nonprofit's mission deserves and requires careful preparation.

Nonprofit leaders, like members of our larger society, often hold fast to myths that suit or meet our needs. Believing that boards will be productive without training and support, that donors will continue supporting an organization without interruption or that risk won't "happen here" are potentially dangerous myths.

Step back and look at the core strategies on which your plans are constructed. Challenge the assumptions that underpin your projections for next year's revenues. Consider a risk that has never materialized but that would represent a serious setback for your mission. By rooting out the myths that exist under the shiny exterior of your nonprofit you'll be taking an important step in organizational learning.

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