

The Devil and the Details



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Throughout my 25+ years in the nonprofit sector, I've heard one particular piece of "advice" more times than I would ever want to count. The comment is typically offered by a well intentioned private sector colleague who says something along the lines of: "the leaders of all nonprofits need run their organizations like a business." My simpatico nonprofit sector lifers and I have learned to offer wan smiles (and resist the urge to roll our eyes) when offered this oh so helpful advice. During the corporate scandals of the 1990s and the ensuing Wall Street and world financial crises, it was hard to resist thinking that maybe the poster children of corporate excess could learn a thing or two from those of us toiling in the vineyard of nonprofit service.

Lately though I've noticed that my cynicism about "the private sector knows best" theology is beginning to wane... if just a bit. Well, maybe not wane, but I've started to believe—and I mean truly believe— that management insights and wisdom can be found in every sector, every industry, and in fields where one might not expect to uncover inspiration for a nonprofit mission. Recent proof of my theory about lessons in least-expected places, is the interview with Ori Hadomi, CEO of Mazor Robotics, featured in the Corner Office column in the 12/24/11 edition of *The New York Times*. The article in which the interview with Hadomi is featured is titled "[Every Team Should Have a Devil's Advocate](#)."

In the article Mazor Robotics' CEO offers two very timely suggestions that in my view should be at the top of every nonprofit CEO's "can do" list.

- **Why Not Admit It: We Made a Mistake** — Hadomi explains his company's annual practice of defining "the five biggest mistakes we made last year" and discipline to "focus on the big ones, not the small ones." How refreshing to hear a corporate CEO explain that his company not only makes mistakes, but that the list includes "big ones" as well as "small ones." While I harbor no illusions that this year's crop of nonprofit annual reports will include a new section titled "Major Mistakes and Mishaps," I believe that it's time for our sector to acknowledge that mistakes not only happen... they offer fertile ground for organizational learning and they are required in an environment that embraces innovation.
- **The Devil Made Me Do It: Appoint a Devil's Advocate** – Hadomi attributes his company's "most obvious mistakes" in recent years to his team's tendency to "think too positively." This conclusion is consistent with the work of Joseph T. Hallinan, who explains that "overconfidence" is the number one cause of mistakes, in his fascinating book, *Why We Make Mistakes: How We Look Without Seeing, Forget Things in Seconds, and Are All Pretty Sure We Are Way Above Average*. CEO Hadomi decided to battle overconfidence by appointing a "devil's advocate." The company's devil's advocate "knows how to ask the right questions," and is charged with engaging the senior team in challenging its optimistic

projections and cherished assumptions. It seems to me that many nonprofit leaders spend too much time looking for like-minded souls who will “get along” and “go along,” rather than rolling out the red carpet for a “devil’s advocate” to challenge the propositions, theories and assumptions that prevent bold risk-taking.

The idea of focusing on “mistakes we’ve made” and the prospect of appointing a “devil’s advocate” to the senior leadership team may trigger a case of heart-burn. These ideas run counter to the diet of optimism that feeds the soul of a nonprofit leader. While I’m not suggesting that you stop your search for “best practices” and “best in class” nonprofit approaches, I think we need to allow ourselves the freedom to find nuggets of wisdom in the far reaches of the nonprofit, government *and* business sectors. Many nonprofit leaders clamor for benchmarking tools that are perfectly suited to their circumstances. But the truth is that great ideas, insights and innovative approaches rarely come fully baked and ready to enjoy. What you are far more likely to find are ingredients and techniques that need to be tested in your own, truly nonprofit, kitchen.

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