

## **The Biggest Challenge**

**By Frances Cone Caldwell, GOTAP Consulting**

They are not perfect, yet the expectation is they must be flawless; they are not wealthy, yet they are expected to save their little corner of the world on a shoestring budget; they sell board positions as an easy job, yet they wonder why they don't always get the support they need; they have noble missions, yet they get lost in un-prioritized minutia. Some work extraordinarily well, yet others struggle, sometimes to a sad and perhaps unnecessary death. Many have extremely noble causes, yet others seem to have mission goals which just don't interest the public.

Nonprofits – they're complicated. What is it that makes some work well, more importantly why do others struggle?

Could the culprit be in a buzz word we hear all over the place these days – fear? It might be called anxiety, stress, even working with a half empty glass. The bottom line – it is named FEAR. There are people who live in fear and people who don't and the later are invariably more successful. The successful are not foolish, they are not unstructured, and they are not callous. They just don't put their focus on fear; at the very least they intentionally face their fear, turning it into something productive.

Googling the word "Fear" brings up hundreds of quotes about the many areas of fear. Dictionary.com defines fear as "a distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, pain, etc., whether the threat is real or imagined; the feeling or condition of being afraid". Imagined fear - perceptions appearing to be real. These perceptions are ours to make and ours on which to place our focus but they are still perceptions, not realities. The depth of that fear is ours to control but to do so, we must acknowledge the fear and name the type of fear we are experiencing. Only then are we able to take steps to rid our organization of the fear which threatens its very existence.

Common fears, perceived or real, which challenge future success:

1. **Change or New Ideas, are they to be feared or are they building blocks for the future? Your organization is a living entity and living objects continually change, grow, and evolve. Letting go of the fear of change and new ideas will open the door for possibilities, creativity and, ultimately, success.**  
*"Never be afraid to try something new. Remember, amateurs built the ark, professionals built the Titanic."* Author unknown
2. **Competition is inevitable and successful organizations face it with vision for the future and the will to try whatever it takes to be the best. There is no room for fear in competition. Fear will defeat your cause and organization while it benefits the competition.**

3. **Leadership** is critical, complicated and multi-faceted. Staff leadership must be empowering, communicative, and team oriented. Board leadership must be carefully chosen to meet real needs and be actively involved in all aspects of your non-profit. All leadership must believe vision trumps fear.  
*"All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership."* John Kenneth Galbraith
4. **Money** funds our mission and our work. Without it we wither and die, with it we change and grow. It is not money that gets in the way of progress; it is greed and our fear of scarcity.
5. **Failure** is imminent when we are driven by fear. Success is driven by determination, vision, and positive thinking.  
*"Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. The fearful are caught as often as the bold."* Helen Keller
6. **Safety** is never guaranteed by fear but rather fear is paralyzing to the point of endangering our safety.  
*"In skating over thin ice our safety is in our speed."* Ralph Waldo Emerson
7. **Success** only comes to those who do not dwell in the shadow of fear.  
*"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do."* Eleanor Roosevelt
8. **Work place "enemies"** - real or perceived? They can be in the culture of your organization, the management, the expectations, the work ethic. They can be real and must be addressed to eliminate the fear of them.  
*"You can discover what your enemy fears most by observing the means he uses to frighten you."* Eric Hoffer
9. **Team Work** is critical for enabling an organization to fearlessly move forward with trust and vision.  
*"Who sees all beings in his own self, and his own self in all beings, loses all fear."* Isa Upanishad, Hindu Scripture

Ultimately, these fears are unproductive exercises in futility. Worrying and 'stressing out' about something you cannot change will only lead you and your non-profit to possible failure. These fears take valuable time away from efficiency, program building and completing the work your mission is calling you to do.

The bottom line - fear is associated with death, an inevitable occurrence we all face. Rather than dealing directly with the fear of death, we bring the concept to the present, to our daily lives - fear of failure is fear of a death - professional, personal, emotional, and physical. We fear that a work project won't be what we hope. We experience fear that stymies our personal life and happiness, fear of the unknown which leaves us settling for the mundane, fear of failure in new endeavours, fear of

our own creativity, fear of aging and failing bodies. If we live in fear of any type of death, we try nothing new and are left to experience death of our creativity, intelligence, and possibilities. We get stuck in yesterday, we exist in survival mode, we do not experience the success inherent in the possibilities of living.

*"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."* H. P. Lovecraft

Fear is a real emotion we all have in our lives. How we deal with it determines the influence and affect it has on our lives. Fear can be a healthy emotion when faced with truly dangerous situations but on a daily basis it is an emotion we need to face in a positive and healthy way so that it doesn't suck the life out of us. The biggest challenge is to limit fear in our lives and replace it with possibilities and vision. Trying new approaches, meeting new people and facing inevitable challenges as potential accomplishments is the healthy and productive alternative to fear.

Our non-profits are made up of human beings who may bring with them experience in the for-profit environment where there is funding for making changes, for visioning, for Research and Development, for risk taking. Non-profits must value the services they provide and the mission they accomplish. The biggest challenge they face is the need to focus on positive ways to drive the fear of failure and death out of their environment. Meeting the challenge will replace fear with the power of knowledge, leadership, abundance, vision, success, and above all, an abundance of intrepidity and peace.

*"Dwell in possibility..."* Emily Dickinson

### **Facing the challenge: dealing with fear on a personal level:**

There are hundreds of self-help guides with valuable techniques for dealing with life's obstacles by focusing on the positive and productive. Fearful and positive outlooks are polar opposites. Begin by encouraging everyone involved in your life to focus on the positive in order to rid your life of fear.

1. Personal health – fear of death is real, do whatever you can to put it off.
  - a. Healthy nutrition - lose or gain weight focusing only on the health reasons.
  - b. Movement, take three weeks to build to 60 minutes a day, five days a week - the gym, outside, wherever you want. Make it something you enjoy and your priority.
  - c. Computer breaks for breathing and stretching are easily done together. Every 30 minutes your eyes need a break from a computer and you need to be in motion. Do these together, a walk around the block, a small park, some stretching exercises. Set your watch or phone to alert you. Incorporate deep, slow breathing in through your nostrils deep into your abdomen and out through your mouth, count to 6 for each breath in and out and do at least 10 breaths. Putting your hands on your abdomen will help you focus on your breathing.

- d. Yoga, meditation, and other spiritual practices will bring a calmness and peace to your life, choking the fear which gets in the way of living.
  - e. Achieve this weekly goal: 8 hours of sleep each night, 8 glasses of water each day, walk 8 miles each week.
  - f. If you smoke, stop; if you drink excessively, cut back and get help.
2. Office Health, embrace the environment where you spend 1/3 of your day
    - a. Eat lunch away from your desk, preferably with another co-worker, perhaps outside when the weather permits. Pay attention to the world around you, there are fascinating things going on, many of which may inspire you in your work and help push aside your fears.
    - b. If your office is small, make a point to speak to each co-worker every day.
3. Get involved with life outside of your office
    - a. Interact with people outside your work environment - bring variety to your life.
    - b. Give back; get involved in regular volunteer work outside of your workplace.
    - c. Use social media to keep abreast of opportunities to see the world from a broader perspective. Focus on growth opportunities and not what others have that you don't - you can't achieve those things if you are fearful of failure, make this a positive experience.
    - d. Spend time with positive and upbeat people who enjoy life and are focused on the possibilities they have rather than what they want and/or don't have.
    - e. Try a yoga class, meditate, listen to music, learn to dance. Spiritually and physically nourish your soul, mind, and body.

*"Try a thing you haven't done three times. Once, to get over the fear of doing it. Twice, to learn how to do it. And a third time to figure out whether you like it or not."* Virgil Thomson