“Rule one:  Never allow a crisis to go to waste.
There are opportunities to do big things!”

(Rahm Emanuel, President Barack Obama’s Chief of Staff, on the CBS television news program “Face the Nation”)
Drucker’s advice runs against the grain of the traditional nonprofit mentality, but most nonprofit executives in multi-service organizations will admit they are trying to do too many things for too many people -- and are therefore unable to give any of their clients the attention they deserve. Organized abandonment gives them a way out of the morass.

It’s easy to understand why a nonprofit begins to lose focus, because social needs are always beckoning. Somebody is hurting, so the nonprofit starts a program. Somebody else is in pain, so it spawns another program. Another person needs help, and the nonprofit responds. After all, isn’t that why people enter the nonprofit sector in the first place? To help others? Too often, however, their reach exceeds their grasp, frustration begins to mount, and everybody loses.

Organized abandonment relies on a nonprofit’s ability to be honest with itself about its strengths and weaknesses -- exceedingly difficult for any organization, nonprofit or otherwise. But the results, over time, have been worth it, and the ultimate winners have been the clients. Nonprofits have discovered that reducing the number of programs they offer has actually enabled them to serve more people, and to serve them better -- because they’ve had the necessary time and resources.

The process can be agonizing. It isn’t easy to kill programs, especially if they’re beloved by Board members or funders. And there is an important caveat: If a nonprofit is the best or the only provider of a program that is critically needed, it will of course retain it -- but if there are other nonprofits that can meet the need more effectively, it should cede the field to them and stop fighting them for resources.

This is an important moment for nonprofits. Organized abandonment rarely happens in good times because vested interests prevail. Board members protect their pet programs, staff members subvert the process, stakeholders apply pressure. But in perilous times, people awaken to reality and summon a sense of urgency. Radical changes are easier to stomach.

During the next few months, some nonprofit leaders will be forced against their will into making soul-wrenching decisions about which programs to keep and which to kill. Others will embrace the opportunity, recognizing a path to sustainability and greater impact. But some will continue to resist, unwilling to act responsibly.

Those that drag their feet will be doing themselves -- and the people they serve -- a regrettable disservice.

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