

# Banking on relationships

Forty years ago in my university room I had a poster. Indeed I had several but there's one which I especially recall. It was of two tethered donkeys straining in opposite directions to get at two piles of hay.

They stop and ponder and realise (let's assume for present purposes that donkeys can realise things), that they'll both do better if they cooperate and so they stop competing and, together, move first to one pile and then to the other. Very sensible.

I was reminded of this at Andrew Hind's CTN lecture last autumn when he proposed that the voluntary sector would do well to balance the natural tendency to compete with the equally natural tendency to cooperate.

We are trustees in positions of influence, not donkeys. And every choice we make influences not only the relationships with the people in our own charity but also all those in the 'charitable ecosystem' which Andrew Hind referred to.

See it this way – each time we make a decision of any sort, we pay in or take out of the voluntary sector relationship bank. And the good news is that when we make a decision which directly or indirectly benefits another, they will be more likely to be inclined, sooner or later, to pay in too. And everyone benefits and the bank balance grows.

So decisions made for the common good are thrice blessed – blessing the one who gives,

*"See what happens  
when we all work  
together"*



the one who receives and the 'ecosystem' as a whole. Trustee decision-making is not a zero sum game – I win you lose – but can help create a healthier environment for all.

Even if we do not see our interconnectedness, the public does. We know that in the public's mind charities are interconnected – the actions of one are seen as the actions of any. I remember the mid-1990s when four organisations, by one of which I was then employed, got to the point of deciding to cooperate for the good of refugees, rather than competing for individual organisational advantage. It was a magical moment indeed, and one which, as well as being an inspiration for those involved, led to benefits for each organisation and for refugees.

It can be done. This is not some romantic dream land. Banking on relationships is practical common sense and especially smart in harsh times. And in their day-to-day actions, trustees should lead by example by making decisions which help build the common good – systematic one-to-one links between charities to build relationships and trust, buddying or exchange schemes, twinning programmes and more.

Benjamin Franklin said in 1776 at the signing of the Declaration of Independence: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately." Although those were indeed different times (Franklin referred to the need to band together in the fight against the British) there is indeed resonance for charities today.

Franklin knew it, the donkeys knew it. We, as charity trustees, would do well to know it too. ●

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