

The “PrimeTimers” Agenda for Change in the Third Sector

Leveraging Business Experience

“PrimeTimers”, a non-profit organization, uses business experience to strengthen the Third Sector. The “PrimeTimers” Agenda for Change arises from our first conference in September, 2005. Its outcome was a series of challenges for the Third Sector as a whole. We offer them here to inform public discussion. We also invite collaboration in initiatives that fall within the scope of this agenda.

We invite anyone who in any way shares our concern to respond to these challenges to contact us (info@primetimers.org.uk) with an “expression of interest”.

Changing career patterns and the competition for experienced talent

Both business and the third sector are failing to recognise and deal with the speed of change in traditional career patterns. Change is happening across the age spectrum but is starkest amongst those in mid-life. Continuing business transformation and a persisting ageist culture often combine with the desire of individuals in mid life to seek a fresh direction. Many look to the third sector to explore new challenges, but wish to combine this with a better work/life balance and ability to work for considerably less than in their previous career. How can this resource be marshaled to the benefit of the third sector? How should the third sector adapt if it is to benefit from this new opportunity? (See “PrimeTimers” own research reported by sociologist, Martin Albrow, in Third Sector magazine, 26th October 2005)

“PrimeTimers” aims to bridge this gap but acknowledges that collaborative action is necessary. There is a clear need for more debate about the optimum way to use this resource. We welcome dialogue with others committed to this objective.

Two way transfer

Within the UK while there is an accepted migration route of experienced business executives into senior jobs in the third sector, there are almost no examples of moves in the other direction. This contrasts with the US with its established tradition of cross sector transfers. Yet, increasing numbers of MBA students are finding the third sector a valuable place to gain experience of complex, important issues and unique management challenges that add value to their search for business success. A number of well publicised moves into business by third sector leaders would truly be the signal that the sector has come of age.

Transformation needs to follow a viral model of change. Steps must be taken to break down the prejudices and ill informed views of private sector recruitment agencies and their client companies about the quality of third sector leaders.

Change management and business models

While the third sector is likely to be an increasingly serious alternative to the public and private sector models of service delivery, it is also facing major change. Redefinition of its boundaries will surely follow the debate on what constitutes public benefit in the new Charity Bill, while the increasing participation of the sector in the delivery of public services will trigger unaccustomed but significant transformations. The business sector with its ingrained culture of perpetual change undoubtedly has lessons for the third sector in the successful management of such transformations. However, apart from having business people as trustees there appear to be few established fora for business to share this change experience with the third sector.

Appropriate learning mechanisms must be created to facilitate a transfer of learning about change management and performance measurement.

Knowledge management

We need open debate about knowledge management to help the sector to make better use of its collective knowledge. Are the knowledge needs of large 3rd sector organisations so different from those of small ones that a one size fits all approach is unhelpful? We need to explore the consequences of a self image of the sector that suggests a collaborative, consensual and open culture, but where the search for innovation, funding and contracts in fact can lead to a mimicking of the confidentiality prevalent within business. We need to develop research capacity for the sector that reflects its current relative strengths and its potential for doing things differently from public or private sectors.

“PrimeTimers” believes there should be a debate about knowledge management and invites collaborators and contributors.

Volunteers: Motives, Needs and Benefits

A huge pool of unpaid workers who often receive no contract of employment characterises the third sector. However there is a sense of expectations and obligations. Increasingly volunteers expect the contracting organisation to strive to understand their motivations and needs. In return, the third sector organisation can and should demand the performance of tasks according to a defined standard and timescale. Does the lack of clear thinking on both sides inhibit the optimum use of volunteers? How can the excellent practices employed by some organisations accustomed to utilising large numbers of volunteers be better disseminated across sectors? Does the use of the word noun volunteer, as a type distinct from a paid employee, actually inhibit the adoption of good management practice in respect of these workers?

Businesses with community volunteer programmes often applaud the positive impact on their staff’s personal development. And, the community investment pays its way in terms of favourable corporate publicity. Yet, within HR departments such opportunities are not always seen as fitting neatly alongside more formal staff training and development, or forming part of a wider context

of re-invention and lifelong learning as career patterns change. Outsiders often perceive mixed messages between the goals of the CSR department and the human capital vision of some HR departments. How can the third sector help educate business about the wider developmental benefits of employee community engagement?

“PrimeTimers” is passionate about the need for joined up thinking within corporates, especially the continuing development needs of those in mid career, and proposes to work with interested parties to enhance the development of constructive programmes.

Third Sector Education

Recognition of the third sector within our education system tends to focus on community service with a heavy emphasis on volunteering rather than as a place where careers can be forged. The school curriculum offers GCSEs in Business Studies, but the majority of third sector qualifications are at postgraduate level. Thus schools and most universities are failing to acknowledge the third sector as a distinctive entity either in terms of a possible career or as possessing a body of knowledge distinctive from, or as important as, the study of business. While this lag in recognising the growing importance of the sector remains within the formal education system, the resulting distorted and ill informed views can persist through life.

The third sector needs to become an advocate for a better representation of its unique and growing contribution to the economy within the education system. Third sector organisations themselves should undertake educational initiatives both within the existing system, promoting new elements in the curriculum, seeking enhanced representation on governing bodies, setting up schools, colleges up to and including universities. We have business universities, why not a university for civil society?

“PrimeTimers” invites other organizations to join in campaigning for an integrated lifelong learning approach to third sector education that involves all institutions, both within and outside the formal education system.