

United Way deserves credit for its emphasis on results

Written by

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When you give money to a charitable organization, you expect your donation will be invested wisely. But what does that mean? And how do you know?

Those are questions members of the board of the United Way of Central Iowa began asking themselves several years ago. Those questions led to a new way of doing business for the charitable fundraiser. Today, the focus has shifted to supporting social services programs that help people get to a point where they can provide for themselves. Now, member agencies are expected to set goals and document progress toward those goals.

United Way's overarching goal for the three-county central Iowa region it serves is to invest in programs that will help those served get a good education, become financially independent and improve their health.

Financial security is measured by the number of people who obtain jobs, housing and financial services. Progress toward better health is measured by improved access to health care and avoiding risky behavior. On education, the primary goal is raising graduation rates.

Thus, for example, a United Way grant to the Boy Scouts is used for a program that challenges low-income boys to advance through the Scouting ranks, which means they will also do better in school, evidence shows. A grant to the Des Moines schools' academic support labs helps students falling behind catch up on credits. Evidence of success: "Last year we had students who gained over 175 credits," United Way President Shannon Cofield said, "which meant 55 of them did graduate who otherwise would not have been able to graduate on time."

United Way did not simply require change. It worked with the agencies on setting goals, provided training on statistical methods and supplied the computer software for documenting statistical measures.

This was something of a radical departure for the venerable community organization, but it is a model that should be studied and copied by other charities. It is important to supply services to people who are struggling, but the goal should be measurable progress toward enabling people to be self-sufficient. That is the only way to break the cycle of poverty that grips some families, generation after generation.

United Way of Central Iowa, which serves Polk, Dallas and Warren counties, is in the home stretch of its annual fundraising campaign, which be wrapped up by the end of the year. Last year, it raised \$24.1 million, which helps fund 55 member agencies. Next spring, the board will make allocations to those agencies. Three committees of the board meet six times a year to monitor member agencies' progress toward meeting their goals. Those that are struggling may be put on a six-month probationary contract. Those that excel may receive a financial bonus.

The idea of holding agencies accountable for measurable results may be foreign to the social services world, but not to the business world. Steve Chapman, chief executive of the Ruan Corp., is a predictably hard-nosed businessman. As United Way's board chairman, he expects results. "United Way is a transformational organization," he said. "It certainly raises funds, but it is managing those funds to drive desired outcomes. It isn't about the money. It's about the life-changing events that take place with that money."

Everyone who writes a check to a charitable organization should expect no less.