

Navigating Nonprofit-Local Government Relationships “The Expectation Toss”

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Support provided by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund and
the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners

Target Audience:

Staff, volunteers, and elected officials of municipal or county governments or of nonprofit organizations. Use 5-30 participants.

Purpose of the Exercise:

Many local governments fund community nonprofits to provide services. Often specific staff members are designated with the responsibilities of:

- Receiving, negotiating, or monitoring funding applications from nonprofits,
- Entering into contractual agreements with nonprofits,
- Assessing how the government interacts with nonprofits, or
- Helping nonprofits communicate with government departments.

Although these staff members may be found in differing places in governmental structure (on the manager’s staff, within departments, in the budget office, etc.), for the purposes of this exercise, we will refer to any person with these kinds of responsibilities as a Nonprofit Liaison.

The purpose of this exercise is to assess the kinds of expectations that community stakeholders place on and the implications those expectations have for Nonprofit Liaisons.

Supplies Needed:

1. Something small and soft to toss, such as nerf balls or crumpled up pieces of paper.
2. Something to catch the tossed items with, such as a basket or net.
3. Print out the “roles,” cut them up into individual strips of paper, and fold them up.

The Process:

Ask one person to volunteer to be the Nonprofit Liaison. Explain that it is this person’s job to oversee the funding application and allocation process and to monitor

the effectiveness of these nonprofit-government relationships. While performing these responsibilities, the Nonprofit Liaison is responsible for answering to the expectations of many different people who have a variety of stakes in the outcomes of these relationships.

Hand the Nonprofit Liaison the basket or net and explain that the community stakeholders are going to toss their expectations, and the Nonprofit Liaison is to try and catch them.

Have all the Community Stakeholders stand up. Pass out the roles to the first nine people. They have to state their roles, express their expectations (which are in keeping with their roles), and toss the nerf balls, which symbolize their expectations, to the Nonprofit Liaison.

Once the first nine Community Stakeholders work through these nine roles, the remaining audience members are free to make up their own roles. If someone seems unable to come up with a role or an expectation, the facilitator should offer a suggestion or invite other audience members to do so.

For example, the person in the role of Elected Official might say, "I'm a county commissioner, and my expectation is that you make sure my favorite nonprofit gets funding." A Tax Watch Citizen might respond, "I belong to Tax Watch. I don't want you to raise my taxes so I don't expect you to fund any outside community agencies." A recovering drug addict might advocate for "more funding for services to addicts." An unemployed citizen might request "more efforts to bring new employers into our community."

Encourage the participants to generate a variety of expectations that reflect the diversity of thought within any community. Keep going until everyone expresses an expectation or they run out of ideas.

Discussion Points:

To the Nonprofit Liaison

- How did it feel to be on the receiving end of those expectations?
- Did you want to catch them all or maybe let some sail by? Which ones would you have preferred to drop or ignore?
- Why did you decide to stand where and catch the expectations the way you did? Was there any other way to have done it that might have made your task easier or more difficult? (Discuss the symbolism of letting the stakeholders lob the expectations from a distance or of going right up to them and forcing them to drop the expectations in the net.)

To the whole group

- Were the expectations consistent? Which ones were contradictory?

- What implications do these expectations have for the way the Nonprofit Liaison conducts his or her work? (communication, documentation, process, politics, etc.)
- What can or should the Nonprofit Liaison do to bring these differing expectations to the attention of the various stakeholders?
- Are there any other conclusions we can draw from this exercise about the role of the Nonprofit Liaison?
- If we repeated this exercise with a Nonprofit Director instead of a Nonprofit Liaison, what, if anything would be different? What would be similar?

Note: This exercise can easily be applied to many other positions that are faced with managing diverse expectations, such as school principals, elected officials, religious leaders, etc.

The Roles:

Elected Official

City/County Manager

Executive Director of a local community nonprofit organization

Service recipient of a local nonprofit agency that offers emergency assistance

Local owner of a small business

Tax Watch Citizen

Chair of the City/County Volunteer Advisory Board that reviews nonprofit applications

Well-intentioned Do-Gooder Citizen

Low-income parent whose child receives a scholarship to play in a city soccer league