



Thinking like a Tech Company

By: Gwyneth Mac Murtrie, Director of Education at Morven Park

When we're not planning, reworking, setting up, teaching, or cleaning up after one of our programs, the education team tries to catch up on articles and other press related to civics. An interview that recently caught our attention was from an episode of the podcast [Recode Decode](#) called "Why nonprofits should think more like tech companies."

The interview focused on author Kathleen Kelly Janus' latest book [Social Startup Success: How the Best Nonprofits Launch, Scale Up, and Make a Difference](#). In the interview, Janus identifies five technology sector strategies that nonprofits should use to get ahead and become more effective. As we listened, we couldn't help drawing comparisons to our current programming here at Morven Park. Here are our thoughts:

#1 - Testing and Innovation:

In Janus' research, she found many nonprofits start without fully understanding the other organizations already working on the same mission or cause. Janus suggests individuals who want to start a nonprofit take the time to research existing organizations already trying to solve the problem. If the new nonprofit plans to solve the same problem, the founders must ask themselves "what makes our solution unique?".

When the [Morven Park Center for Civic Impact](#) (MPCCI) began, plenty of national organizations provided civics programs for students. What made our program different was that none of these organizations operated specifically in Loudoun County, provided grade-specific programs, trained educators to lead the programs, and offered the program for free. They might have met one or two of these criteria, but not all of them, so MPCCI passed this first test.

#2 - Measuring Impact:

Good data helps inform nonprofit organizations about the effectiveness of their desired impact, but Janus found that while 75% of non-profits collect data, only 6% feel they know how to use it well.

Again, MPCCI passes this test. We collect data and are confident we know how to use it. During the 2017-18 school year, we conducted an evaluation of our 3rd, 8th, and 12th grade programs. The findings helped us better understand the impact our programs have on students. Our formal evaluations, coupled with informal observations and teacher feedback, helped us redesign lessons to better produce desired outcomes. This year we've already seen the positive effects of the changes made thanks to the data collected during last year's evaluation.

#3 - Fundraising More Creatively:

Nonprofits continually seek out new or returning financial supporters and Morven Park is no different. Janus suggests looking for new funders in ways other than the traditional gala, grant, or written check.

Recently we tried that "thinking out of the box" approach with our volunteer corps. We explored how volunteers could become supporters- not by giving their money, but by giving their time. Many of our programs rely on stuffed folders, tangram tiles, or other materials that take time to assemble. By increasing our number of volunteers, we freed up staff time and could focus on other aspects of the program planning process. Also, we believe that some volunteers will become donors after they've directly experienced one of our educational

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KATHLEEN KELLY JANUS

programs, felt a personal connection to the work we do, and realized how much they helped contribute to our success.

#4 - Collective Leadership:

Janus explains collective leadership as “when organizations flip the traditional hierarchy of the CEO being on top and putting their staff up front.” In this model, customers come first and the CEO last.

At Morven Park, we thrive on collective leadership. We highly value our “customers” whether they are teachers, athletes, equestrians, or museum patrons. Morven Park has many different programs and offerings and it would be impossible to ask management to be an expert in every subject matter or have a hand in every decision. The Executive Director provides guidance and support but allows each department manager to take the lead on projects and execute day to day operations with minimal oversight.

#5 - Developing Better Ways of Telling the Story:

According to Janus’ research, it is beneficial for all staff and board members to be capable of effectively telling an organization’s story. You never know how an individual’s connections or daily interactions can help grow your mission and everyone must be ready to be a “brand ambassador”.

As the Center for Civic Impact has grown, our story has changed and evolved. In order to keep track of our progress (and setbacks) we continually update our 5-year business plan. This forces us to understand and communicate what we’re working on, what we’ve accomplished, and what still needs to be done. That is extremely helpful to know as we “tell our story” to educators, funders, our Board of Trustees and other staff here at the Park.

To help us grow our brand and tell our story, learn more about our approach to teaching civics curriculum and the programs we offer at [MorvenPark.org/Education](https://www.morvenpark.org/education). Continue following the education blogs to learn more about how we use these concepts as well as other exciting things in the works!

Source:

Swisher, K. (Host). (2018, November 14). *Why nonprofits should think more like tech companies* [Audio podcast]. <https://www.recode.net/2018/11/14/18094520/kathleen-kelly-janus-nonprofit-philanthropy-charity-social-entrepreneurship-kara-swisher-podcast>.