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Social Enterprise: Is it the answer?

Jane O'Connor and the team at The Cleaning Solution have created a truly successful social enterprise. They are transforming lives by employing people living with mental illness to provide competitive janitorial services. Here's what Jane has to say to non-profit board members and executive directors inspired by their example.

The question I most frequently ask the people who call me up is, "Are you and key players ready?"

- Are you ready to think like a business? Act like a business? Make decisions outside your non-profit comfort zone?
- Are you ready to embrace profit? Are you able to say, "Profit is not a dirty word" and mean it?
- Are you ready to read income statements and understand a profit and loss statement?
- Are you ready for the business not to breakeven in the first year, or second or third...? Are you ready to go in debt?

When agency leaders interested in social enterprise approach me, the bottom line is, "**Are you ready to think differently?**"

Social Enterprise looks good – an empowered and creative response to current funding realities. I think sometimes it looks easy. But it is a world that is very foreign to many, perhaps most, non-profits.

I have sat in many meetings with my colleagues who are exceptionally talented and dedicated to the work they do. We all share a common passion to improve the lives of those living with mental illness.

But many times, as the social entrepreneur, I have felt like an outsider speaking a foreign language when I ask questions about costs, profitability, or marketing. I perceive problems and solutions differently - not better – just with a different framework.

Where do you find a common language? Who will listen and understand your challenges and who will help celebrate the successes? **Who will speak business with you?**

Beyond the personal challenges, social enterprise is deeply disturbing to the organization. I believe the biggest challenge is recognizing the difference

between a great business idea and a great idea for a program. A need does not equal a business. Good intention will not necessarily mean profitability in the end; recognizing the difference can be challenging for non-profits.

Starting and running a social enterprise is not the same as starting a Sunday shopping trip program to the local mall: Within a few trips, the bugs have been ironed out and most problems can be averted or predicted.

Starting a business has a certain predictability but social enterprise, especially an employment-based business, provides some very unique challenges. Many of which are not at all predictable.

"Up and running" doesn't mean profitability, viability, and sustainability when you are talking about a business, and that difference is a challenge for many non-profit leaders. The timeline and cycle of a business start-up is not familiar. It takes patience, faith and the willingness to take risks outside of the usual non-profit comfort zone.

If you are ready for all this, there are many benefits.

Perhaps the greatest is a change in the core assumptions driving your organization: Many non-profits approach problems and decision making from a place of poverty – of having little or few resources, and fewer options.

Social enterprise can change that. It can shift thinking from poverty to wealth.

Again, are you ready? When our thinking and decision making is from a place of abundance, skill and capacity, it is rather exciting and empowering.

Jane O'Connor is Team Leader of the Social Enterprises Services Department at the Vancouver/Burnaby Branch of the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#), and a Director of [The Cleaning Solution Society](#), a social enterprise started by CMHA, employing individuals living with mental illness.