



The Mycelium Model for capacity builders, professional associations, funders, and other support organizations

Posted on [May 20, 2019](#) by Vu

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[Image description: Two velvet foot mushrooms, one tall one and one short one, growing from a log. They are both bright orange and standing on a cylindrical stem. The big one has gills. The mycelium is not shown. Image obtained from [Pixabay.com](#)]

Hi everyone, if you haven't filled out the [Fundraising Perception Survey](#), please do so. It'll take 10 minutes and I will send you a baby bunny. (OK, I was just told by our lead evaluator that bribing people with adorable pets would bias the results, so strike that).

Every year, I look forward to the [Puget Sound Mycological Society's Wild Mushrooms Show](#), where hundreds of types of mushrooms are on display. All are critical to the ecosystem. Some are edible and delicious; others are poisonous; a

few phosphoresce in the dark; several gradually melt into a sticky mess. In other words, mushrooms are very much like nonprofits.

All jokes aside, there is much that mushrooms can teach us. We can liken direct service organizations to mushrooms, as they provide sustenance to a variety of plants and animals. They are vital because they feed the community.

However, for mushrooms to flourish, the mycelium must be strong. This is the vast but mostly underground network of root-like tendrils. Mycelium is like an invisible tree, and the mushrooms you see are the visible fruit. The mycelium does many important things: Brings nourishment, clears out toxins, connects mushrooms to one another, creates symbiosis with other species, and decomposes and recycles nutrients, among other things.

Mycelium has often served as a metaphor for community, for the invisible connections that bind us in a vast network of humanity. It also serves as a great model for support/intermediary organizations. I am going to **define these as the organizations who do not provide direct services but support those that do**. This includes capacity builders (like Rainier Valley Corps), **back office service providers, collective impact backbone organizations, affinity and profession development associations, grantmaker associations, state nonprofit associations, coalitions, and foundations**.

Support organizations, like mycelium, are often invisible. And sometimes people wonder what the hell we do. On occasion, especially when funding is tight (because no one wants to fund capacity building or advocacy or whatever) we ourselves even ponder what the point of our existence is. **But we are vital to the nonprofit ecosystem because without support organizations, it will be challenging if not impossible for many direct service nonprofits to thrive**. Mycelium thus provides our sector with a great guide on the role and functions of support organizations, and a gauge on whether we are effective at doing our jobs. If you are a support organization, get your team together and discuss how well you are doing in each of these categories below:

Delivering nutrients: In nature, the mycelium brings nutrients so that the fruiting bodies, the mushrooms, can grow and do their work. Support organizations must ask ourselves how we are bringing resources to nonprofits. By advocating for more funding? By helping write grants? By providing back-office services? By recruiting and training volunteers? The most important resource is multi-year, general operating dollars (MYGOD). In this sector, we have a damaging belief that nonprofits should be self-sustaining. Following the Mycelium Model, it should be the role of support organizations to bring resources so that nonprofits can do their jobs. Just as importantly, support organizations must assess whether we are taking or using too much of resources for ourselves, which would be a violation of one of mycelia's primary functions.

Detoxifying the environment: Certain types of mycelium are proving to be extremely effective in removing toxins from the environment, including plastic, petroleum oil, even mercury. That's freaking amazing! Support organizations play a similar role when help to remove barriers so that other organizations can do their work. For instance, my org discovered that the contracting and reporting process for a grant was unrealistic and burdensome for many nonprofits in our operations support program. Due to power dynamics, it is difficult for these smaller groups to give the grantor feedback directly. RVC, however, was able to provide the feedback and work with the funder to simplify it. Capacity builders, intermediary organizations, professional associations, and even foundations, must play more of this role of helping to remove barriers so that nonprofits providing vital services to our community can thrive.

Strengthening communications: Mycelium help to connect plants to one another, kind of like an internet within nature. This allows plants to communicate and helps with things like collective defense against threats. Recently, I led a conversation among fundraisers and other nonprofit leaders on how we may be complicit in perpetuating inequity even while we aim to fight it. The discussion was eye-opening. The group that brought me there, a support organization, realized that these organizations had very few opportunities to have these deep, meaningful conversations. Support organizations must bring leaders together, creating spaces that are conducive to honest discussions, feedback, and collaboration. As the

challenges facing our communities become more challenging, we play a critical role in strengthening communications among nonprofits.

Creating symbiosis: Mycelium play a fascinating role of fostering beneficial symbiosis with a variety of plant species. The mycelium absorbs nutrients that may not otherwise be accessible to plants, and in turn plants provide sugar and other nutrients that the mycelium cannot easily obtain. Support organizations play a similar role when we help organizations cooperate, through connecting but also through intentional setting up of symbiotic relationships: A funder introducing two orgs that are doing similar things so they could collaborate; a capacity builder connecting an org that has tried and succeeded (or failed) at something and another org that is thinking of heading down the same path so they could share lessons learned. Also, I've been seeing more support organizations facilitating cross-sector collaborations, which will be vital to many of the issues we are trying to address.

Protecting against harm: When mushrooms or symbiotic host plants are attacked, the mycelium plays a defensive role by releasing chemicals to ward off intruders. When it might be too late for one plant or mushroom, the mycelium can warn others through its channels so they are prepared. Support organizations play a similar role when we fight off ignorant and damaging beliefs and policies, such as the destructive focus on "overhead." As if we didn't have enough to deal with. Support organizations need to recognize and more actively engage in our role of protecting the sector against ignorance-based beliefs and policies.

Decomposing and Recycling: Mycelium helps to break down organic and inorganic matters so that they could be used as nutrients. This includes reabsorbing mushrooms that are past their time and may no longer be useful to the ecosystem in their current form. That sounds morbid, but it is a pivotal role in the ecosystem. And in the nonprofit ecosystem, we need support organizations to play a similar role. In fact, I think this is one area that we are not very strong at in our sector: Helping nonprofits that are no longer effective, or that were formed for a specific time-bound purpose, to dissolve. I'm not sure many nonprofits even know of this as an option, and so we have a bunch of "phantom nonprofits" who have legal tax

status but who are not active. **We capacity builders and other support organizations need to do a better job letting nonprofits know that it's OK to dissolve, and help them through the often existentially-fraught process of doing so.**

Maintaining balance: It has been found that mycelium not only helps to connect plants of the same species, but of different species, and this facilitates the redistribution of nutrients to weaker or younger plants and species. According to this [article](#), “It has been proven that nutrients being recycled from older trees do not always go to older-established trees but instead go to the saplings in the area to help them grow.” Support organizations must play a similar role in bringing resources to nonprofits led by and serving people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ folks, older adults, people in rural communities, etc. Right now, it is imbalanced, with these organizations getting the least funding. Our role in restoring and maintaining balance is one of our most important ones, and we need to be as intentional as mycelium.

All right, sorry I geeked out so much on mushrooms and mycelium (and yet I am not sorry at all). Mushrooms are an important part of our ecosystem. They are pivotal in the environment and in our communities, including in my wild mushroom and chocolate chip risotto (very popular with the children). To thrive, however, they rely on the invisible mycelium that runs in a vast network underground that provides nutrients, connects, detoxifies, creates symbiosis, protects against threats, decompose and recycles matters, and maintains balance. We support organizations must recognize our responsibilities within the nonprofit ecosystem. Learning from mycelium is a way for us to gauge how effective we are in carrying out our work, and prevent us from straying too far from our purpose—for instance, by absorbing too many resources for ourselves, or by not doing a better job with advocacy in the face of external threats, or by not creating connections and collaborations among nonprofits—and possibly harming the organizations we were formed to support.

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B

Betsy_at_Class_Action

5 years ago

I'm literally LOL at the acronym MYGOD for multi-year, general operating dollars!

1 0 Reply ↗

— ▾



Alliance for Better Nonprofits

5 years ago

We feel SO SEEN RIGHT NOW, thank you!!! We might even change our name to Mycelium. Love, an East TN capacity building organization that constantly struggles to explain to donors who we are, why we do what we do, and why we need support, too! <3

0 0 Reply ↗

— ▾



Paulette Lynch

5 years ago

You are such an insightful leader and awesome writer. THANK YOU!!!!

0 0 Reply ↗

— ▾

J

JM

5 years ago

"We can *liken* direct service organizations to mushrooms..."
I see what you did there. LOL\

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— ▾



Anne Murphy Owens

5 years ago

Thank you -- needed the words of support today. As one of the background (Vol. Center) organizations, I often feel that the merit of my organization to the community is overlooked or taken for granted.

— ▾

0 0 Reply 



Persia

5 years ago



Excellent points about helping nonprofits that have served their purpose gracefully end, rather than remaining in legal limbo or limped along for the sake of limping along. I think it's easy to forget when you're in 'look forward, plan ahead' mode to recognize that 'let it go' is also sometimes the right option.

(I took the survey, but am once again reminded what blunt instruments surveys can be. Where is my 'sometimes' option?! Where is my 'I'm not sure' option?)

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Tweets from @NonprofitAF

Vu Le (with o...) 
@No... · Feb 20

“What is a codpiece, and should everyone at your organization wear one?”

nonprofitaf.com

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  7 

 **Vu Le (with one E)** reposted

Sulaim...   
@Sha... · Feb 17

 260  16K 

 **Vu Le (with one E)** reposted

Najat Abdi 
@the... · Feb 15

I cannot believe Egypt is building a concentration camp as we speak. This level of betrayal will be felt for generations and will have regional repercussions. Inhumane doesn't begin to describe it. I'm enraged and

describe it. I'm enraged and heartbroken at the same time.

735 33K

Vu Le (with one E) reposted

Khalissee @Kah... · Feb 15

WATCH THE AD THATS GOING VIRAL IN AMERICA ON TIKTOK

"Honey we can't afford these eggs. Our government needs that money to kill Palestinians in Gaza."



1K 87K

Vu Le (with o... @No... · Feb 14

Happy Valentine's Day, everyone. Here's part 3 of #NonprofitPickupLines

instagram.com

Vu Le (@nonprofitaf) • Instagram reel

2

Vu Le (with o...

@No... · Feb 13

“Funders: Do a better job of protecting and supporting leaders and organizations who take risks in standing up for justice”

nonprofitaf.com

Funders: Do a better job of protecting and supporting ...

10



Vu Le (with one E) reposted

Martin Gri...  

@UNR... · Feb 7

We must not forget #Sudan.

Almost 10 months of conflict have robbed the people of Sudan of nearly everything.

We are appealing for US\$4.1 billion to meet the needs of civilians inside the country and those who have fled to neighbouring countries.

reliefweb.int/report/sudan/s

...

40 367

Vu Le (with one E) reposted
Mohamad... @mhd... · Feb 6

Kidnapping and torturing United Nations staff is a violation of the Vienna Convention. This is unacceptable.

1K 64K

Vu Le (with o... @Non... · Feb 6

“The Year of the Dragon and what it means for nonprofit and philanthropy”

nonprofitaf.com
 The Year of the Dragon and what it means for nonprofit ...

1 20

Vu Le (with one E) reposted
Free Palestine @Wild... · Feb 5

Holy shit, look at the reaction to this guy saying, “I’m Jewish, I support

Palestinian human rights.”



1K 49K

Vu Le (with one E) reposted

marzi 🇵🇸 ✨ ... X @the... · Jan 27

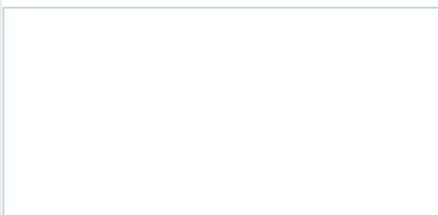
a 📖 of things NOT to do as a pro-palestine “ally” since as a palestinian myself, a lot of y’all are giving us second-hand embarrassment w/in the past few months ever since the genocide escalated back in october:

143 106K

Vu Le (with one E) reposted

NIKKINOW2 ... X @Cund... · Feb 1

White people complain every year that there isn't a White history month. So in order to oblige them, I am starting a thread #WhiteHistoryinBlackHistory Month





1K 11K

Vu Le (with one E) reposted
Trae Crowder @trae... · Jan 31

ON REPUBLICANS AND THE BORDER CRISIS

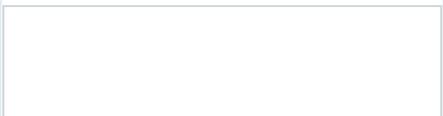


412 12K

Vu Le (with one E) reposted
LanaQuest... @LqLa... · Jan 30

In 1946 WWII veteran Maceo Snipes was shot in his back by the KKK the day after he became the first Black person to cast a vote in Taylor County, Georgia.

After he was shot, Mr. Snipes walked three miles to the hospital with his mother. For six hours doctors left him waiting...





2K 23K ⓘ

Vu Le (with o... X
@Non... · Jan 30

“10 boring, predictable responses often made by enablers of crappy funding practice”

nonprofitaf.com
10 boring, predictable responses often made by ...

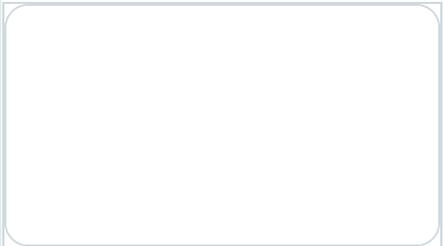
1 14 ⓘ

↻ **Vu Le (with one E) reposted**

CALL TO A... ✓ X
@Callt... · Jan 24

HOLY SHIT! Only 17 years old, yet he destroys Republicans better than any adult could.

Every second of this gives me hope.



3K 49K ⓘ

Vu Le (with o... X
@Non... · Jan 23

“Join the global strike this week for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza”

nonprofitaf.com

Join the global strike this week for a permanent ...

🗨️ ❤️ 6 ⓘ

🔄 **Vu Le (with one E)** reposted

Francesca Al... 
@Fran... · Jan 21

This is absolutely disgraceful & orwellian. One would think that if there is a place where the danger of dehumanizing rethoric should instinctively be understood and averted is Germany.

People in Germany: please do not stay silent. Let humanity prevail.

🗨️ 525 ❤️ 12K ⓘ

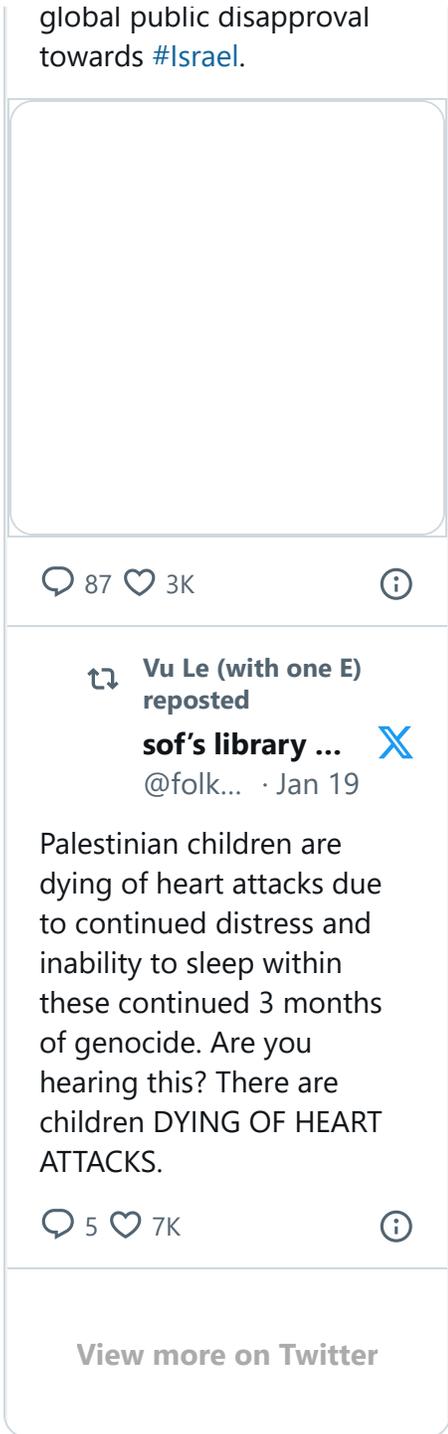
🔄 **Vu Le (with one E)** reposted

Muhamm...  
@rafa... · Jan 20

Replying to @azaizamotaz9

The Israeli flag  was taken down from Sheffield Town Hall in England and replaced with the Palestinian flag 

Signaling a rising wave of



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