STRONGER ROOTS

KC PRIESTOR:
WHEN VISION MEETS OPPORTUNITY

How a small community centre in Sered' found its identity and built a partnership with a multinational corporation

Nadace OSF · Nadácia Otvorenej spoločnosti · NIOK · glopolis · Batory Foundation

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Photo: Marcela Pančík Bardiovská – KC PRIESTOR team

KC PRIESTOR

is a community and cultural centre in the town of Sereď that focuses primarily on children and young people. In response to the significant outflow of youth from the town, the centre aims to strengthen ties between young people and their hometown, bring the youth community closer together, and offer alternative ways to spend free time – not only for young people, but also for families and active adults.

In addition to hosting workshops, discussions, and cultural events, the centre also runs a coworking space for students and nonprofits. Currently, the organising team consists of five members, working mostly on a voluntary basis.

Foto: Lukáš Klčo – Opening workshop of the *Exceptional* programme

Challenge: Finding stability with limited resources

The main goal of KC PRIESTOR's project under the Stronger Roots programme was to professionalise the organisation, despite having a small team, limited funding, and a high number of ongoing activities.
The team was looking for ways to bring in new volunteers and achieve financial stability. A major focus was placed on strengthening ties with the corporate sector. They also wanted to learn how to do crowdfunding within their local community and better identify potential donors.

A weekend that changed everything

At the start of the process, the team, with the support of an external facilitator, took part in a weekend teambuilding retreat to go back to basics. They re-examined the centre's vision and the values it should represent. Through this process, they redefined their mission, values, and the kinds of activities that align with their vision – consciously avoiding those that might seem attractive but don't fit the organisation's direction.

During the process, it became clear that not all team members identified with these ideas, which marked a turning point. It explained why the team had not been functioning well internally. Nearly half of the team members subsequently decided to leave and end their cooperation. The newly defined vision, values, and guiding principles then served as a key foundation for further work – such as developing tailored products for corporate partners.

Photo: Marcela Pančík Bardiovska – Closing ceremony of the *Exceptional* program

Building a strategic partnership with Amazon

Thanks to the new vision, the offer of cooperation for Amazon, which operates in the town of Sereď, was much better structured. Although there had been occasional cooperation with Amazon in previous years, it had been informal and irregular. However, previous contacts had been maintained. KC PRIESTOR therefore re-established contact with the company and held a series of in-person meetings, where they first sought to understand the company's approach to supporting the nonprofit sector. Since this information was not available online, in-person conversations were the only way forward.

The key was to find alignment between the organisation's own vision and the vision of the company. The first step was introducing corporate volunteering. Building on that, the team proposed a leadership development programme for girls. This was in line with the company's internal development programme in the same area. The idea that a girl with strong leadership skills could one day become a capable manager was also appealing.

The KC PRIESTOR team then presented an offer for cooperation, including key indicators and methods for measuring impact. Consultations with psychologists were very helpful in setting indicators of internal change in the girls.

A consultant from the Stronger Roots program helped to design an impact measurement questionnaire in terms of feedback for the organisation, and a marketing consultant helped to craft the final offer for the company.

The partnership's success was based on this alignment with the company's values, a clear articulation of the programme's benefits for participants, and the company's active involvement – some workshops took place on Amazon's premises, with company employees participating as instructors.

For Amazon, one of the perceived benefits was raising awareness among local residents and the opportunity to build its reputation. The company appreciated the intentionality and continuity of this cooperation, as opposed to random volunteer events such as litter collection.

Today, Amazon is the general partner of KC PRIESTOR's girls' leadership programme, and both sides are exploring ways to continue the collaboration even in the context of reduced company budget. The organisation now also has a list of other companies it plans to approach for cooperation.

Crowdfunding: Learning by doing

Another idea of the team was to attract regular individual donors from the community. Together with a consultant, they reconsidered this plan and decided to launch a one-off crowdfunding campaign. The aim was to raise funds for the rent of new premises.

Although the move to private premises was primarily triggered by political circumstances, this fact was intentionally left out of the campaign messaging. Instead, the focus was placed on the new, renovated, accessible space – green surroundings in the heart of a residential area – and on launching a social enterprise in the form of a café.

The successful campaign was preceded by improved communication about the centre's activities, with a particular focus on the programmes for young people.

Photo: PwC – Workshop for young people from the centre

Challenges and lessons learned

"Amazon — it went smoothly, but it required a huge amount of work."

team KC Priestor

When they tried to establish similar partnerships with two other corporations, they encountered obstacles: both had reduced their budgets, and their original contact persons had left. They would have had to start the entire relationship-building process that they had successfully completed with Amazon from scratch – and at that point, they no longer had the capacity to do so. Just building relationships takes much more time than they had anticipated. Now, they have a list of relevant companies to approach. They can invite them to company breakfasts, informally invite them to meetings in the centre to find out more about how these businesses want to support their communities and build on that.

Crowdfunding was the greatest challenge, as KC Priestor had no prior experience with it. They eventually decided to break the fundraising goal into milestones – a move that proved wise. In hindsight, they realized they had overly high expectations for regular individual donations. Reflecting on the crowdfunding campaign, the organisation's team believes that investing more money in advertising, even with uncertain result, might have helped the campaign.

At the beginning of the process, half of the team members left the organisation because they did not connect with its newly defined vision and values. Although this was difficult at the beginning, it turned out to be beneficial and led to a better functioning and more cohesive team. The support of a mentor was crucial during this time, helping leadership establish clearer team structures. Responsibilities were clearly assigned, regular team meetings were established, and thanks to the Amazon partnership, the team was able to hire one new staff member. With this additional capacity, the organization could explore new projects, including those involving EU funding.

KEY FINDINGS

- **A clear vision is the foundation of everything**
  Defining the organisation‘s vision, what it stands for, and what it offers helps to communicate better with target groups and partners.

- **The team must share values**
  If not, it is better to part ways, even with volunteers. Don‘t be afraid to work with a smaller team, but it is important that everyone knows exactly what they are working towards and is a team player.

- **Donors are not ATMs**
  Do not perceive them as a bottomless source of money. Listen to them and try to understand their motivations. At the same time, stick to your vision, and if you cannot find common ground, do not be afraid to walk away.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

01

Offer, don‘t beg!

Present your proposal to donors – not just a request for money.

02

Invest in building relationships

Strategic partnerships require much more time and energy than it seems.

03

Stretch crowdfunding across the year

If you decide for crowdfunding, set a target amount for the whole year and look for different ways to meet it. It might not work out all at once.

04

Milestones work

When crowdfunding, dividing the target amount into milestones is a good strategy.

STRONGER ROOTS

This case study was developed within the Stronger Roots program.

The aim of the Stronger Roots program is to increase the resilience of civil society organisations and their networks, strengthen their social capital, and integrate them into the communities and societies in which they operate. The program is implemented by the Open Society Fund Prague, the NIOK Foundation, the Open Society Foundation Bratislava, and Glopolis.