Some might say that nonprofits are the hope of humanity. Dr. Robert F. Ashcraft, Executive Director of Arizona State University’s Lodestar Center for Philanthropy & Nonprofit Innovation, and a professor of nonprofit studies, lives with this concept daily. In fact, he is at the center of this discussion.

In leading the ASU Lodestar Center with his drive for effective nonprofit and philanthropic practice, Ashcraft focuses on the premise that these nonprofits are crucial to the advancement of society. No matter the scale, from local to global, nonprofits and those who lead, manage and support them, fill a critical role. They aid society in every possible aspect from advancing
the social, political, environmental and cultural landscape to education and healthcare.

As Dr. Ashcraft explains, philanthropy and nonprofit forms grew, in part, from a response to perceived inadequacies in government and/or the marketplace of commerce. To fill those needs, individuals through philanthropy would often organize and nonprofits formed to serve those specific missions. From homelessness to veteran services and beyond, a vibrant nonprofit sector grew.

More importantly, nonprofit services are often fueled by the personal commitment, experience and values expressed by philanthropists.

“Those attracted to the sector often answer a higher calling and the expectations for performance are huge,” says Dr. Ashcraft. Since 1999, the Center has explored ways for nonprofits to be more impactful and sustainable. As a research-based nonprofit academic center, they serve this need by offering data-driven research, professional development training seminars and access to thought leadership that provide unique insight for nonprofits to succeed.

The innovative approach to learning, research and service has made the Lodestar Center at ASU one of the globe’s most
influential leaders on the topic. It is nearly impossible to talk about effective nonprofit management and philanthropic practice in Arizona without mentioning the Center and its critical role in educating practitioners and volunteers/donors to effectively lead, manage and support the causes they care about.

Arizona was the perfect place to start the discussion about effective nonprofit and philanthropic practice and it was a strong fit with Arizona State University. According to the Center,
there are more than 20,000 registered nonprofits serving nearly seven million people across the Grand Canyon State.

Ashcraft agrees that these numbers indicate that “Arizona’s nonprofit sector is robust and meets a variety of purposes that advance our communities. Equally impressive is that over 77 percent of Arizona households make charitable gifts and 1.2 million Arizonans volunteer their time to support causes,” he adds.

Nonprofits, especially those charitable organizations within the sector, are led and supported by individuals with passion across an array of mission types from educating youth, preserving the natural world, providing forums for worship, activism, and artistic expression among other purposes.

At the core of each, however, is a desire to be proper stewards of philanthropic investments. Mismanagement and ineffectiveness can sacrifice, if not waste limited resources
and ultimately the legitimacy and life of an organization that doesn’t focus on good management.

What began as a service project 35 years ago by Phoenix Rotary 100 Club in the founding of ASU’s Nonprofit Leadership Alliance program, formerly American Humanics, later became the comprehensive nonprofit academic center that the ASU Lodestar Center is today. The Center facilitates undergraduate and graduate academic programs as well as research projects, next generation leadership programs, nonprofit assistance and capacity building opportunities, all within the framework of an institution of higher learning.
“We are giving people the knowledge and tools they need to be great at what they do whether they are staff, volunteers, board members or philanthropists.

These are the individuals who advance nonprofits and are the human and philanthropic capital ingredients that allow nonprofits to meet their mission and do what they do at greater levels of achievement and impact,” Ashcraft explains.

It is not good enough to have a passion for a social cause. Effective organizations orchestrate change. The needs of a society are ever-changing and yet the pursuit of effective practices remain.

What has changed is a laser focus on impact, especially among those nonprofits dealing with issues who face the most vulnerable of citizens.

The strategy in Greater Phoenix -- to move from managing homelessness to a setting of ending homelessness -- is the sort of solutions driven leadership that has grown first from the area’s nonprofit sector. “Is it okay
to manage an issue that seems to grow larger despite the
great work of leaders, managers, volunteers and donors?”
Ashcraft asks rhetorically. “Or, are nonprofits realizing their full
potential to actually eradicate this issue?” he questions.

This discussion is typical at ASU’s Lodestar Center and
such questions are often framed within the constraints of
resources. How do these vital organizations keep up with
the changing landscape in which they serve? How do they
build upon established best practices effectively? Should
they pursue collective impact strategies?

These are questions that swirl around the daily path of Dr.
Robert Ashcraft, as he takes a central role in the discussion
that ultimately makes the quality of life in our communities
better for us all.

A

A key ingredient that distinguishes the nonprofit
sector from other sectors in society is
philanthropy. Philanthropy is a “habit of the
heart,” Dr. Ashcraft says.

It is that very habit that is at the core of a
benevolent and thoughtful leader. We’re just
happy it’s a habit that the faculty, staff and students at the
ASU Lodestar Center think about every single day.