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Prioritize and Focus

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Organizational success is a marathon, not a sprint. Today, many individuals and nonprofits run at an unsustainable pace that is reactive, but not strategic. With limited time and resources, it's essential to set priorities and then focus on what's most important. As a leader, you must motivate everyone — staff and board — to march in the same direction and maintain focus. People have to trust the leader's vision and accept responsibility for helping make that vision a reality.

10% for Planning

Planning to implement a nonprofit's vision and strategy requires looking at both the short term and the long haul. I always urge staff teams to spend at least 10% percent of their time each week planning. Taking time to plan and confer creates a useful rhythm and routine. Stepping away from the daily grind challenges you to slow down, reflect, and adjust your plans as needed.

One of the practices I've always preached is what I call the "Rule of Three." You should always identify and focus on three priorities. Start each day reassessing and reaffirming them. Have a separate list of priorities for a day, week, month, three months, and up to a year. While most of us do many more things in a day, or a year, you need to budget your time so that your top priorities are always front and center.

"Priority management" is much more powerful than "time management." Make sure that all of your activities, each day, are moving you past short-term priorities and toward longer-term goals. You'll gain a feeling of control when you move away from being constantly in reactive mode. Don't let the urgent rob time from more important long-term priorities. Review your best ideas at least weekly, prioritize them, and think about when they can become actionable. Never treat long-term goals as something you plan to "get to" in a year.



Board Priorities

Nonprofit boards have three primary governance responsibilities. Priority one is setting strategic direction. Second is ensuring adequate financial and human resources. And third is providing oversight to fulfill the nonprofit's mission.

Part of a board's value is its ability to take the long view. Being a thought partner to the chief executive offers your nonprofit a broad range of perspectives. Recruiting a diverse board with a range of functional experiences and networks from different industries and among different stakeholder groups is more likely to produce a healthy mix of viewpoints, advice, and counsel.

Board work requires discipline. Using your organizational multi-year strategic plan and budget, the chief executive and the board chair should design an annual "conversation map" focused on what decisions need to be made and when. Meeting agendas should center more heavily on engaging in generative conversations to reflect, solve problems, and create meaning. Strategic and fiduciary issues also then need to be covered to monitor the nonprofit's agreed-upon goals, outcomes, and financial metrics.

Plan to Succeed

I served for nine years on the global board at The Nature Conservancy (TNC). Our governance committee focused on two key oversight functions. First, to drive better performance, we developed a strong planning process for conducting annual performance reviews for the chief executive as well as the board itself and individual board members. Reviews such as these are an opportunity to build trust and to keep people motivated and focused. A healthy process and conversation will recognize good work and discuss areas that can be strengthened. Throughout the year, you can promote a culture of listening and learning by providing ongoing coaching and offering constructive feedback.

Secondly, our governance committee developed succession plans for both the chief executive and the board officers, so that we were prepared for either an emergency or for a planned leadership transition. These plans became tools to help align our talent development with our future leadership needs. In this situation, my "Rule of Three" is to create a personal list of at least three people whom you think could be good additions to the staff and board teams, being attentive to your organization's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Success comes from continually prioritizing and focusing on your goals. You must plan to succeed. And you must plan... to succeed!

Conversation Starters

For Chief Executives

1. What would enable you to devote 10% of your weekly schedule to short- and long-term planning? What would you eliminate from your current schedule?
2. How do you engage your board in serving as your thought partner? What do you do to ensure that they remain focused on their top three governance responsibilities?

For Staff Team Members

1. How do you go about setting your work priorities, both short-term and long-term? What are your top three priorities today and this week?
2. How can you create time in your weekly schedule to reflect on your priorities and adjust them as needed? How will you communicate any planning changes to your manager?

For Board Members

1. How do you establish your annual work plan and priorities? What training and education programs could strengthen new member onboarding and ongoing governance performance?
2. What processes are in place to provide the chief executive, individual board members, and the board collectively, with ongoing feedback and an annual performance assessment?

For Individual Donors

1. Before giving to a nonprofit, how can you gather information about its strategic plan and finances?
2. Does your giving tend to be more strategic or reactive? How might committing to multi-year giving be beneficial to the nonprofits you support?

For Institutional Philanthropies

1. How often do your board and staff refocus your grantmaking approach and priorities? How do you communicate these shifts to your grantees?
2. How can funding a nonprofit's board and staff development, strategic planning, and executive succession planning be wise investments?