

# How to Define the Work of Nonprofit Executive Teams

By Libbie Landles-Cobb

As a leadership expert and co-author of *Senior Leadership Teams: What It Takes to Make Them Great*, Ruth Wageman has experienced firsthand the dissatisfaction many executive team members express about the lack of clarity they have around their purpose as a senior team. “They don’t really have a framework for imagining what’s possible for a great leadership team,” she told us in a recent interview. “They rarely have experienced meetings they look forward to attending, and in fact, they might dread them,” she adds.

Recent Bridgespan research echoes her experiences. In a survey of 365 executive team members, Bridgespan discovered only 19 percent felt their teams focus on the right work. And only 17 percent strongly agreed that their meeting time together is well spent.

In this Q&A with Wageman, Libbie Landles-Cobb, co-author of “[How to Create Better Nonprofit Executive Teams](#),” dug into how to define and prioritize the work of the executive team and thus focus its valuable time on the right things.



Ruth Wageman

**Libbie Landles-Cobb:** You have worked with many executive teams over the years. Why do you find that it is important for executive teams to get clear about the work they should focus on?

**Ruth Wageman:** Really the underlying question here is “What is the impact on the organization overall when the executive team is not focused on the right things?” There are several challenges I have seen when the team is not aligned on the work it should focus on.

First, I see a lot of executive teams spending time on issues that teams much closer to the work could handle better. What happens then is that the organization's staff, who come to the enterprise with a tremendous amount of energy and talent, end up being frustrated because they are micromanaged or misdirected by the executive team.

On the other hand, many executive teams don't prioritize the critical issues that they should be responsible for: issues that are complex and affect the whole organization. This prevents them from accomplishing powerful outcomes on behalf of the constituencies that they're supposed to be serving.

I also see teams spending an awful lot of time merely exchanging information or providing each other with updates. When this happens, team members end up feeling like their time would be a whole lot better spent focusing on the "real work" that they have been asked to do as individual leaders.

All of this can produce a lot of frustration for team members, including the chief executive. Being a chief executive can be a lonely job. It can feel like you're trying to push a giant boulder uphill all by yourself when you could have a strong team of aligned and talented leaders helping you move it.

**Libbie:** That really resonates with my experience working with executive teams. The only thing I would add is that when a team is not clear about what their priorities are, the urgent almost always crowds out the important. So if a team has not clarified what it is accountable for and aligned its agenda to that work, it will end up focusing on whatever feels most pressing at the time of its team meeting, even if that's not the most critical use of the team's time.

**Ruth:** I agree. There are certainly times when something unexpected happens that needs the attention of the whole executive team. But many things that are considered "urgent" don't actually require a collective perspective from the executive team. Even worse, constantly focusing on the urgent can crowd out the things that would benefit from the team's leadership, like "How are we imagining the future?" "What are the strategies that we should be considering?" "What are the threats and/or opportunities that we're seeing in the world?" Those big questions that really would benefit from the perspective of the whole executive team never get the room on the agenda that they deserve.

**Libbie:** In your work, how do you help CEOs and teams determine what work the team should focus on—and what they shouldn't?

**Ruth:** The big questions the team needs to answer are: What should this team do together as a unit? What are the things that only this leadership team can do? And what are the must-win battles that we really need to take on?

In many cases, the chief executive has to answer these questions before engaging the team. I do a lot of one-on-one coaching to help chief executives think through what their priorities are and how having great teams with a broad perspective, real alignment, and shared decision making would make the outcome so much better than one person's perspective alone. I ask them a series of questions to help them do this (see the sidebar "Defining Your Team Purpose" on page 3). Once the chief executive has drafted a short list of the most critical decisions, I have them share it with the team and invite questions, reactions, and amendments. The team has to own the team purpose, of course, and this iterative practice helps that.

For some teams, I have them do an exercise where members of the team embody key stakeholders and tell the team "here is why I need you to be in an aligned leadership team." Not only does this build empathy with critical stakeholders and their needs, but it also helps the team get clear about what the organization and its customers and partners need from them and who is impacted by their work.

**Libbie:** I agree that getting this clarity starts with the CEO. One tactic we have used with teams is to have the CEO draft a list of the most critical 10-15 organizational priorities over the next 12 months. The list includes both time-bound initiatives the organization is working on as well as ongoing organizational leadership responsibilities, like developing talent pipelines and managing cash positive financials.

Then the team works to refine that list and identify which of those priorities should be the work of the team by asking two questions: Which priorities are the highest stakes? Which priorities are the most interdependent? Those priorities where the answer is "yes" to both questions should be the focus of the team. The other priorities may be led by individuals on the executive team, but should not be a core focus of the team's collective work.

### Defining Your Team Purpose: Reflections for Chief Executives

**What decisions do you want this team to make as a team? Some useful categories:**

- Defining strategy
- Strategic investments of resources
- Principles of organizational systems
- Managing high profile external relationships
- Incubating new capabilities
- Shaping organizational culture and leadership model

**What do you need to keep in your portfolio as the chief executive?**

**What do you want this team to be known for? "This team exists to..."**

**What would success look like for this team if they were to accomplish it? "If we are successful, then..."**

Source: Developed by Ruth Wageman and Kristen Lowe at [Team Diagnostics](#)

**I learned this notion of interdependence from your work. Can you talk about what you mean by interdependence?**

**Ruth:** The executive team should be focusing on things that, in order to be done well, require the team to truly interact together. In my book I highlight a few characteristics of interdependent work:

- Work that requires a shared answer, where decisions need to be made collectively on behalf of the entire enterprise rather than the interests of any one function
- Work that requires true collaboration—serious time devoted to debate, interaction, resource sharing—from the team
- Decisions or initiatives that need aligned communications and implementation across the organization

In other words, the executive team should be focused on issues that are going to affect many parts of the organization, where the outcomes will be way better if multiple intelligences, perspectives, and champions are applied to it because it's really too complex for any one person to lead on their own.

Once the team has refined the list of priorities it should focus on, it's then important to discuss how it will live into that work. Do these priorities shape every agenda for every meeting? What would specific measures of team success look like? What would it need to stop doing in order to achieve it?

**Libbie: We hear from teams that it's nice in theory to identify the most critical work for them to focus on, but it's hard in practice to focus on that because there are so many fires to put out. What advice do you have for teams struggling with this?**

**Ruth:** As much as possible, executive team time should be viewed as protected space. It is critical for the CEO to determine how best to spend that time by owning the agenda for all executive team meetings. They are the best positioned to decide where the team should focus on any given day.

This doesn't mean the CEO doesn't care about the urgent issues facing each individual leader, but they are able to pull up from immediate concerns and prioritize what's best for the organization overall. "We have these strategic questions that require our attention and that people are waiting for us to articulate a view on, and these are the issues that most require our collective work." Anybody has the right to say, "There is a crisis happening that is going to affect our reputation and our impact in the world and how to handle it would benefit greatly from our aligned views on it." And that may be the right call, but too many times what's claiming the team's time—what feels really urgent—really belongs to individuals or to a subset of individuals, not the executive team.

If you don't have a meaningful, well-intended, well-crafted agenda of items that aligns to the work of the team, you are going to lose the battle against the urgent every time.

**Libbie: Wonderful words to end by. Thank you so much for your time!**

*Are you interested in clarifying the work of your executive team? A great place to start is clarifying your strategy. Learn about how to do this with our guided, online program for nonprofit executive teams, *Achieving Strategic Clarity*. We're enrolling our March 2019 cohort now! Visit [www.bridgespan.org/services/bridgespan-leadership-accelerator/achieving-strategic-clarity](http://www.bridgespan.org/services/bridgespan-leadership-accelerator/achieving-strategic-clarity) for more information.*

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