

# I Need a COO: The Translation

By Nicki Roth

Your nonprofit's work is gaining traction and new projects are coming faster than the staff can handle. The founding core group of true believers is now in the minority.

The senior leaders are breathless from juggling all the external relationships with the expanding internal demands. This once easy going, dedicated small band of colleagues are now at each other's throats. You think, what this organization needs is a chief operating officer (COO)—someone who can handle the people and management issues while I focus my efforts on external relationships we need to achieve our mission.

Often nonprofit leaders see the COO as the Superman/woman who will bring order to operational chaos, institute some decent management practices, address the whole range of people issues, and generally make life easier for the executive director (ED). But that's not always the case. Getting things back on track often requires more than a COO; it requires understanding why the train left the track in the first place.

Consider Stella. (Her real name has been withheld.)

Stella is a luminary in the world of early childhood education innovation. She founded her nonprofit organization nine years ago and her techniques have had a profound impact on schools and children across the country. For the first six years, Stella was able to juggle building the organization while making her mark on educational institutions.

But, over the past three years, the organization has become increasingly less productive. As Stella spent more time out in the world doing great things, something not as great was happening back at the ranch. Tensions were mounting and nerves were fraying around the office. People were complaining about how decisions got made...or didn't. They didn't understand why one person got the plum assignments while someone else got the more mundane ones. Meetings were more frequent, but most seemed like a waste of time. On the rare occasions that Stella was in the office, it just wasn't like the old days when they used to hang out and talk about exciting developments. The staff was growing more impatient with Stella, and she was baffled by staff members' need to "have their hands held."

Aware that she could no longer handle all the internal *and* external responsibilities, Stella decided what she needed was a COO. On one level, this makes sense. As an organization grows, there is a natural sorting out of leadership activities (strategic planning, external partnerships, advocacy, board

relationships, attracting talent and donors) from daily management duties (budgets, systems and processes, talent management, facilities). A common solution is to have the ED assume primary responsibility for external relationships while a COO makes sure the internal workings function well.

Logical? Yes. Successful? Not always, which leads to the more interesting question, why isn't a COO the panacea?

Passionate people who start nonprofits are wired to create change. They are not always skilled at management, and, too often, the results are lackluster. Many of these nonprofit leaders are not (select all that apply) interested, capable, or willing to take up the mantle of organizational leadership. During the early stages of growth, most leaders focus on building bridges externally to support their missions. This often means they neglect weaving together a coherent organization and growing internal capacity (a.k.a. staff).

So what happens with staff during this time of external focus, exciting growth, and under-management? Staff members take charge. If there is little guidance about how things ought to operate, staff fills in the blanks. If performance standards are unclear, staff sets the bar. If decisions are foggy, staff makes tough calls. If face time isn't valued, staff comes and goes as it pleases. If ordinary differences of opinions aren't moderated, staff creates alliances and sometimes votes opposition off the island. In short, certain members of the staff become the de facto leaders and a potent shadow organization runs the show. Meanwhile, founders are often oblivious to these dynamics.

Enter the new COO. Even if all the right declarations are made and all the best intentions are in place, when a leader tries to wrest control out of the hands of the staff, strange things happen. Human beings like autonomy and control over their destiny. When someone intervenes to curb that we are not likely to say, "Oh, how wonderful. What can I give back to you?"

This interplay between unprepared leaders and assertive staff are often at the root of many dysfunctional nonprofits. Layer on top of that other organizational challenges and this is a recipe for confusion (at best) or devolution (at worst). There are no bad guys here. There are leaders out in the world trying to make a huge difference and well-intentioned staff trying to hobble together ways of getting things done. Sometimes there are good outcomes, but more frequently the culture—the beliefs and values that determine how work gets accomplished in an organization—needs to get on a more fruitful track.

The key before you make any COO hire is to bring sensibility, focus, and positive momentum back into the organization's culture. Often, this requires three specific leadership actions.

**1. All roads must lead back to the mission and impact.** The passion and commitment that built the organization must return to center stage. When office dynamics devolve, the noise and unproductive behaviors take precious resources away from the real work. Nonprofit organizations need to redirect the energy at every turn. When office chatter surfaces ask, "What solutions will further our

mission? How does this issue impact our results? What is the best use of our time?” The more you drive the internal dynamics to be of service to the mission, the more you build the horsepower of the organization.

**2. Grow the talent through meaningful dialogues.** One reason these dysfunctional behaviors persist is that leaders have not created a habit of delivering feedback. Have the talks you have been avoiding. Define the performance standards and then conduct ongoing conversations so that staff members can be praised for their good work, coached to improve their performance, or advised on correcting inappropriate behaviors. Giving and receiving feedback must become a central feature of the culture. Without it, there is little distinction between desired and unproductive behaviors from staff and leaders.

**3. Leading the organization is a team sport.** Changing an organization’s culture goes well beyond the ED. Pull your team together and build consensus on strategy and organizational practices. Each member of the team should consistently demonstrate rational management practices and spend time listening to staff members and engaging their ideas and solutions. If staff can take advantage of any leadership vacuums or mixed messages, chaos will persist and a new COO will walk into a mess.

In her first attempt, Stella neglected taking these actions before hiring a COO, which set up the new COO for failure. Stella needed to reexamine her role in the dysfunctional dynamics, try some new behaviors, and prime the staff for a transition that would stick. The organization’s second COO was greeted by a leadership team that rallied around him; the staff was well on its way to more productive habits and Stella was freed up to focus more on her advocacy work.

With success comes more organizational complexity. Sometimes sorting out the leadership responsibilities and divvying them up is necessary. But doing that without taking a closer look at the culture and office dynamics is shortsighted.



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