

What Three Lessons Would You Share?

The question “What three lessons, as an executive director, would you give someone younger than you?” was posted by a member of our Nonprofit Executive Director/CEO LinkedIn Group. Here we share selected lessons from the many nonprofit leaders that contributed to the conversation. Their lessons provide interesting insights into what next generation nonprofit leaders should consider as they pursue their professional goals—as well as some good reminders for any social sector leaders.

Darren

Executive Director

1. **Listen.** Give opportunity to staff, volunteers, and board to share their observations and ideas with you. Committed people often have great insight.
2. **Be humble.** Share successes with others and own your mistakes. Don't be afraid to own up to dropping the ball.
3. **Beware the tyranny of the urgent.** Get out of the office so you can think big picture thoughts where smaller tasks won't distract you. The "to-do" list will always be there.

Cynthia

President

1. **Be crystal clear about what you want to achieve and have a plan** about how to go about achieving your goals: What do you do today, tomorrow, next week, next month?
2. **Be crystal clear in your communications with all your constituents.** Be sure they understand in their own language, what you are doing and what you may want of them.
3. **As stated above, listen carefully and intently** to those who speak with you and understand what they expect of you.

Lianne

Executive Director

1. **Passion is crucial.** You must care for the cause or no one else will.
2. **Get creative.** One of the biggest perks of being a nonprofit leader is the freedom to make things happen.
3. **Trust your instincts** when hiring and making decisions. It is great to use business tools and resources to help ensure we are on the right track, but instincts are crucial and should not be ignored in favor of these tools.

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Sheri

Executive Director

1. **Be clear on what your vision is**, what you are asking someone else to do, how they see their part fitting into the larger picture and its importance.
2. **Make sure they understand** what you are communicating.
3. **Give them the freedom to make it happen.**

Cindy

Principal

1. **Get clear, written expectations from the Board for your performance.** Hold yourself—and them—to that document.
2. **Immediately learn what each of your key employees does and how they do it** by shadowing them, asking questions, etc.
3. **Set clear, concrete expectations for your direct reports**—and if changes are needed, make them early.

Rose

Executive Director

1. **Listen to board and staff concerns/expectations and spend time finding out what each does.** You will find out really quickly who is committed, who is doing their job, and what kind of attention each needs.
2. **Get to know your nonprofit.** This may sound like a no brainer, but even if you have heard about the organization in the past or have been on the board, you won't really know the day-to-day activities until you dig through some things. Typically in nonprofits you have to hit the ground running, so you will need to educate yourself, fast.
3. **Within your first three months, give your board a report of the agency.** Let them know past successes and challenges, and the agency outlook for the next 12 months (as you found it). Then you can set your goals and they can give you effective input. (Don't assume your board or staff knows what the past ED was doing.)

Frank

Executive Director

There's a lot of great advice shared before my post. I hope to offer three things that haven't been presented:

1. **Be flexible without compromising your convictions.** "Blessed are the flexible for they shall not be bent out of shape."
2. **Learn how to use data to help tell the story of your nonprofit, set goals, forecast revenue, and engage stakeholders.** Qualitative data, the stories we share, can be powerful tools and quantitative data is just as powerful. Learn what data should be collected/analyzed and add discussions on said data to your board and staff meeting agendas.
3. **Always seek strategic alliances with other NGOs, for-profits, community members, etc.** Sustainability is the big buzzword, but strategic alliances also create knowledge communities, innovation/creativity clusters, and potential funding partners.

Bonus: Schedule time to sharpen your saw. Be intentional with setting aside time to get away from the work to invest in the other portions of your life. This will make you a better leader.

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