

# How to Lead High-Performing Nonprofit Executive Teams

By Roxane White

Effective executive teams are critical for many organizations to both maximize and sustain an organization's impact. Yet shaping this team to be high performing isn't easy. In fact, in a Bridgespan survey of 362 nonprofit executive team members,<sup>1</sup> only one in five believe their teams focus on the right work. How can a CEO ensure their team's time and efforts are well-spent?

Roxane White, the former president and CEO of [Nurse-Family Partnership \(NFP\)](#), a nonprofit that focuses on helping first-time, low-income mothers across the country, offers some advice. At NFP, she led a team of five, which eventually became eight, executives in the large, outcomes-driven organization. And over her career, she's led seven executive teams, including as the chief of staff for Denver mayor and then Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper. Until recently, she served as the Morgridge Innovator in Residence for Ascend at The Aspen Institute, and today she runs [Strategy with Rox](#), which partners with clients on bold approaches to leadership development and support. In a recent discussion with Bridgespan, White drew on her leadership experience to share with us a number of ways she's approached leading teams for maximum impact. Here we share her advice, in her own words, from that conversation.



**Roxane White**

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<sup>1</sup> Libbie Landles-Cobb, Henry Barmeier, and Kirk Kramer, "How to Create Better Nonprofit Executive Teams," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, October 17, 2018, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how\\_to\\_create\\_better\\_nonprofit\\_executive\\_teams](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how_to_create_better_nonprofit_executive_teams).

## Give your executive team a healthy dose of your time

There's no single "ideal" percentage of time a CEO should devote to managing an executive team but devoting time is essential. I once figured out I spend 40 percent on opportunities and challenges, 30 percent on external relationships and fundraising, 20 percent on leading my executive team, and 10 percent working with my board of directors. I prefer to think in terms of a monthly timeframe because if I have a board meeting or major fundraising push, I'd better spend a lot more time with my executive team planning for the board meeting.

Twenty-percent may seem like a lot, but it's what I need to ensure that my team members, and not I, are managing their areas. There's a great deal at stake when you consider that an executive team is responsible for marketing, communications, fundraising, operations, finance, and so forth. I've known CEOs who assume that, unlike regular staff, senior teams don't need to be held accountable for block-and-tackle goal setting and meeting objectives—it's assumed they're very smart and know what to do. My problem with this thinking is I've known too many development directors who didn't know exactly how much money they had to raise in a given year, and too many program directors who couldn't say exactly what their teams needed to do to deliver quantifiable results. To prevent this kind of atrophy from quantifiable goals, I meet with each one of my executive team members every week, even if it's just via Skype or Facetime, or while one of us is killing time at an airport or on a train.

## Executive team meetings are expensive, so make them count

I'll admit to being a bit obnoxious about always knowing how much it costs per hour in executive team salaries to simply convene an executive team. I structure meetings to engage my team, keep things strategic, and avoid having a \$3,000 per hour meeting to make a \$100 decision!

I generally discourage overreliance on PowerPoints as a substitute for compelling narrative and dialogue, since presentations are at least as likely to deflate a meeting as energize it. I also ask that people be given enough time to read materials assigned beforehand—at least 48 hours for two or three pages—and I'll cancel a meeting when we're not prepared. It is better to use that time to be ready for the following week. I hate it when we come to a meeting pretending to have read the material. Decisions that are made at those meetings are seldom kept.

Every topic that becomes part of the executive team agenda follows a three-fold process of information, input, or decision. My weekly one-on-ones give me a chance to coach team members about determining which agenda items ought to be solved at the department level and which need to be advanced to inform, receive input on, or be decided by the whole executive team.

Finally, I'm a big believer in follow-up, usually written communication, that lays out what we discussed, any action taken on agenda items, and a heads-up on key upcoming decisions we're going to be making. Reporting out like this keeps the executive team accountable to one another and demystifies our activities for our entire staff. This removes the feeling of secrecy that may keep the organization from moving forward in a healthy way.

## Conflict is probably inevitable, so meet it head on

Managing an executive team, the CEO is bound to confront instances where team members just aren't jelling. One telltale sign involves members who complain about each other without talking to each other about their concerns. Another sign involves somebody who consistently comes unprepared to meetings or never submits items for consideration. My response to both situations is pretty frank: I ask them, "Do you care enough about the person or our mission to find a way to be honest about what's wrong?"

While the answer ought to be "yes," not everybody handles crucial conversations in the same way. One person is going to do it over drinks, while another will fire off a nastygram, think twice about it, and then hightail it over to the recipient's office to explain things. I'm comfortable with a range of styles—as long as they have the conversation.

Sometimes, the organization truly has outgrown a senior staff member. For example, the leader who came to work at a small nonprofit and suddenly finds they're at a national organization with plans for even greater expansion. They may be fabulous, talented human beings, but now they're thinking, "Maybe I don't fit here anymore?" If your lines of communication are open, you will prevent surprises and head off angry feelings should they end up leaving. It's not a failure to no longer "fit" with an organization.

## Unify your team around diversity and shared challenges

I think diversity in race, ethnicity, gender, and then extroversion and introversion, and so forth is very important. In my mind there's no excuse anymore for not having a diverse executive team. So, I start with a diverse team of people representing different backgrounds, levels of expertise, and points of view.

I also look for people who offer a diversity of management and leadership styles and skill levels. For example, it's not going to help an organization if everybody in the executive team is a fabulous leader but just a decent manager, or if everybody is a fabulous manager and only a decent leader. You have to have that balance between these skillsets. This may sound obvious, but it means you may have to pass over a strong leader because what your team really needs is more management talent.

Then, I make sure we're all pulling in the same direction, joined together in a common mission. I'm not a big "go off into the wilderness together and bond leader," but I do

spend time building the team's unity. I'll go out of my way to pair members of my team on difficult assignments—maybe on an important hire or project—just to build a bond. And I'll be the first to admit there's nothing like solving a great crisis for bringing together an executive team!

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