

Be That Kind of Boss: Leadership Strategies for Executive Directors

If you're just starting out—or even if you're an old hand—here's what every executive director needs to know.

By Michael J. Carrasco

Remember when you first started working, and you saw leaders you wanted to follow and told yourself, “Man, if only I could work for so-and-so. What a great boss”? Now that you're a leader, use these strategies to become that kind of boss.

1. Manage Yourself.

You're a brand new boss, the new executive of a nonprofit organization. You want to hit the ground running and show everyone just how effective you are. Okay, stop!

Your eagerness to do so much can undercut your success. Aim to manage yourself first. Make sure your emotional intelligence is sharp. Get people invested in your plans. Seek feedback (and be prepared to hear it—both positive and negative) from influential staff members.

Get to know as many people as possible. Contemplate what they have to say, and don't rush to judgment.

2. Understand Your Board.

You're part of a leadership team. Build rapport with your board members. Listen closely and you'll find out a great deal about their personalities and styles. You can only achieve your goals if you work to help them achieve theirs.

Pay special attention to creat-

ing a good connection to the board chair. The two of you will depend on each other to get things done.

3. Assess Your Impact.

You need to determine how efficiently and effectively your organization is doing what it sets out to do. Remember the difference: *Efficiency* is a numbers game funders are interested in. *Effectiveness* is about making an impact.

Your mission doesn't just involve individual people—it involves families and communities. That's your bottom line—creating sustainable communities. This means asking tough questions to adjust your strategic goals, visions, partnerships, alliances—whatever needs adjusting—so that your organization continues to be relevant to those it serves.

4. Make Your Relationships Work.

A leader works at building relationships. Start with your staff. Explain to them what you hope to do and how you hope to do it. Set proper expectations for all. You're not a marriage counselor, but it doesn't hurt to have the skills of

Creating a mental shift toward the future is the most important thing you can do to ensure your organization's success.

one: understanding how to resolve interpersonal difficulties, having a genuine interest in people, communicating well, and understanding how to build and end relationships.

Aim to manage yourself first.

Remember that, as the leader, your thinking needs to be strategic and your world view flexible, with no permanent “friends” or “enemies.” You'll align yourself with one set of allies today and disagree with them on another set of issues tomorrow.

See if there's a local chapter of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network nearby. This nation-wide network is interested in building tomorrow's nonprofit leaders. This and similar support groups are excellent places for you to brainstorm, seek guidance, and learn the skills to lead your organization. Seek out a mentor, and don't be afraid to solicit advice from peers.

5. Delegate.

When you delegate jobs to people, it helps them grow. Employees learn how creative they can be, and you discover their true potential. If they make a mistake, it's a learning experience.

Your time and decisions are critical, so you can't get bogged down in details. You have to focus on achieving results by outlining your



“Management is about human beings.”

expectations and holding staff accountable.

6. Share Your Vision and How to Get There.

Your organization's strategic agenda tells where you're going. It is visionary, multi-dimensional, and crafted by your board. Know this document. It can help you decide how you'll collaborate with other organizations, what trends to be aware of, and what types of technology you should use. It can identify critical risks and minimize surprises. It can help you prepare a business plan, telling everyone how you're going to achieve your strategic goals. Such a business plan will show potential funders—especially high level donors—that you can operate efficiently while achieving your mission.

Meet the Challenge.

Being a leader is a challenge. You're the organization's face, strategist, and operational manager. Everyone watches you the minute you walk in the door. You'll have to earn respect. As Peter Drucker once said: "Management is about human beings." That needs to be your compass point. You must communicate well, listen even better, and come to understand human beings so that you can work well with a team. Managing yourself helps you manage others, and in turn you will achieve your goals. ■

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RESOURCES

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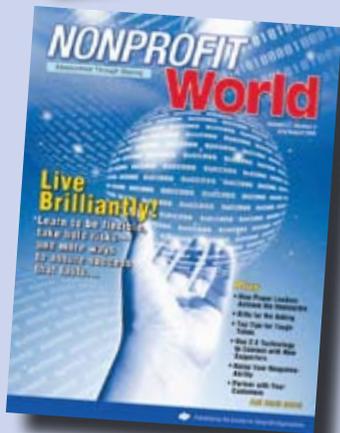
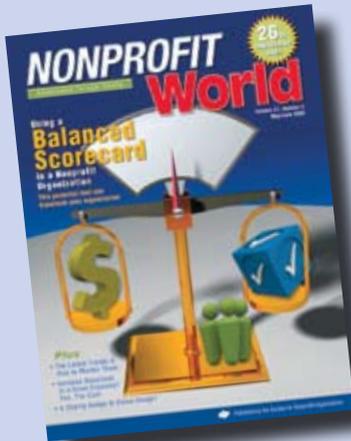
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These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

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