

# 12

## Self—Renewal Tools for Executive Directors

### **Are you skirting the edges of burnout? Here are steps to help you reconnect to your passion.**

BY COLLEEN NAUGHTON

**W**hat can nonprofit executives do to stay fresh? We asked a group of executive directors this and other questions about renewal.<sup>1</sup> Their answers reveal 12 simple, effective rejuvenation tools. We have arranged these tools into four key areas, since these were the clusters that surfaced from our analysis.

#### *PREPARE YOUR OWN RENEWAL PLAN.*

To prepare your own plan for renewal, do the following:

- Read through the key areas and tools discussed in this article. Reflect on each tool and select those that are most meaningful to you. (Choose at least one tool from each of the four key areas.)
- For each tool you choose, write down realistic activities and dates for a one-year period.
- Each year, review the tools in this article, evaluate your progress, and prepare a plan for the new year.

Use the following four key areas and 12 self-renewal tools as the basis for your renewal plan:

#### **KEY I: BE TRUE TO YOUR MISSION.**

##### *Tool #1: Commit to Mission.*

Commit to the essence of your organization's mission in everything you do.<sup>2</sup> Personalize your mission through true stories of how you are making a difference in people's lives.

One director's commitment waned when his organization expanded internationally. This new focus required him to spend most of his time developing complex documents. While this was a mission-centered function, it seemed distant from the organization's true work: helping people survive. Then a poignant letter arrived. It described the suffering of a child in a remote country.

The letter revived the director's commitment. "We used that story to renew our sense of purpose," he says, "by telling it

over and over again.”

Such tales of making a difference help people see beneath the surface of their daily work. Told and retold, these stories penetrate people’s bones and become part of their every breath.

### Tool #2: Use Your Mission to Challenge Yourself.

Look for new projects that advance your mission statement. If you’re open to opportunities, you can expand your mission in ways you never dreamed. One director who has been with the same organization for 32 years says, “I can buy into most nonprofit missions. What stimulates me are the leadership and management challenges. I view my organization as a laboratory to try new things.”

### Tool #3: Lead or Leave.

If you can no longer steer your organization in the direction you think best, you may need to prepare a departure plan. One director, for example, was convinced that his organization needed to merge with another nonprofit. When the merger fell through, it was the most disappointing moment of his career. “The fire went out in terms of the merger. Well, I felt the fire go out in me, too,” he says. “How do you rekindle that energy?”

Although he had been with the organization for almost two decades, he began making plans to leave. Filled with discouragement, he could no longer lead his organization effectively. “Something didn’t happen that I thought had tremendous potential,” he says. “Now I want to get on with my life and do something else.”

## KEY II: TRUST IN SYNERGY.

### Tool #4: Believe in the Power of Change.

Welcome change as the ultimate tool of renewal. See chaos as

an opportunity. Find ways for your staff to pull together to create order out of the confusion. Carve out a mission that centers the organization as it moves through change.<sup>3</sup>

### Tool #5: Try New Styles of Leadership.

Create new connections with staff, board, and others. Often such relationships can fill voids, save costs, and maximize quality. One director, for instance, was forced to reduce staff from 12 to nine people. He eliminated the receptionist and support staff positions, introduced voice mail, and made sure everyone had a computer. Now four people, including one volunteer, share telephone answering duties. All staff, including the executive director, handle their own meetings, mailings, and filing. All rally together for large mailings. The result: All staff know more about the workings of the entire organization, and there is a renewed sense of camaraderie.

### Tool #6: Use Collaborative Strategies.

Build on the collaborative processes that have proven successful in the nonprofit sector, such as participatory decision making, team building, negotiation, and collegiality.<sup>4</sup> One executive director was amazed at all she learned when she joined a management team. Other team members assumed a mentoring role, she says, and helped her gain knowledge and a sense of empowerment. Her experience showed her the transforming power of relationships.

## KEY III: LIVE YOUR BELIEFS.

### Tool #7: Develop a Personal Credo.

Document your beliefs, and use them to form your personal credo for organizational leadership. Find a systematic way to gain support for your credo. Some directors find this support by subscribing to personal journals. Others find it by meeting regularly with one or more like-minded people.<sup>5</sup>

### Tool #8: Use Positive Thinking.

Identify positive thinking techniques such as self-talk and affirmations. Use them often, and build upon them.

One director refuses to think negatively even when facing crises. Instead, he draws on images of other leaders who project a positive attitude. He asks himself what those people would do in the same situation. He also faces crises by telling himself, “Things will turn out all right. Trust your ability, trust yourself, trust your instincts.”

Another director uses affirmations—positive statements which she repeats to herself throughout the day. These affirmations, she says, reframe her attitude about herself and what her work is all about.

### Tool #9: Create Your Own Leadership Symbol.

Develop a leadership metaphor to serve as a renewing guide. One director uses the image of a date tree to symbolize his work in the nonprofit sector. “Date trees don’t bear fruit during the life of those who plant them but during the lives of

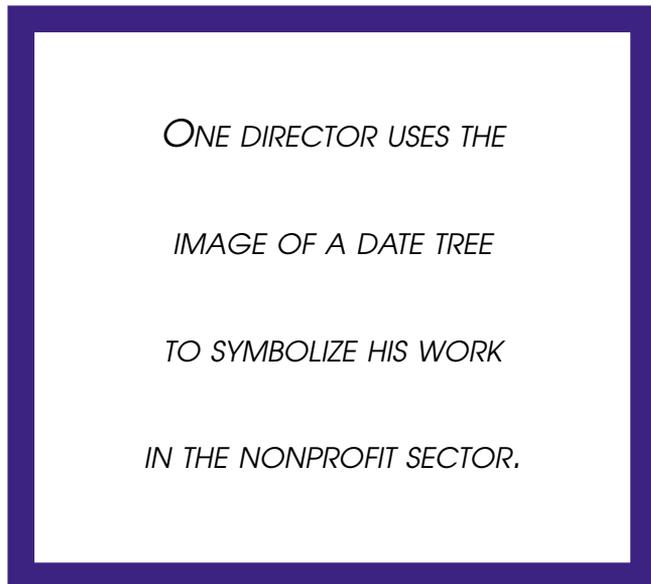
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successive generations,” he notes. His job—promoting justice for people of color—fits this metaphor, he says, because developing a just society takes a long time. When he feels discouraged, he pictures the date tree and remembers the need



for patience and faith. “That’s what social change is all about,” he says. “It’s not a quick fix.”

## KEY IV: FIND EQUILIBRIUM.

### Tool #10: Pace Yourself.

Establish a work schedule that does not exceed 50 hours a week, and identify non-work activities that invigorate you. One director takes Fridays off, clocking 40 to 45 hours in four days. That helps her stay fresh. Another director advises people to find a zone where time can “stretch” without compromising productivity.

### Tool #11: Set Goals for Formal and Informal Education.

One director was so intrigued by a book on leadership that he enrolled in graduate school. The new learning led to a master’s degree and a new position. Another director has joined a book club and finds the discussions invigorating and enlightening. Another is reading books on his own, developing a personal leadership regime.

### Tool #12: Develop Relationships.

Spend time with positive people. Search out those who strengthen you through their advice, enthusiasm, or knowledge. Take other executive directors to lunch and ask them what renewal resources they use. List names and contact dates to remind yourself to call people you wish to get to know better. The experiences of other people can be the most rejuvenating resource of all. ■

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>These six directors were randomly selected by gender from names supplied by nonprofit Twin Cities leaders. During our 1994 interviews, the six directors had the following characteristics: three males and three females; one

African-American, one American Indian, and four Caucasians; job tenure ranging from three to 18 years; and service in the nonprofit sector from 10 to 28 years. All their organizations are in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area; none is affiliated with a national organization; budget sizes are \$250,000, \$500,000, \$750,000, \$900,000, and two organizations with \$1.8 million; three are social services agencies, two are arts organizations, and one is a social advocacy group.

<sup>2</sup>For more on creating a powerful mission statement, see Vogt in “References.”

<sup>3</sup>For information on harnessing the power of change, see Rosenberg in “References.”

<sup>4</sup>For more on collaboration, negotiation, and team building, see “References.”

<sup>5</sup>See Jenson in “References.”

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations’ Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society’s *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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