LEADERSHIP BOTTLENECKS

WORKBOOK FOR NONPROFITS

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WORKBOOK

Why This Workbook Matters for Nonprofit Leaders

In the nonprofit world, the work is urgent, the stakes are high, and resources are often limited. As a result, leaders are stretched thin, wearing so many hats, managing diverse stakeholders, and carrying a deep personal investment in the mission, It's no surprise that leadership bottlenecks form.

But when leaders are the bottleneck, teams can't act quickly, opportunities are missed, and staff may become disengaged. This workbook is here to help you spot where bottlenecks are forming and give you tools to remove them so your organization can thrive.

Heather Garland

SECTION ONE

UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP BOTTLENECKS IN NONPROFITS

WHAT IS A LEADERSHIP BOTTLENECK?

A leadership bottleneck happens when key decisions, communications, or initiatives depend too heavily on one person, often the executive director (ED), program lead, or board chair. It can slow down the organization, even when that leader is doing their best.

COMMON SYMPTOMS IN NONPROFITS:

- Staff waiting for ED input before acting
- Delayed program launches or funding decisions
- Repetitive approval loops for small tasks
- The same leader in every meeting
- Missed deadlines for grants or reports due to decision lags

WHY IT MATTERS:

- Stalled progress toward your mission
- Staff burnout and turnover
- Board frustration and micro-involvement
- Loss of trust or credibility with funders and partners

SELF ASSESSMENT: ARE YOU IN A BOTTLENECK?

RATE EACH STATEMENT FROM 1 (NEVER) TO 5 (ALWAYS):

STATEMENT	1	2	3	4	5
My team regularly waits on me for decisions or approvals.					
I'm involved in nearly every conversation or meeting.					
I often redo work that others have completed.					
I find it difficult to fully delegate program or fundraising responsibility.					
Staff avoid making decisions without checking with me.					
I feel like the only one who understands "how things should be done."					

Scoring:

- **6-12**: Low bottleneck risk, good delegation culture
- **13-20**: Some signs of centralization, opportunity to share leadership
- **21-30**: High risk of bottleneck, prioritize shared systems and decision authority

COMMON BOTTLENECK AREAS IN NONPROFITS

PROGRAM DECISION-MAKING BOTTLENECKS

CAUSE	ED or Program Director retains control of all decisions
EXAMPLE	No new program ideas move forward without ED's approval
IMPACT	Slows innovation and staff leadership development
ACTION	Identify one program decision your team can own this quarter
TOOL	Delegate with guidelines: Clear mission alignment + budget caps

FUNDRAISING APPROVAL BOTTLENECKS

CAUSE	Only the ED or Development Director communicates with donors or reviews grant proposals
EXAMPLE	Delays in submitting proposals or donor follow-up
IMPACT	Missed funding opportunities
ACTION	Develop shared fundraising roles, e.g., program staff support storytelling or impact data
TOOL	Create a grant calendar with ownership and checkpoints

COMMON BOTTLENECK AREAS IN NONPROFITS (CONTINUED)

BOARD- STAFF ROLE CONFUSION

CAUSE	Board members step into staff decisions or staff rely too heavily on board input
EXAMPLE	Board insists on approving small operational changes
IMPACT	Frustration, loss of autonomy, confusion over who leads
ACTION	Clarify board vs. staff roles using a decision rights matrix
TOOL	Establish a "board communication protocol" and board-staff boundaries

COMMUNICATION SILOS

CAUSE	Lack of structured information-sharing systems
EXAMPLE	Development and programs don't coordinate on shared outcomes
IMPACT	Redundant efforts or mixed messages to funders
ACTION	Establish bi-weekly cross-functional updates
TOOL	Use a shared outcomes tracker tied to strategic goals

STRATEGIES TO UNBLOCK NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP

DELEGATION WITH MISSION GUARDRAILS

- Set clear boundaries: budget limits, ethical considerations, and alignment with strategic priorities
- Use delegation to empower, not dump, responsibility

EMPOWER MID-LEVEL LEADERSHIP

- Train program managers or operations leads to own decisions
- Celebrate and publicly reinforce when staff lead successfully

DISTRIBUTE FUNDRAISING RESPONSIBILITY

- Staff can support cultivation storytelling and reporting
- Fundraising isn't just "owned" by development: it's a team sport

CODIFY ROLES & DECISION RIGHTS

- Use a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) chart for clarity on tasks like:
  - Event planning
  - Reporting to funders
  - Strategic planning

IMPROVE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

- Regular 15- minute huddles with staff or teams
- Monthly ED updates via video or email to keep teams aligned
- Share board meeting takeaways with staff for transparency

30-DAY LEADERSHIP BOTTLENECK ACTION PLAN

Focus Area	Bottleneck	Root Cause	First Action	Owner	Due Date
Example: Fundraising	*ED approves every proposal*	*Control + brand protection*	*Create a grant template and approval workflow*	*Development Lead*	*June 10*

LEADERSHIP REFLECTION PROMPTS

Spend time journaling or discussing with a coach or mentor.

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Where in my leadership am I unintentionally holding others back?	
What would it look like to truly trust my team?	
Which decisions or relationships do I fear delegating and why?	
What leadership shift could have the greatest impact on our mission?	
How do I model sustainable, collaborative leadership for my team?	

TEAM FEEDBACK TOOL

Gather anonymous input to uncover unseen bottlenecks:

- Are you clear on which decisions you can make on your own?

- Where do you most often feel "stuck" waiting on someone else?

- What tools or authority would help you do your job more effectively?

- How could leadership better support your autonomy and growth?

Delivery Tip: Use Google Forms, Microsoft forms or SurveyMonkey to collect responses anonymously.

A DEDICATED

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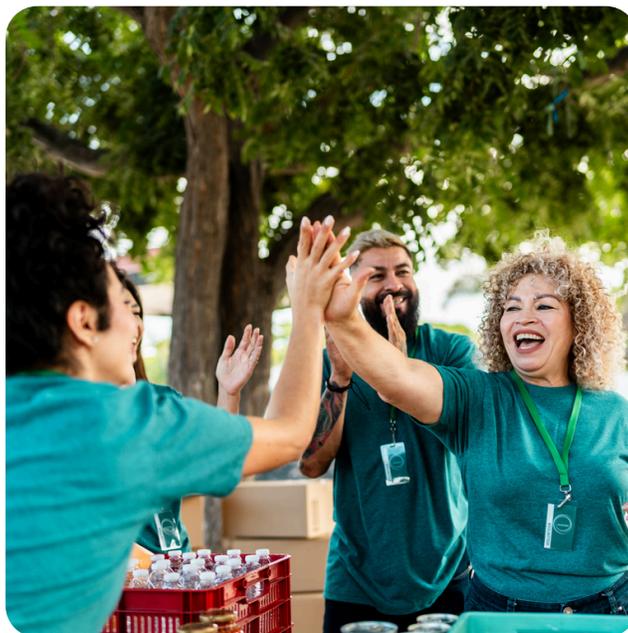
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ABOUT WHAT WE CAN DO TO HELP
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