



4

## Develop Court Sense

Develop “court sense” to see everything that’s happening around you, and to rapidly adjust to changes.



I've always liked basketball because it is an intense and fluid game. There's no standing around waiting for a pitch or lining up and waiting for a snap. While you have a game plan, you have to adjust on the fly. You study your opponents' behavior and focus on seizing opportunities as they arise. Playing basketball helped give me "court sense," an ability to pay attention to and manage more than one thing going on, and to adjust to fast-changing variables to predict where the next opening or opportunity might be.

Court sense is the alert, action-oriented posture that sports like basketball demand for success. But it's not just for sports. When our kids were young, our family did quite a bit of river rafting in Northern California. My daughter enjoyed it so much that she became a weekend guide and developed her version of court sense.

As a rafting guide, you have to have skill, but you also have to pay attention to other factors, like the skill-level of your guests, the weather, the water current, and hazards like rocks or a log that can suddenly appear. You have a plan, but you also have to paddle down the river with your head up and your eyes open. You can't ignore a sign of danger or a problem that might sink the raft. You have to develop confidence and adjust quickly when conditions change. As the guide, you pilot the boat; and the better your court sense, the better the outcome.

Where does your court sense come from?

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### **Court Sense for Nonprofits**

In the nonprofit sector, "court sense" means understanding the environment that impacts your organization. You can't hone your court sense in a vacuum — or an echo chamber. It's valuable to take time regularly to step out of your comfort zone, and out of the weeds of daily tasks and pressing issues. A disciplined way to put your court sense into play is through annual and multi-year planning cycles.

Your job is to look up, look forward, and look around. Be ready to react to changing conditions and threats, and to identify new opportunities to innovate and to take risks. To thrive in a complex world, you can't just slog forward every day checking off



boxes in a linear fashion. You have to anticipate problems, process new information, and adjust your strategy. This is systems thinking. And systems thinking requires court sense.

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## Driving Forces

In thinking about the long-term direction of your nonprofit, it's critical to assess driving forces. Driving forces include demographic shifts like the rise of millennials, issues surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion, and the global interest in reducing reliance on fossil fuels. Micro driving forces can be unique, possibly fleeting opportunities, such as a community partner's strategic program shift, changes in tax law, or a lapse in government funding.

A good leader is constantly looking for what is likely to impact the organization's future. Get used to assessing driving forces early and often. Your ability to perceive and incorporate them into your thinking will improve over time. Reflect on how you, your board, and staff are strategically positioning your organization to take advantage of change. Systematically seek client feedback and analyze program evaluation data to inform your thinking. Every significant decision should assess relevant driving forces, both short-term and long-term.

While strategic decision-making always includes risk, developing your court sense and regularly assessing trends will help shape your instincts and reflexes. It will inform the way you lead and how your people work, make decisions, deliver services, and relate to clients and donors.

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## The Inspirational Why

To be an effective manager, you need to be sensitive to how organizational change affects your employees. Rapid ups and downs are rough on people and create tension. Employees can fall into predictable patterns where they might deny what's going on, become discouraged, or resist change. A common mistake is to ignore the tension and just keep adding more responsibilities to people who are already working very hard. But your employees' energy and commitment are vital. By listening to your staff and engaging in open, honest conversations, you can build bridges of understanding and enhance workplace morale.

Even amid disruption, always focus on your nonprofit's goals and values to keep your team's focus on the inspirational why of your work — the reason your organization exists.

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## Conversation Starters

### *For Chief Executives*

1. How do you factor driving forces into your organization's annual and multi-year planning cycles? When you detect changing conditions, how do you adjust your strategies and find ways to move forward?
2. What steps have you taken to prepare your staff to respond to rapidly changing external conditions and trends? What do you do to pay attention to employees' needs during times of change?

### *For Staff Team Members*

1. How does using your "court sense" inform the way that you work, make decisions, deliver services, and relate to clients and donors?
2. Think of a time when you or your organization had to make a quick adjustment. What did that experience teach you? What, if anything, would you do differently next time?

### *For Board Members*

1. What current significant trends and driving forces provide the organization with opportunities for growth and change?
2. How can you support the chief executive and staff through times of rapid change to confront the challenge of work overload and the risk of burn out?

### *For Individual Donors*

1. How do you use your "court sense" when considering where you might make a donation or volunteer?
2. How do driving forces in our world shape your philanthropic interests? How do they impact where you decide to direct your donations or to volunteer your time?

### *For Institutional Philanthropies*

1. How does your "court sense" inform your grantmaking?
2. How do driving forces in our world shape your giving strategies, priorities and approach?