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The Whole Job

Commit to doing “the whole job.”
Investing in organizational capacity
contributes to excellence and impact.



When I joined The Nature Conservancy (TNC) Asia Pacific Council, one of my priorities was to convey to our teams the concept of “the whole job.” Environmental expertise and developing creative solutions to preserve the ecosystem were the main focus. But, in order to do “the whole job,” it is also important to develop strength in finance, fundraising, marketing, and hiring.

Your nonprofit has specific functions and processes, as well as regulations it must follow. You spend and control cash, acquire facilities and equipment, hire and train a diverse team, manage information and much more. Sometimes you can fill gaps and create efficiencies by leveraging volunteer expertise, seeking opportunities for collaboration, or sharing back-office operations. All are effective ways to strengthen your nonprofit while reducing administrative costs. A weakness in any operational area can negate successes in others. Over time, without all the parts functioning well, the entire organization will suffer. Commit to doing “the whole job.”

Face the Elevator Door

Change is the medium of opportunity. At Applied Materials, my team developed the concept to “face the elevator door.” With shifting economic cycles, things happen that can help or hurt an organization. You need to prepare yourself to capitalize on an opportunity (the elevator door opening) regardless of where your nonprofit may be in its lifecycle or in implementing its strategic plan. As a leader you need to be out front, thinking ahead of the game. By staying attuned to the macroeconomic forces that can impact your revenue, you’ll be ready to move when the momentum shifts, the door closes, and the elevator changes direction.

Investing in people and infrastructure is essential. When revenues are strong, control your spending and aim to build a cash reserve that can cover three to six months of operating costs. When the economic climate changes, causing a downturn in earned revenue or charitable contributions, your organization will be well-positioned to meet urgent or emerging needs. Cash is king. Raise it when you can; don’t wait until you need it. Always protect your downside.



Fundraising challenges add more volatility to the mix. Many major donors impose restrictions on their gifts and grants. This increases risk and can even cause harm.

Your nonprofit will prosper if you focus on finding and cultivating donors who share your vision. To attract multi-year gifts ensuring your sustainability, you'll need to show donors and grantmakers a multi-year strategic plan and budget to sustain and grow your organization's impact. I am always impressed when a nonprofit has an honest conversation with me about how unrestricted general operating support will best help them achieve their goals.

A Humble Approach to Giving

I've been deeply engaged in philanthropy for more than two decades and have had exposure to a wide variety of nonprofits through our family foundation. Friends and colleagues often ask me how I assess the effectiveness of a nonprofit. I share with them that I have the highest regard for organizations that have:

1. Strong leadership with a bold vision and a strong plan for implementation.
2. A clear mission that spells out what the organization seeks to accomplish and why it's important.
3. Transparency regarding finances, governance, program evaluation, outcomes, and impact.
4. Strong partnerships with donors, volunteers, other nonprofits, businesses, and government.

My wife Becky and I have encouraged our family, foundation staff, and fellow donors to apply those same principles in their philanthropic efforts or when considering where to volunteer or serve on a nonprofit board.

No matter the size or type of contribution, take a humble approach to giving. Trusting a nonprofit's leadership and contributing unrestricted dollars to support their whole mission is a sign of respect. While an organization's budget may have line items for people and infrastructure separate from program costs, they can't operate without both. Investing in leadership development — for both staff and board — is an impactful contribution to help sustain and grow an organization.

Both individual donors and institutional philanthropies must invest strategically, sufficiently, and over the long-term. Nonprofits and donors become a team when they think of doing “the whole job” together.

