



# Leadership Development in the Nonprofit Sector

Building capacity for impact

A practical session for nonprofit executive directors, senior staff, and board partners

Blanche Brann | Move United Conference Cape Cod 2026



## Today's roadmap

**01**

### **Name the leadership reality**

Why nonprofit leadership feels different—and why that matters.

**02**

### **Focus on practices that build capacity**

Delegation, feedback, and one-on-ones that make leadership visible.

**03**

### **Use a simple development framework**

Collective, contextual, and continuous leadership development.

**04**

### **Leave with next steps**

A 90-day plan you can adapt in your own organization.

## A familiar nonprofit leadership moment

Late one afternoon, an executive director received, within the same hour:

- a program crisis
- a donor question
- a staff conflict
- a board email

**And she still had to show up calm, strategic, and clear.**

*“My job description reads like seven different careers.”*

That tension—between immediate demands and long-term leadership—is exactly why leadership development matters in nonprofits.

## Opening exercise

On the 3×5 card in front of you, complete this sentence:

*“The difference between leading and managing is...”*

### Keep it simple

- You have one minute.
- There is no single right answer.
- Think about your organization, not a textbook.

## Leading and managing are different — and nonprofit leaders do both

### Management

#### Management focuses on reliability and execution

- planning
- organizing
- budgeting
- tracking progress
- building repeatable systems

### Leadership

#### Leadership focuses on people, direction, and change

- setting vision
- building trust
- aligning people
- influencing culture
- navigating uncertainty
- INSPIRATION

**Great nonprofit leaders do not choose between them.  
They learn when each is required.**

## Why leadership development matters now

Mission impact depends on people, not just programs.

Many nonprofits operate with lean infrastructure and very high expectations.

Leadership gaps show up quickly in culture, retention, execution, and succession.

When one leader becomes the bottleneck, the mission slows down too.

**Leadership  
development  
is not a luxury  
line item.**

**It is capacity  
building.**

# The nonprofit leadership balancing act



**In many organizations, one person is carrying too much of the leadership load.**

## The hidden challenge: leadership can feel lonely

### Isolation

Hard decisions often come with too little space to think aloud.

### Constant urgency

Every issue arrives marked important, even when it is not strategic.

### Emotional labor

Leaders are holding mission, staff, board, clients, and donors all at once.

### Burnout risk

Sustained pressure can shrink leadership into survival mode.

**Shared leadership is not only more effective. It is also more humane.**

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## Leadership challenges nonprofit organizations are already feeling

Staff retention and burnout

Funding uncertainty and donor expectations

Board alignment and role clarity

Technology, data, and communications change

Community trust and demand for adaptability

**Tomorrow's challenges require leaders at every level—not heroic leadership from one exhausted person.**

## The Five/Three – Learning the Talents/Skills of Yourself and Others

1

### What do you Like To Do?

On one side of a 3x5 card in front of you, write down 5 things you enjoy doing as part of your work life...

2

### What do you NOT like to do?

On the other side of the 3x5 card, write down 3 things you don't like to do as part of your work life....

3

### Share this with your Team...

Of the things you DON'T like to do, are there other people on your team who might enjoy doing or have the skill sets to do what you don't like to do?

This is also a great interviewing technique, board activity and team activity – allowing you to play to people's strengths, rather than to their weaknesses.

**WHAT DOES THIS TEACH US?**

# Delegation builds capacity

## A realistic example

### Before

An executive director reviewed every external communication, approved too many small decisions, and became the bottleneck for movement.

### After

She created clear guardrails, named decision rights, and used short check-ins instead of constant approvals.

### Result

Faster decisions, stronger staff confidence, and more time for strategic work.

## What delegation is really doing

### Growing skills

Delegation gives people a chance to practice judgment, not just complete tasks.

### Building trust

Clear delegation tells staff that leadership believes they can handle meaningful work.

### Preparing future leaders

When people own decisions now, succession becomes more real later.

**Delegation is not *dumping*. It is structured development.**

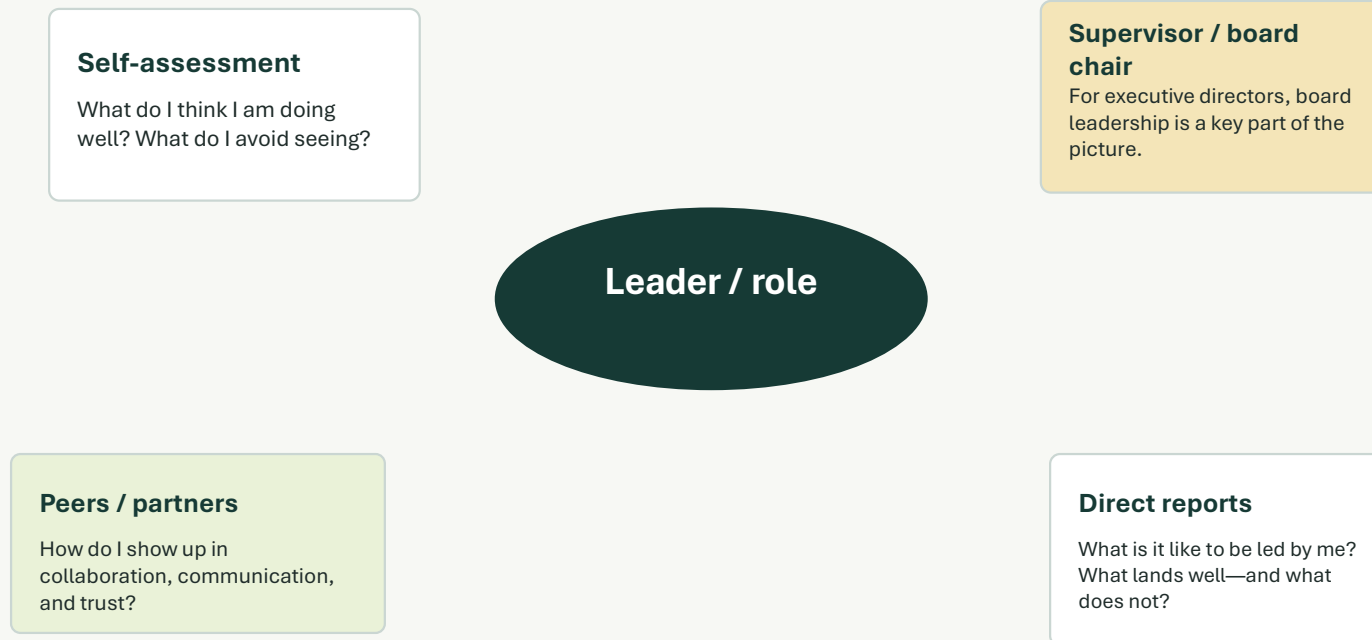
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## Quick reflection

**What is one responsibility you could delegate — or stop rescuing?**

Turn to a partner for 30 seconds each. Listen for where fear, habit, or lack of structure is getting in the way.

## The value of 360° feedback



**360° feedback gives a fuller picture of leadership impact. People need to know both their strengths and their growth edges—and recognition matters too.**

## Structured one-on-ones prevent leadership drift

### **Cadence**

weekly or bi-weekly  
protected time  
short and consistent  
rarely cancelled  
owned by both people

### **Conversation topics**

priorities and obstacles  
feedback  
development and support  
decision-making  
alignment with mission

**The meeting  
leaders  
cancel first  
is often the  
one that  
would  
prevent the  
next problem.**

## Who, What, When – The Simplest Tool in the Box

### WHO

Persons Responsible  
Each Person has their  
Own WWW.  
Interwoven and inter-  
connected

### WHAT

Series of Deliverables  
Projects can have their  
Own WWW – that feed  
Into the Master WWW

### WHEN

Weekly  
Person is now responsible  
For managing UP  
Don't have to chase after

## Collective leadership

### Staff teams

Stretch roles  
clear decision rights  
emerging leaders  
shared problem solving

### Boards

Governance clarity  
partnership with the ED  
stronger committee leadership  
shared accountability

### Partners + networks

Cross-sector collaboration  
community voice  
trusted relationships  
leadership beyond one org

**Strong nonprofits spread leadership capacity instead of concentrating it at the top.**

## Contextual learning

### **Solve real problems**

Use live organizational issues as learning opportunities instead of waiting for “perfect” conditions.

### **Coaching**

Help people reflect before, during, and after they act—not only after something goes wrong.

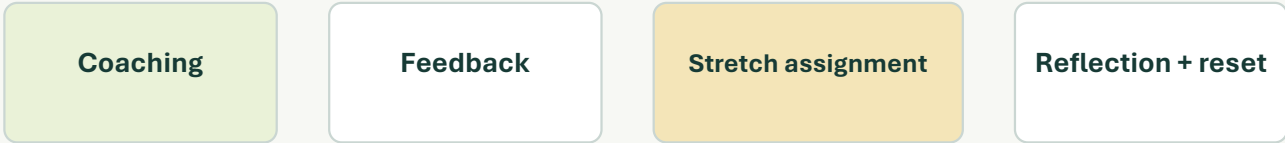
### **Peer learning**

Normalize challenge, borrow wisdom, and shorten the learning curve through honest conversation.

**The best leadership classroom in a nonprofit is often the work itself.**

# Continuous development

One workshop does not change leadership habits.



**Strong leaders grow through repetition, support, and practice.**

## Practical steps for the next 90 days

**1** Identify one leadership bottleneck only the executive director currently owns.

**2** Start or strengthen one regular one-on-one rhythm.

**3** Pilot a simple feedback process for one role or one team.

**4** Name one emerging leader and give them a stretch opportunity.

**Small, repeatable practices beat a perfect plan.**

## Reflection

### Question 1

Where is leadership too concentrated in our organization?

### Question 2

What conversation are we avoiding about leadership, feedback, or delegation?

### Question 3

What capability will we need most in the next year?

**Take one minute to jot down your answers.**

## Return to your 3×5 card

Read what you wrote at the beginning. Then ask yourself:

- Has my definition changed?
- What is one leadership practice I will start tomorrow?
- What kind of leadership does my organization need next?

**Leadership development  
starts with one decision  
and one repeated  
practice.**

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# Thank you

Questions?

Keep building leadership everywhere your mission depends on people.

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Always Happy to Talk with You