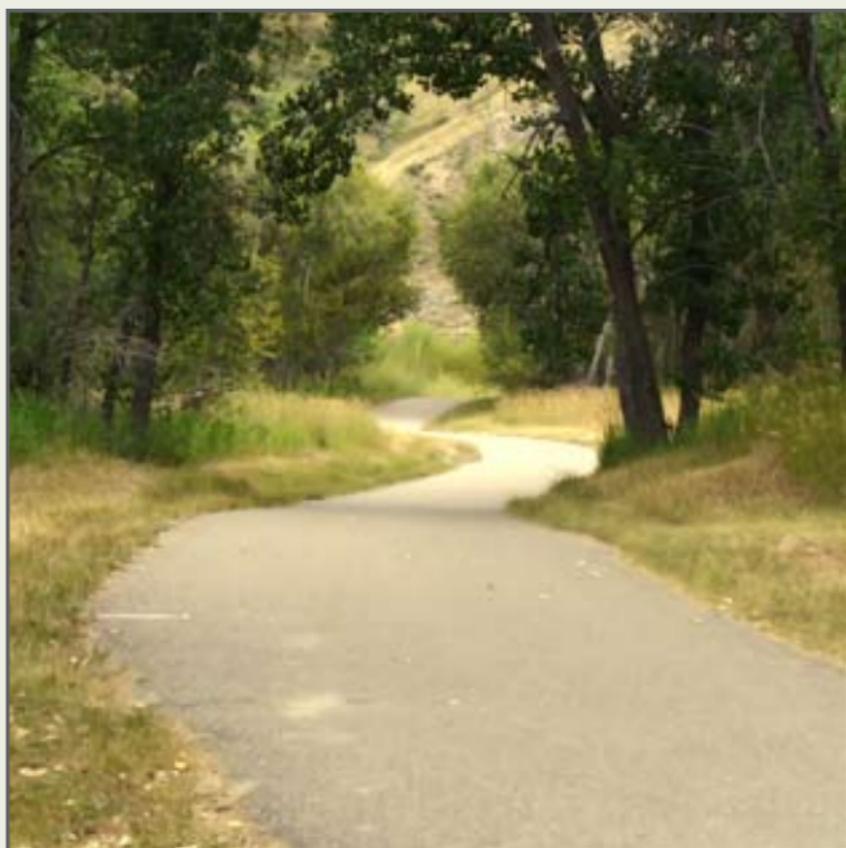


Planning for Sustainability in Nonprofits

by Sara Peterson

When we consider a plan for the sustainability of a non-profit organization, we want to be able to look back from some point in the future and say that we were able to do the following:

- Successfully withstand shocks, while maintaining our core beliefs and values
- Use those beliefs and values to guide our adaptation to change
- Continue to develop without losing the progress we have already achieved or compromising our ability to move forward



The path of sustainability requires several elements. No matter what stage of development or maturity the organization is in, there must be a sense of vitality throughout the organization if it is going to continue to grow in the future. The needs of an organization—as well as the communities it serves—will change, so an organization cannot be limited to maintaining the status quo. Instead, an organization must constantly adapt, develop, and self-replicate in order to be truly sustainable.

Sustainability is active and requires continual awareness, learning, and adaptation to the changes in the environment. Even so, there may be a breaking point—a point at which we can no longer move forward. That breaking point depends on the pace and the scale of change, as well as the strength of the organization's starting position. The goal of sustainability efforts is to continually push away that breaking point.

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Moving forward and evolving as an organization requires choices and tradeoffs. We must choose to nurture some efforts and not others. Some projects may have become obsolete and should not be sustained. Sustainability requires diverse ideas at all levels. Some ideas won't succeed, and some resources will disappear, but an openness to a variety of possibilities is necessary, and an organization will need to try many ideas along the way in order to know which ones to nurture.

Finally, sustainability requires internal optimism, an attitude that we can—and we will—succeed. Along with this comes the sense that we are in control—that we are influenced by external forces, not controlled by them.

Where do we start? How is planning for sustainability any different from the strategic planning, succession planning, capacity building, and stabilization efforts we have tried in the past? Planning for sustainability requires us to be aware of ourselves and place our organization in the context of the communities it serves.

Sustainability requires internal optimism, an attitude that we can—and we will—succeed.

1. Know ourself—our starting point and our core beliefs, values, and mission. Know our achievements and vision.
2. Know our environment.
 - Who allows us to work?
 - Who needs our work?
 - Who gets the work done?
 - Who supports our work?
 - Who can get in the way of our work?
3. Anticipate the intersections of critical future events.
 - What will change inside our organization in the future?
 - What will change in our organization's environment?
 - How and when will those changes intersect to affect our work?

By exploring the issues that may leave us vulnerable, we should be able to develop the foundation of our sustainability plan.

The path of sustainability is a winding one. It is the path that we create, rather than simply follow. It is neither a destination nor a resting place, but an ongoing approach to interacting with the environment in which our organization operates.

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