

# 5 Ways Nonprofits Can Balance Creativity and Structure

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Learn how balancing creativity with structure can help your nonprofit foster innovation - without compromising your mission and goals

**Create an environment where creativity and structure can work together.**

As it is for many nonprofit leaders, creativity is central.

Creative adaptation is at the core of what we do. But again, like many in the nonprofit sector, we are limited by time and resources from exploring and trying *all the ideas*. So how do you determine which ones to follow, and which to put on hold?



There are no bad ideas. However, we can't play out every single one of the ideas we come across, either. In the nonprofit sphere, we simply don't have the time or funding. And now, in this "post-pandemic" world, there might not even be a so-called normal to fall back on.

Without the safety net of what has worked in the past, how do we keep moving forward without falling flat on our faces? One thing is clear: deep thinking is necessary to nonprofit work.

## Five Techniques to Add Structure to Creative Problem Solving and Innovation

The following represent five techniques that can be used to balance innovation with structure. You might use these techniques when you or your team is looking for a solution to a problem that isn't obvious, or when you're trying to think *out of the box* with limited time and resources (aren't we always?).

Perhaps there's a deadline or action needed sooner rather than later. Perhaps what you've been doing isn't working and you need to quickly pivot and come up with alternatives. Hopefully these five ways to add structure to creative problem-solving and innovation will help!

### 1. Set expectations, limits, and boundaries.

At your nonprofit, you might use this step to punt some pain points, challenges, or ideas for a future project. Once you start diving into a problem to solve, there may be a series of problems and opportunities for innovation that follow, but you likely can't tackle them all at once.

By setting some boundaries and limits, you can table some conversations and ideas for future projects to address later, hopefully with a similar process. Basically, this technique gets everyone on the same page. We've found if you don't start there, you spend too much time reigning it all in.

### 2. Come up with ideas or possible options and start to weigh them.

This is where your best teachers' advice - no bad ideas - comes into play. Work together to come up with some options.

For innovation at your nonprofit, start big and narrow in later. Abide by the eternal advice: *don't yuck my yum*. Don't shoot down ideas right away that will limit future ideas. Several options likely are plausible, that's the thing about creativity - and there's no such thing as a wrong answer.

You can begin to assess the amount of risk you are willing to take when you start weighing your options.

For example, you may want to pilot a new approach with one program or process rather than implementing it across the board. Or maybe a solution requires more operational support than your organization currently has, so it's not the best option.

On the other hand, you may decide that big changes offer a high return on investment, and with some adjustments to operations, it may be worth taking the plunge.

### **3. Let it sit, cook, and breathe.**

Give some time for the ideas, options, or creative juices to marinate and flow.

After a meeting, discussion, or presentation, it might be best to *not* act immediately. Instead, take it all in and think on it before deciding which direction to take. This might take a minute, a few days, or a month, and the timeframe might just depend on what kind of question you are interrogating.

Some decisions need to be made quickly while others achieve clarity with a little bit of time. Chances are if it is a big decision, you should probably give yourself some time to think it through.

But be transparent in this thought process, you don't want to leave the rest of your team hanging.

### **4. Stay positive by tracking and celebrating progress as a team.**

The creative process isn't always linear, in fact, it often isn't. It may feel like two steps forward and one step back or a winding path that finally circles in. Through the creative process you may discover doors to new and exciting opportunities. And who knows: the end point may even change.

But progress can still be tracked, benchmarks and milestones can be celebrated, and high fives can be given. This can include sharing updates during staff and board meetings. Here, creating a dashboard with charts and metrics can really illuminate progress and trends.

And recognition is important. Make sure you are recognizing the efforts of teammates who have worked hard to implement some new and creative ideas and processes. After all, you need them to feel good about their work.

By having those expectations, limits, and boundaries (step 1), you'll have a sense of what you're reaching for. Have good communication to share prioritization. Stay positive and visualize success.

### **5. Look out for your people: take a break and recuperate.**

Nonprofit work, creative work, strategic inquiry, it's all never-ending. There is always more that can be done.

But having a structure in place that gives breaks will help avoid burnout. Taking time off, being flexible on deadlines that don't need to be firm and understanding when things don't go as planned are important parts of the creative process.

You need to make sure you are giving your team time to recuperate and recharge. Ultimately, structuring downtime will strengthen your team and promote more creativity.

Just because it's structured doesn't mean it's a science.

The above structural components are not an exact recipe or a science, but they interplay with creativity to achieve forward motion.

Keep in mind, there is never (or at least rarely ever) one right answer or solution. Whenever you are considering possible options, there are usually several that could and would work. Everyone's professional background, experience, and biases ultimately determine what they think is "best" and it might be an indication of what you are most comfortable with. Trying to find a way to balance these creative ideas and opinions ultimately takes creativity, too.

So, for a nonprofit, innovation is a balancing act, balancing the creativity and the "anything is possible" mindset with the limited resources that exist within our sector. I suggest building in some structure and then letting the creativity dance. After all, what's progress without some forward motion?