

# 7 New Nonprofit CEO Success Secrets

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*"What did you learn  
in your first months  
of being a CEO that  
surprised you?"*

I contacted over 60 new nonprofit CEOs to learn what surprised them in their first months. If you're a new executive, seeking a position, or have been at the job for years, I bet you're curious about what they discovered and how you can benefit from their wisdom.

Read on.

You won't be disappointed. Ahead you'll find insights to apply to your work to be more efficient and effective. I've organized their perceptions into seven tactics with an explanation and an example.



# # 1. New Nonprofit CEO Advice: Set Realistic Expectations



*Expect constant day-to-day decision-making.*

*You'll encounter a slew of unknowns; interviews never cover everything.*

*Embrace the work it takes. You're not doing it wrong if you're not done by five.*

*Being a new CEO is like raising a child—the first year is tough. In the second year, you get into the flow.*

*If possible, take a vacation before you start.*



Congratulations. Your board hired you to do great things. "Take care to remember your limits," your peers advise. When you arrive at the new position, you'll probably find a lengthy task list waiting for the new leader. One CEO encountered a collection of delayed facilities projects needing immediate care. A second stepped into a grant's deliverable scramble.

As a new CEO, you're in danger of setting unrealistic expectations.

To go fast soon, slow down *now*. Let me translate this advice into a measurable specific: Reduce your initial goals by 50 percent.

**At the Nonprofit CEO's Desk:** In her first 90-days, Jackie planned to meet individually with all of the organization's staff, major donors, and board members. Onsite, she realized this was unrealistic because of the size of the nonprofit's territory and staffing issues. Jackie revised her goal to spend more time with each individual over six months. Subsequently, Jackie closed an unexpected major gift because she prioritized giving people the time they needed instead of clearing her to-do list.

## #2. New Nonprofit CEO Advice: Schedule Thinking Time



*To lead as a CEO, you need to collect information and generate an overall understanding of what's happening.*

*First-time CEOs often get too versed in the details. Being a leader involves less doing and more being.*

*People who get too involved in the details miss things.*

*Filter what you will do and focus on the most important—don't just start activities.*



Here's an example of well-scheduled thinking time. Regularly book monthly "flights" for the first year to manage your time. Pretend you have a monthly out-of-town donor meeting that requires a 70-minute flight. Dedicate the time--from when you buckle up until the pilot turns the fasten seatbelt light off-- for your 30,000-foot perspective experience. During your "flight," be unavailable. Get perspective and notice where you might be about to drown in minutia.

**At the Nonprofit CEO's Desk:** Andrew is committed to investing time to think strategically, but conflicts plague him. After booking 11 am, 1 pm, and 3 pm over three months, he finds the first Friday at 8 am after his board meeting works on his schedule.



## #3. New Nonprofit CEO Advice: Analyze First, Change Second



*The problems you encounter at first aren't yours. You have a window before you need to solve them.*

*You'll enjoy the newcomer's insight for a short time. Please take advantage of it. Don't hurry to act.*

*Pay attention. Stay in the learner's mode, especially in the first two quarters.*

*Seek to understand how the pieces fit together and what's missing.*

*Do your own research. Include the "usual suspects" and staff, donors, and volunteers who quit.*



Nonprofit problems aren't created in a day. Instead, most develop over months and years. To resolve those you encounter, follow the advice of other new CEOs. If possible, learn more about them. As a rule of thumb, seek at least three perspectives on entrenched issues.

**At the Nonprofit CEO's Desk:** Kelly lists the top three challenges she noticed during her onboarding. She asks her leadership team and board members to do the same anonymously. She interviews major donors, lapsed donors, and former staff members. Based on a former staff member's cryptic hint, Kelly discovers that two top challenges on everyone's list are caused by a third. She creates an action plan to solve this critical challenge with these insights.







## #4. New Nonprofit CEO Advice: Grow Your Self-Confidence.



*Be okay making unpopular decisions.*

*Be willing to disappoint your last employer. Or negotiate a long transition period. Your old job may need more than two weeks' notice, but your new one needs you full-time plus.*

*Give yourself some grace. There is a lot to learn, understand, and move into.*

*Take more deep breaths. Have faith in your onboarding process. You will get this.*

*Don't be afraid to hire people smarter than you.*



Self-confidence is not inborn, and it doesn't come with a title. Confidence is a skill that requires nurturing and work. Your self-assurance grows in tiny steps as you master new skills, solve dilemmas, and invent detours around mistakes.

How do CEOs and prospective CEOs develop self-confidence? They

- Grow their sector and leadership knowledge,
- Ask questions and listen to what's said and *not* said
- Get skill-focused mentoring and coaching for fresh ways to solve problems.

Why is growing confidence worthwhile? The stronger your leaders, the faster you move. The greater your assurance, the more you'll engage confident people to join your team and board.

**At the Nonprofit CEO's Desk:** During Martin's onboarding process, the board assigns him two books to read. Inspired, he designs his own book-a-month reading program. Each quarter, he recommends his favorite book to his leadership team and offers team members a coaching option. Before his second CEO anniversary, their program outcomes and budget grow by 25 percent. Confidence is its own reward that also shows up in the bottom lines.

## #5. New Nonprofit CEO Advice: Find Outside Support

*Being the CEO is like being the CEO. No matter how knowledgeable you are: it's different.*

*Adjusting to supervising requires honesty, clear expectations, and solid boundaries if you've been a peer.*

*Create a team of experts around you whom you can call for advice without relinquishing your decision authority.*

*The new title changed how people reacted to me. What I said carried more weight, and even when we were just brainstorming, what I said was taken as a decision.*

*You can't complain about situations in the break-room anymore. You need to lead staff, not commiserate with them.*

Nothing fully prepares you to lead in your new setting, no matter your career and what you've done. Most CEOs find the role creates a significant burden no matter their background. At times you will feel isolated and lonely. That's why nonprofit CEOs encourage you to develop an external support system.

You need supportive friends and professional colleagues outside your nonprofit for your mental health. These relationships offer perspective, advice, and a chance to let off steam and enjoy meetings without leading them. So, join a congregation, gym, book club, the chamber, and Karen's Conversations, get a mentor, or join AFP if your nonprofit seeks donations.

**At the Nonprofit CEO's Desk:** Sandy served as the assistant director for three years before taking on her retiring founder's role. She learned about setting boundaries in her first months and was upfront with her staff about their changed relationship. Sandy prioritizes attending a monthly women's professional breakfast group despite the intense pace. Here, she learns something new, shares camaraderie, gains perspective, and gets fed literally and mentally.

## #6. New Nonprofit CEO Advice: Prioritize Your Energy & Resources in Staff



*The hardest about being a new CEO? Understanding what's happening internally.*

*A leadership team member was one of the most helpful people in my transition.*

*Never ask anyone to do what you wouldn't do yourself.*

*Staff members are hired to get stuff done; CEOs to lead.*



If your nonprofit has employees, staff investment is a must.

Richard Branson, the founder of The Virgin Group, advises, "Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of the clients."

Your peers recommend that you prioritize understanding and appreciating the complexity of internal operations. After all, your staff mans the nonprofit factory that cranks out your mission. Costs have been cut, and now you face inflation. And, everyone is always asking your team to do even more.

**At the Nonprofit CEO's Desk:** After 30 days on the job, Johnathan creates a Google Sheet that charts the time he invests with staff compared to community leaders, board members, and donors.

He blocks two afternoons weekly for one-on-one employee conversations when he sees the minimal tally. He sees a return for his efforts during the first staff meeting.



## #7. New Nonprofit CEO Advice: Set Your Pace for a Marathon



*Be careful what you say. Don't light too many fires.*

*Be aware of your nonprofit's capacity when you make assignments, or else you'll overwhelm people.*

*Time is the resource in the shortest supply.*

*While the job may be full-time-plus, don't make it worse by biting off more than you or your staff can chew. Play the long game.*

*To accept change, people need to know why it's needed and co-create the future, so they own it. This takes time.*

New CEOs often overpromise.

Besides the advice above, I also heard: "Take small bites!" "Rome wasn't built in a day." These statements stand out as the most common advice CEOs with a few months on the job would give themselves if they started again.

This advice dovetails with #1, Set Realistic Expectations. Thinking marathon vs. a sprint invites you to consider the long view and conserve and monitor your time and resources.

**At the Nonprofit CEO's Desk:** After Sondra returned to her board *twice* to report delays, she asks a new question when she assigns projects. It's this. How much time do you estimate you will need for this work. By doing this upfront, Sondra gets a sense of the workload ahead.



## Conclusion

Starting as a new nonprofit CEO or executive director is exciting *and* daunting. Using your peer's guidance on how to succeed will help you balance the opportunities ahead. What other mindsets have you found essential for success as leaders, especially as a new nonprofit CEO?

I am convinced that no matter where you are in your leadership journey, one of the methods above will provide you with an insight to use today.

*"If all else fails, play your beginner card. 'I am new. If I make a mistake, let me know.' Then correct your errors before the sun goes down."*



# Resources



## Vetted Resources for New CEOs

*The Art of Possibility*-Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander

*The First 90 Days*-Michael Watkins

Karen's CEO Library

Burnout Prevention-Articles and Videos

Podcast-*In a New Role? Here's How to Hit the Ground Running*, HBR

Podcast- Episode #162, *Are You Ready to Be a Nonprofit CEO?*

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