



Why Organizations Go Off Course Lesson 13: Avoid Getting the Wrong Things Done
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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Go Off Course*. The article details a series of lessons I have learned both as an Executive Director and as a consultant working with dozens of other organizations.

This series offers a counterpoint to the lessons in another series: *Why Organizations Thrive*.

Why Organizations Go Off Course Lesson Thirteen is: Avoid getting the wrong things done.

More than once, I've encountered Executive Directors who accomplish tasks very effectively. Their writing is cogent. Documents they produce are always well-formatted. They are well-spoken in person, laying out clear ideas. They get a lot of stuff done. Many, many tasks get crossed off the to-do list. They clearly work a lot of hours.

Yet, their organizations are floundering.

Almost always, it's because they're getting the wrong tasks done.

By wrong, I don't mean they are doing tasks that are inherently counterproductive and take the organization backwards. It's that they're doing tasks that should be priority 6 through 10 when priorities 1 through 5 are crying out for more attention.

Peter Drucker wrote extensively about this 50 years ago in his seminal book: *The Effective Executive*.

How can an executive stay focused on the top priorities in order to be more effective?

In every organization I've encountered, the Executive Director (or CEO) could work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and not run out of useful things to do on behalf of their organization. Of course, in the real world you have 40-60 hours per week on a sustained basis.

How do you decide what to do within the time available?

My first recommendation for an Executive Director when evaluating a potential task is to filter it through three questions to determine whether to **not** do a task.

Question one is: is the task essential to our *organizational* strategy. Whether or not the organization's strategy is embodied in a written strategic plan, you should know what your goals are and the strategies you're using to achieve them. If a task doesn't squarely fit within one of the strategies to achieve one of your goals, it is almost always suspect.

Question two is: should I be the one to do this task? Just because it fits within the organizational strategy doesn't mean the Executive Director should tackle it. What tasks should fall to the E.D. and what to other staff, to contractors, or volunteer leaders?

Even in an organization with no other staff or contractors, an E.D. who isn't finding ways to delegate tasks to the board or other volunteers is almost always going to tackle tasks that take them away from higher priorities.

A question any Executive Director can ask: is this something that *requires* the E.D.'s participation either because of my unique skills or relationships? If not, your first step should always be to ask: who else would be better to do it?

This filter is especially important for an Executive to use when receiving requests that they participate in meetings. More often than not when I encounter a floundering executive, they are heavily scheduled into meetings where they aren't essential participants. They just don't want to miss out on the "action."

A third filter to apply is to ask the question: is the task the cake or the icing on the cake.

Put another way, is accomplishing this task an essential building block to the overall strategy or just one nice outcome we want? Unless and until the essential building blocks are achieved, tasks that are simply positive should be shelved.

In addition to using these filters to nix involvement in some tasks, there are three other tactics I recommend to Executives looking to become more focused.

First, identify up-front what are the most important tasks you struggle to complete and then calendar large blocks of time to focus on them and then rigorously stick to that schedule. Often times in the nonprofit sphere, it is major donor fundraising that just seems to keep getting pushed off by something that "seems" more urgent. Force yourself to stick to a schedule where everyone on your team knows you aren't to be disturbed.

Second, cut out the easy time-wasters. Examples of these include:

- The meeting that takes half an hour that could be done in 15 minutes.
- The half-dozen times during the day checking your Facebook because there might be something relevant to the organization's work.
- The extra 15 minutes formatting a document to be perfect when it was already good enough to be understood.

Lastly, beware shiny objects. These are the opportunities that come along. Perhaps you're asked to speak to a group. Or to put together a media release on some breaking news of relevance. Often, these are things that may gratify the ego, but really aren't essential building blocks to organizational success. Get used to saying no and feeling good about it because when you say no to something new you're saying yes to the core work you already have underway.

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