



The 14 Attributes of a Thriving Nonprofit

Non-profits are messy. It's true even for the best non-profit organizations out there.

Not enough money... Too many cooks... An abundance of passion...

“Non-profits are messy” is more than just my tagline — it's my mantra. And my mission is to help non-profits clean up the mess.

But in this guide, I want to focus on what the best non-profit organizations are doing right. My hope is this will inspire you and set an aspirational vision. Maybe your non-profit does a bunch of these really well (I hope so!), but we all have something to work on.

There are fourteen things the best non-profit organizations do really well. These fourteen indicators are not the sole purview of a large, well-funded organization. If you read this and think, “Well, when I have a \$10 million budget and \$1 million in cash reserves, I might have a chance here,” you need to re-read.

There are \$60 million nonprofits that don't have these attributes. The size of your organization is not relevant. That is the truth. Do not let yourself off the hook. You can have a \$400,000 budget, a kick-ass board, and a small-but-mighty staff and hit all the marks. You find volunteers to help with marketing or recruit a board member who leads the efforts. You can listen to a podcast about how to do strategic planning without spending a fortune.

Far too often, I hear leaders say, “If only I have the resources I could....” But here are the only resources you really need:

- Passion
- Boundless energy
- Enough money and commitment to get the right staff “on the bus”
- A clear vision that invites smart and diverse board members to the table that are willing to do what's needed to grow the scope and impact of your work

The most important things (apart from fair pay) don't have a price tag.

Please don't be daunted by this list. Be inspired. Understand that it is a journey. This list is what you are aspiring to. Like your mission, it's a different kind of North Star.

Here they are...

Joan Garry



1. “A Workplace of Choice”

This is my new favorite phrase.

The people who work at your organization are your most important asset. Hiring and retaining the right people is essential to serving your clients or community in the best way you can.

And by the way, turnover is really costly. The best non-profit organizations get the right people on the bus and make sure their employees never want to leave.

They pay them as well as they can, appreciate the hell out of them, are generous with comp time, and care about them like the three dimensional people they are.

And when that happens, word gets out and the really good folks take notice.

See why it's my favorite new phrase?



More:

- **The Secret to Managing Nonprofit Staff**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/secret-managing-nonprofit-staff/>)
- **5 Ways to Make Sure Your Best Employees Never Want to Leave**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/keep-best-employees/>)
- **Podcast: Building a Culture of Optimism**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/ep26-culture-optimism-steve-gross/>)

2. Public Champion

The best non-profit organizations have a strong staff leader who is a visible, vocal, and effective public champion. Plain and simple.

A cheerleader. A smart, eloquent voice that can lead people to two important statements:

“I want to know more” and “I want to do more.”



More:

- **The Big Mistake That's Hurting Your Nonprofit (and How to Fix It)**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/nonprofit-elevator-pitch-1/>)
- **A Great Executive Director is a Great Storyteller**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/nonprofit-storytelling/>)
- **How to Give a Great Event Speech**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/how-to-great-event-speech/>)

3. Financial Stability

An Executive Director with her nose in cash flow statements worrying about payroll will never have the time nor the focus to create a long-term strategy.

At the best non-profit organizations, the board treasurer is an active partner with the staff finance person and a first-rate communicator so that every member of the board understands the basics of the finances of the organization regardless of financial prowess or background.

There are key financial vital signs the best non-profit organizations focus in on. Things like accounts payable, cash on hand, and so on. If you want a fuller list, there's a financial dashboard I created in the "More" section below that you can download on a post I wrote about board governance.



More:

- **Is “Board Governance” a Dirty Word At Your Nonprofit?**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/board-governance/>)
- **Is It OK for Nonprofit Leaders to Make Big Salaries?**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/nonprofit-salaries/>)
- **Is Nonprofit Overhead Too High?**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/nonprofit-overhead-too-high/>)

4. Balanced, Diverse & Sophisticated Fundraising

A thriving nonprofit does not have all its eggs (read: dollars) in one basket. For example, way too many organizations are heavily dependent on events.

The portfolio must be diverse to be healthy. The best non-profit organizations raise funds from a good mix of individuals (large and small donations), foundations, events, online, direct mail, and government (where appropriate).

The best non-profit organizations have:

- ✓ A high functioning fundraising database with accurate data
- ✓ A board that gets its obligations to raise money and delivers to the best of its ability
- ✓ An Executive Director who understands the joy of fundraising



More:

- **Why Do So Many Nonprofits Live or Die By Special Events?**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/special-events-mistake/>)
- **How to Convince Your Board to Fundraise**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/nonprofit-fundraising-plan-board/>)
- **The Perfect Fundraising Plan**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/creative-fundraising/>)

5. Board Diversity

The best non-profit organizations have created boards with intention. The board is diverse and reflective of the community it serves. There is a composition matrix that guides the recruitment process for proactive outreach to prospects who have the skills, experience, and attributes the organization needs.

The board also includes folks who understand the sector you're in and folks impacted by the work you do.



More:

- **How to Build the Board You Want**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/fix-your-board/>)
- **Why Everyone Should Join a Nonprofit Board**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/reasons-join-nonprofit-board/>)
- **Why Diversity Matters and How to Get There**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/why-diversity-matters/>)

6. Clarity of Board Roles

At the best non-profit organizations, board responsibilities are clear, serious, and well-executed. There is a smart recruitment process and a really comprehensive and engaging board orientation.

Once onboard, ongoing education about board roles makes all the difference. The best non-profit organizations also have high functioning committees that have clear charges and annual goals.



More:

- **A Template For a Great Board Orientation**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/board-orientation-template/>)
- **How to Build an Effective Executive Committee**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/effective-executive-committees/>)
- **Critical Interview Questions for Non Profit Board Members**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/interview-questions-non-profit-board-members/>)

7. Mission-Centric Programs

Too many organizations simply ‘follow the money.’ A funder who offers a check so the organization can start Program X.

This program is not one the organization would have started otherwise and takes their focus away from what really matters.

The best non-profit organizations use their mission as a north star and if a program’s relevance to the mission is unclear, they have the discipline to say no.



More:

- **Learn How to Say “NO”**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/my-boss-cant-say-no/>)
- **When Donors Make Demands**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/donors-make-demands/>)
- **Podcast: Turning Tragedy Into Legacy**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/ep-12-community-organizing-caroline-samponaro-podcast/>)

8. Impact is Understood

It's not enough to simply have anecdotes of impact.

The best non-profit organizations have mechanisms in place to measure success. It's key to strategic planning and yes, funders want to know too!



More:

- **Podcast: Unlocking the Mystery of Foundation Funding**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/ep23-foundation-funding-molly-deaguiar/>)
- **Podcast: Mission Control and Strategic Planning**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/ep-18-mission-control-strategic-planning-liana-downey/>)

9. Clear, Strong, Compelling External Presence

It's crazy how hard nonprofit leaders find this but everything from a finely tuned "elevator pitch" to a smart website to press visibility separate the good from the great.



More:

- **How to Craft an Elevator Pitch**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/nonprofit-elevator-pitch-1/>)
- **Should Your Executive Director Blog?**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/executive-director-blog/>)
- **Podcast: It's All About the Message**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/howard-bragman-podcast/>)

10. Intelligent, Integrated Marketing Strategy

You need a strategy for growing and engaging stakeholders in the work.

You bet this includes a smart social media strategy (no I did not say a cool looking website) but it's more than that. I'm talking about an organizational strategy across all departments that's designed to invite folks in. As donors, as volunteers, as prospective board, and staff.



More:

- **3 Ways to Raise More Money Online**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/online-fundraising/>)
- **Does a Facebook “Like” Matter?**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/facebook-like-matter-slacktivism/>)
- **Podcast: Websites, Social Media and Online Movements**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/ep-9-online-movements/>)

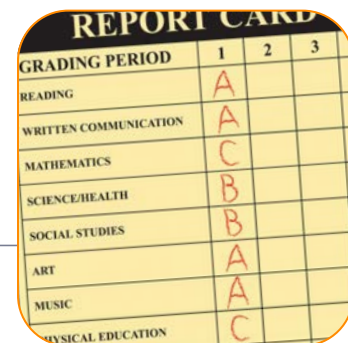
11. Regular Assessments for Staff & Board

I know. You thought you had this one until you read “board,” right? You do staff reviews, sure, but the board? Are you kidding, Joan?

Uh. No. Not kidding.

The best non-profit organizations have a strong Board Governance committee that administers some kind of simple self-assessment to each board member as a catalyst for a conversation about what’s working and what each board member needs to be successful.

It’s also a mechanism for “calling the question” for a low performer.



GRADING PERIOD	1	2	3
READING	A		
WRITTEN COMMUNICATION	A		
MATHEMATICS	C		
SCIENCE/HEALTH	B		
SOCIAL STUDIES	B		
ART	A		
MUSIC	A		
PHYSICAL EDUCATION	C		

More:

- **A Step-by-Step Guide to Assessing Your Board**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/board-assessment-tool/>)
- **The Key to a Successful Performance Review Process**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/performance-review-process/>)
- **Before You Fire Your Development Director**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/before-you-fire-your-development-director/>)

12. Strong Leadership Pipeline

Thriving nonprofit boards and staff have strong leadership pipelines and solid bench strength.

On the board side, this is why it's so important that the recruitment committee look at attributes as well as skills. The best non-profit organizations recruit for leaders.

This is also why committees are key – they give boards the opportunity to test drive potential leaders.

As for staff, Executive Directors at the best non-profit organizations hire folks who could replace them. And then they invest in their development.

And if they have a sizable staff, their senior staff members engage in exactly the same strategy with their staff members.

Homegrown talent – a person who has been with the staff and board — has institutional knowledge and experience. Just think about how much more someone like that brings to the table.



More:

- **The Five Keys to an Effective Succession Plan**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/effective-succession-plan/>)
- **Is It Always Better to Promote From Within?**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/promote-from-within/>)
- **The Five Attributes of a Great Executive Director**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/ellen-degeneres-great-executive-director/>)

13. Strategic Planning

Thriving nonprofit boards have a thoughtful long-term strategy developed jointly by the board and staff.

The strategies at the best non-profit organizations set a clear and inspiring vision.

Let's be clear. I'm not talking about some 5-year plan that causes the organization to dig into weeds (often called KPIs – “key performance indicators”) – tasks to be accomplished and boxes to be checked off.

I'm not talking about a five-year plan at all. Does anyone have any idea what is happening in 5 years?

I'm talking about a destination that the board and staff can wrap their heads and hearts around, that they can raise money around, and the big steps they have to take to get there. I'm also talking about a plan that allows an organization to be opportunistic and nimble.



More:

- **Strategic Planning for Nonprofits: Just Do It!**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/strategic-planning-nonprofits-just/>)
- **10 Books Every Nonprofit Leader Should Read**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/nonprofit-leadership-books/>)
- **Podcast: Mission Control and Strategic Planning**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/ep-18-mission-control-strategic-planning-liana-downey/>)

14. A Great Partnership Between the Board Chair and Executive Director

I believe this is the single best sign of a healthy nonprofit.

Why? Because it touches everything else. If this relationship isn't working, it affects how well the board can function and limits how effective the Executive Director can be. It spills over to the staff -- believe me, they know. It's a huge morale problem and your best employees leave. And all of this spills over to your fundraising and financial stability too.

Without a strong relationship, major problems get swept under the rug. And when you don't talk about problems, you don't solve them. They just get bigger. Heaven forbid you have to navigate an actual public crisis.

Talk about messy.



More:

- **What's the Single Best Sign of a Healthy Nonprofit?**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/best-sign-healthy-nonprofit/>)
- **How a CEO and Board Chair Can Build an Amazing Partnership**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/ceo-board-chair-relationship/>)
- **Cast Your Vote For the Ideal Board Chair**
(<http://www.joangarry.com/ideal-board-chair/>)

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About Joan Garry

When it comes to nonprofit leadership, Joan Garry has seen and done it all; Executive Director, board member, major donor, and volunteer.

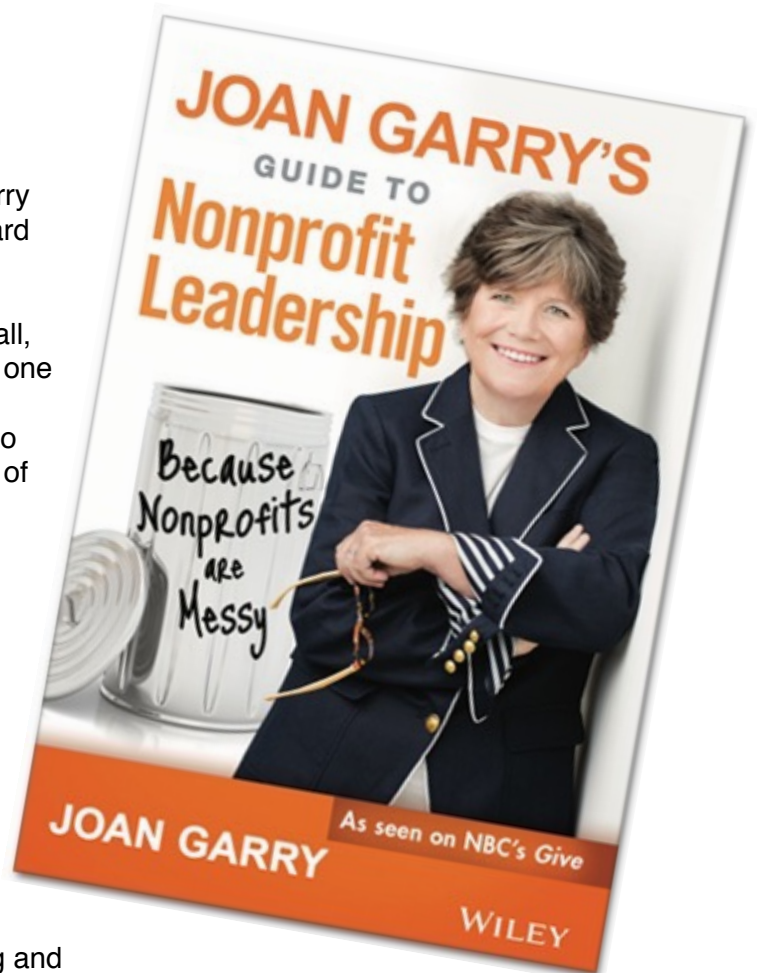
In 1997, with no prior fundraising experience at all, Joan became the Executive Director of GLAAD, one of the largest gay rights organizations in the US. GLAAD was broke, without enough in the bank to even cover payroll. Leave it to a nonprofit board of directors to hire a new Executive Director for a failing organization who had no fundraising experience!

But when Joan left the organization about a decade later, GLAAD was thriving. Strong and diverse revenue. A significant cash reserve. The staff size had doubled. And most importantly, GLAAD had made a major impact in the fight for equality.

Since leaving GLAAD, Joan has made it her mission to help thousands of nonprofits thrive through her consulting practice, her popular blog and podcast, the Nonprofit Leadership Lab, and now her book, *Joan Garry's Guide to Nonprofit Leadership*, available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and many other fine book retailers.

In addition, Joan regularly appears on the first network television reality show about nonprofits — NBC's "Give", teaches nonprofit media strategy at the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, and is a keynote speaker at major nonprofit conferences.

Learn more at www.joangarry.com



Thank You