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Find Fulfillment by Creating Your Future

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In this reflective moment looking back over my life and 50+ years of working – the last 30 years working full-time in public service positions in government and charitable nonprofits – I offer the following lessons I’ve learned and advice I’ve received about advocacy and life in case you might find any of them useful in your life or career.

1. **Accept and fully embrace that “power” is not a four-letter word.** Most of us in the nonprofit sector are drawn to it because we want to help others. Yet somehow many of us seem to translate “help” narrowly to mean supporting others, and that power, as in “having power,” is bad. I’ve heard many people in the sector say they reject and refuse to play in the power structure that created the social problems they’re working on, and I’ve heard others say they don’t like conflict, so they avoid power. I understand. But the solution isn’t to sit on the sidelines. If we’re to be “agents of change,” then we’ve got to get on the

field of play. Change requires action, so we must have power. We need to have power to protect others. We need to have power to secure resources. We need to have power to right wrongs. We need to understand how to wield power to do good. Having power is not bad. Rather, the issue is, how does one wield power: for good or bad purposes?

2. **Own and live your values.** The Oracle of Delphi was correct. You must “know thyself.” That means you’ve got to know and own your values to your very core to ensure you truly live your values. That’s true at the individual level and the organizational level. At the National Council of Nonprofits, [our shared values](#) have served us well: Serving others by listening and leading. Getting things done, together. Earning trust in *everything* we do. Centering equity in all our work. Honoring the nonprofit workforce. We “own” those values to our core, not by just writing them on a piece of paper that’s quickly forgotten, but by incorporating aspects of them into our weekly meetings and other conversations, thereby reinforcing the values so we’re living them.
3. **Take action and deliver impact - that’s what matters.** Notice the through-line of those values, which is no accident: each is action oriented. We neither just sit around talking about problems, nor do we just discuss viable solutions. Instead, we go out and solve problems in the real world. I’ve seen too many organizations measure their so-called advocacy by how many Hill visits they made or how many policy papers they’ve published. Yes, both those actions can be useful (and we highlight the really good ones in this Advocacy in Action section of the newsletter), but by themselves they are not successes that had any impact.
4. **Know and live your WHY.** Speaking of action, don’t get stuck on the conveyor-belt of life, aimlessly going along for the ride wherever it takes you. Instead, intentionally question your essential purpose, why you’re on the planet. Don’t expect an immediate answer. It won’t come in a day, week, or month. Indeed, it took me more than a couple of decades. Some people measure success by how much money they have in their bank account, others by how many votes they got, and yet others by how many lives they touched and improved. Think big, be bold. Know that to be truly fulfilled, you need to focus on something bigger than yourself. Think of Jake and Elwood in the classic movie, *Blues Brothers* – they were on a “Mission from God” that drove them to do more than anyone thought was possible. Their quest: earn enough money to stop foreclosure of the Catholic orphanage where they were raised. What is your Mission from God that inspires, resonates, and motivates you? What will

leave you fulfilled when you have given it your all and succeeded?

5. **Speak truth to power.** I agree – it sounds and feels very scary each time I do it. To begin with, like many of you, I hate conflict and want to avoid it. Compounding the fear are the many questions regarding how will that “Power” respond for me standing up for the truth, for others? What penalty will I pay? The consequences? The repercussions? Then I remember, it’s not about me. I have the ability – and responsibility – to at least try, to do my best for others. I remember my WHY, my Mission from God of serving others. And I remember that every time, *every time*, I’ve stood up for justice to speak truth to power, it has been worth it. Sure, a couple of times in the short term there were some consequences. But ultimately, over time, good things ultimately resulted even for those, too.
6. **Change your vocabulary and mindset.** Too many people (especially in the nonprofit sector) cringe at the notion of engaging in “lobbying” or “policymaking,” fearful that they will be exposed for not remembering about government from high school civics or the words of Schoolhouse Rock’s, “[I’m Just a Bill.](#)” But it’s not that difficult. Really. At its essence, you are simply solving a problem for people in your community. City Hall may be at a different street address from the soup kitchen or the youth center, but it’s all the same purpose: you’re simply taking action to solve problems, helping others. You can do it!
7. **Expand your experiences.** Early in your career, seek opportunities to do a variety of things. Being exposed to more parts of an organization, community, life is invaluable. Those early experiences provide you with a storage closet full of perspectives to see the interconnectedness of how the world works. I’m constantly amazed at how I draw on previous insights from jobs working to put myself through college and law school, how narrow projects I worked on decades ago as a brand new lawyer suddenly have new relevancy in a different context, how something I worked on as a volunteer member of the Phoenix Parks Board is useful today. Volunteer outside your organization, and volunteer for new projects in different areas of your organization. You will be a better advocate for nonprofits if, for example, you understand how budgeting and finances work, the insights your colleagues have from frontline work, and more.
8. **Excel at defense, and at the state and local levels.** People inexperienced in the realm of public policy think that you measure success by the number of bills you pass. Wrong. The first measure of success is the number of bad bills you deflected, amended, blocked, or outright defeated. Legislative bodies are

full of half-baked and bad proposals – usually not because a legislator is trying to hurt people or organizations, but because they don't know the full facts or how things work in the real world. Likewise, people seem to fixate on what's going on in Congress. But the truth is that most laws affecting nonprofits are passed by state legislatures and local governments. And it's not just statutes passed by the legislature, but also the rules and regulations set by agencies. Yes, that's a lot of territory for you to cover. But you're not alone – that's why organizations like your [state association of nonprofits](#) and groups that focus on your subsector exist.

9. **Be like geese – fly in formation.** Did you ever wonder why geese fly in a V-formation? Because geese know they are more powerful flying together than alone. Again, that's the benefit of joining up with others. Geese know that they can fly farther and longer if they fly in formation – the first goose breaks through the air current and the others fly along in their wake to conserve energy. Geese also know that being the lead goose is challenging, so they rotate out regularly, sharing that responsibility as they go, with the lead goose dropping back and the next in rotation moving up to the point position as the new leader. And did you ever wonder why the geese honk as they fly? They're encouraging the leader and each other to keep going, we've got your back!
10. **Build your Dream Team.** Always have your radar aimed at looking for the best talent. Seek and hire the best talent that plays together well. They may not be available or even approachable at a given time. Impose patience on both you and the process when hiring people. Make sure that each person is a good fit, not just for the narrow job description, but also with others on your staff so everything is cohesive without disruptions. Build a strong collaborative culture. Remember, it's not about any individual. It's about the team. But, indeed, it's not even about the team. It's about your organization. But oh no. It's not about your organization. It's about nonprofits. But no, it's not about nonprofits even. Ultimately, it's about the work that needs to get done in local communities so that people's lives are improved. When hiring, keep that alignment in mind to remember the end objective is not to fill a slot on an org chart but to deliver impact in the form of improved lives for those you serve.
11. **Be open to synchronicity.** You never know when something's going to appear in front of you, when the universe is going to speak to you. Samurai warriors used to focus on being prepared, not only physically but also mentally. They knew if life's cubic centimeter of chance dropped down in front of them, they must be alert to seize it and hold on to make a difference. Synchronicity

often appears in the form of a mentor you did not select or even expect, but who suddenly, magically, appears when you need them most. In the policy world, synchronicity can appear when an issue you care about presents itself for action. Be alert for those special moments so you can seize and take advantage of them.

12. **Trust is the lubricant to everything.** Charitable organizations are normally separate, shoved into different silos. We're in the silos of subsectors, like health care, education, faith, human services, and the environment. We're also segregated by our geography. We're over here in Hawaii or Florida or New York. But what if? What if we started to collaborate and share information and sling it around so that everybody benefits from what we do? Collaboration requires trust, which you must earn everyday and can be lost instantly if breached just once. Everything operates better with trust, so pay special attention to earn and maintain it. We can have a much larger impact on the broader world working together than we can when we're by ourselves. By tapping into the power of the interconnectedness of everything, we collectively can improve lives of countless people. That's why the National Council of Nonprofit exists – to connect, champion, and inform nonprofits to advance the public good.

Always remember, *together* we can!