



**Is Your Nonprofit Concerned with Survival? Focus on Adaptability.
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These are scary times. Perhaps more than ever before, nonprofits today are thinking about their future in terms of survival or demise. So, what makes it more likely that a nonprofit will survive?

Charles Darwin's "survival of the fittest" theory of evolution seems to suggest that survival depends on "fitness" deriving from innate qualities like strength and intelligence. But his most well-known quote suggests a different quality is paramount.

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."

Like species, nonprofits that are concerned with survival should consider the importance of adaptability.

The dinosaurs were doomed because they were unsuited for their rapidly changing environment. Similarly, nonprofits that cannot adapt are unsuited for our ever-changing environment. The strategic plans that are intended to help guide nonprofit organizations into the future often seem to be set in stone. No wonder so many strategic plans are notoriously sitting on the shelf collecting dust, like fossils.

Unlike strength and intelligence, adaptability is a skill. It refers to our ability to learn, to assess information and to change course based on that assessment. This skill is critical to overall nonprofit performance. In fact, it is one of the four "core capacities" identified and measured by the Core Capacity Assessment Tool (CCAT), the premiere organizational assessment tool for nonprofits developed by TCC Group. The CCAT is used to help nonprofits identify the areas where they can focus attention and limited resources to improve overall capacity.

Unfortunately, learning, assessing, and adapting is not the path of least resistance for nonprofit leaders. Many don't want to do the work. Instead, they often choose to "trust their gut" when making decisions – assuming that when something feels right it must be right. But trusting the gut is simply choosing to keep doing some version of what you've always done. It is the opposite of learning and adapting.

F.M. Alexander, the developer of the Alexander Technique who is known for his work on understanding and overcoming habitual tension and misuse in movement, recognized that something that "feels right" simply means that it is familiar. A person can do something wrong over and over again until it becomes habitual and it will feel right to you while it is actually a gross and obvious misuse of the body. Decisions can follow a similar pattern.

Rather than trusting the gut or doing what was always done, nonprofits need to learn from best practice. We need to create procedures for gathering and assessing data and integrating it into our decision-making processes. When we learn to adapt, we will more effectively build organizational capacity, using our limited resources differently to grow our mission impact.

Smart strategic planning is also about anticipating change, preparing for change, and having a guiding vision that acts as a compass in the midst of change. So, plans must incorporate a mechanism that encourages and enables the nonprofit to adjust course. The organization must integrate the goals and objectives of the plan into the processes through which it routinely takes in information, assesses it, and uses it to make decisions to improve.

When developing the strategic goals and objectives of the plan, nonprofits must identify the earliest noticeable changes that will tell us whether our efforts are having the desired effect and are therefore leading us in the direction we anticipated. These changes must be monitored so that we will know if we need to adjust course.

Key performance indicators (KPIs) are quantifiable measures that are intended to monitor performance on strategic objectives, track progress, identify areas for improvement, and help us make informed decisions about necessary course adjustments. The right KPIs – the earliest possible indicators that our anticipated outcomes and impact are indeed coming to pass – need to be identified. They are like the voice on your GPS that says “recalculating” when you make a turn that takes you off the mapped route. The sooner it happens, the better. It is not helpful to wait until you’re five miles down the road to recalculate and reroute.

Spark Nonprofit Consulting is about helping small and mid-sized nonprofits build capacity. Nonprofits with fewer resources must be more targeted when they invest in growth. I help nonprofits learn from best practice and from the experiences of many other similar nonprofit organizations I’ve worked with, to help them learn, adapt, and build capacity to deliver on their mission.

I’m a certified facilitator of the Core Capacity Assessment Tool and am experienced in helping nonprofits build capacity through strategic planning and plan implementation. If you think I can help your nonprofit, please [contact me](#).

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