

Five Things You Wished You Knew Before Becoming an ED

Becoming a nonprofit Executive Director (ED) is often described as an "impossible job". While deeply rewarding, the reality of the role frequently diverges from the expectations of first-time leaders. The following are five common reflections from long-term EDs of things they wish they had known when they first started their position.

1. You are a professional fundraiser first, and a program director second

Many EDs assume their job is to run the organization's programs and execute the mission. In reality, securing the funding to keep the lights on and the staff paid will consume a massive portion of your time. Fundraising requires a shift from being passionate about your cause to actively inviting others to financially invest in it.

2. You will be a jack-of-all-trades

Unlike in the corporate sector where departments have dedicated specialists, nonprofit budgets often mean you will wear every hat at once:

- When the office bookkeeper is out, you might be managing the payroll.
- When social media goes quiet, you are the one writing the posts.
- You must quickly become comfortable making decisions on everything from HR compliance to public relations.

3. Board governance is entirely a two-way street

New EDs often look to the Board of Directors to be their boss and provide all the strategic answers. In practice, boards often look to the ED to guide them. Managing a board means not only respecting governance (bylaws, board compliance) but also actively educating, recruiting, and coaching board members so they can effectively help the organization.

4. Leadership can be an incredibly lonely experience

Because you sit at the top of the organizational pyramid, the buck ultimately stops with you. This can be isolating; you cannot always vent to your staff, and you cannot share all organizational struggles with your board. It is vital to find a peer support network or an executive coach outside of your immediate circle.

5. Managing decision fatigue requires strict boundaries

You will be faced with a constant barrage of decisions, both big and small. The weight of keeping the organization afloat—often on limited resources—can lead to severe decision fatigue and burnout. Setting healthy boundaries on your time and energy is not a luxury; it is a necessity for the survival of the organization.