




Nonprofit Capacity Building: Management Practices that Nurture Sustainability

While sustainability is often defined in terms of the necessary financial resources to perpetuate nonprofit operations to fulfill its mission, sustainability is more akin to the application of the term in considering the environment. In an environmental context, "sustainability" generally means finding a way to use resources in a manner that prevents their depletion. Applying the environmental definition to the nonprofit context applies a more holistic, trauma-informed lens to sustainability. If we consider nonprofit sustainability in this manner, we have to consider how we define our resources, and what it means to prevent their depletion as critical to perpetuating our ability to fulfill our missions. For instance, if sexual assault medical advocates are burning out navigating hospital systems, or the domestic violence counseling program is not able to retain staff, funding alone will not help sustain these critical services.

Conceptualizing sustainability as holistic means that our inventory of resources include not only funding, but also talent, time, reputation, community, culture, traditions, relationships, and infrastructure.


It may be challenging to think about sustainability when, in so many ways, underserved communities are concerned with survival. That concern is particularly acute today, when survivors find themselves at the intersection of domestic and sexual violence and the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice. And the barriers that survivors from underserved communities face - such as immigration status, language,

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accessible and population relevant services, etc. may be particularly difficult to navigate in this moment, requiring additional effort, creativity, and energy from staff who serve them. However, sustainability helps us create organizational resilience, which is particularly necessary under the pressures our communities have historically faced and are currently facing. While we may not have control over the pandemics, we do have many choices on how we steward and nurture our resources, and in particular, our people. This means that how we manage – how we support and guide our staff and volunteers – is key to sustainability. This article focuses specifically on management practices, and how we have many opportunities to manage in a way that allows staff and volunteers to reach mutually decided upon goals without depleting them. When we manage the breadth of resources involved in serving survivors in underserved communities, our goals are to improve survivor and community experiences, to reduce staff and volunteer turnover, and to ensure program delivery is on track to meet objectives and best respond to the particular needs of the community.

Below are several management practices for sustainability. These practices have been adapted from practices initially developed by the [Management Center](https://www.managementcenter.org/) (<https://www.managementcenter.org/>), an organization devoted to strengthening nonprofit management, and can be used by managers in remote, hybrid, and/or in-person work settings.


1. **Shared Goals** - If you don't have shared goals, then you don't have a shared destination, and it can be difficult to get back on the same road if you discover that you're traveling to different destinations. Better, then, in the outset to agree on clear, ambitious goals for what your team and individual staff are going to accomplish for a defined time period, and then check in on the team and/or team member's progress



against those goals regularly. While COVID-19 in particular may make it feel challenging to set goals, with so much changing in terms of service delivery and workplace policies, clarity about shared goals are even more important as they provide direction. This may be a good time to revisit the specific deliverables included in grant proposals with the team, ensuring that you are all clear on what you're trying to achieve, or determine collectively the need for modifications in light of the current situation (see #7).


2. **Asking the Right Questions** - Asking the right questions can ensure that you get what you need in order to manage well from your conversations. It's easy to ask a surface-level question like "how is your work going?" However, asking questions that get to a deeper level of understanding creates better opportunities for you to support, guide, and if necessary, course-correct. It is also an opportunity to surface obstacles that you may be able to help clear. Suggested questions include:
 - How are you handling X [a specific piece of their work]?
 - What seems to be working well? Why do you think that's working?
 - What are you most worried about? What are you most excited about?
 - How else can I best support you with this? What else do you need (from me) to make that work? Is there anything I'm doing as your supervisor that's not working for you?
 - How is this work impacting you / your other work? What are you not getting to?
 - What is taking more/less time/energy than you had planned on?


3. **Observe and Affirm** - In terms of individual services, direct observation may not be possible. Confidentiality is key to our work, and the trust we build with survivors is based on that confidentiality. When our work is not office-based, managers may have to make additional creative effort


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to see one another in action such as joining a meeting, going on site visits, or observing a presentation, etc. It helps you understand what's happening "in the field" as well as give you a reference point. Be clear--before you "show up"--on the purpose of your observation; don't surprise your team member! It may in fact be helpful to partner with your team member in planning the observation, particularly when your presence might shift the dynamic in the space. Will you introduce yourself and the purpose of you joining? Will you participate – take notes for them, be part of discussions – or will you only observe? Will you be present for the whole time or only a part of the time, and could that be disruptive? You can also create opportunities to observe. For example, if you have a team member who is developing their facilitation skills, you may ask them to facilitate a meeting. Make sure you close the loop and debrief with your team member, discussing what you observed, being prepared to comment on ways you saw the person be successful and effective.

4. **Clear & Consistent Communication System** - Establishing a clear and consistent system for communicating ensures that everyone has the appropriate expectations, especially when boundaries between home and work are blurred. As a manager, make sure you're clear about your accessibility and the norms of your organization as well as your team. What times are you available? How can someone best reach you and for what? What are your/your organization's communication systems and which system is used for what (chat vs video call vs phone call vs email, etc)? Particularly when working remote or a combination of remote and in office, understanding these norms and expectations can avoid miscommunication. Having conversations about communication expectations can also help you understand if there are issues of accessibility or concerns related to staying connected for the team members whose work takes them out in the community such as outreach.

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5. **Keeping Everyone in the Loop** - Managers must be vigilant about ensuring that everyone knows what's going on, particularly if you have a hybrid office/remote team. Since it can be harder for remote employees to know what's going on in the office, make a special point of ensuring that they're included in communications. We know how damaging and powerful isolation is for survivors of domestic and sexual violence. There are many ways working with underserved communities and remotely can be isolating; you don't want to contribute to that disconnection.
 6. **Building Community** - Create opportunities for building trust and getting to know each other by setting up virtual lunches or approximating other ways for people to connect. These can be for the full team or one on ones. Particularly for team members who you used to see in passing at the office, and you do not directly supervise, you may need to set up specific times to check in. This also creates opportunities to check-in about how folks are being impacted by the pandemic, racial injustice, etc. Celebrations (individual or collective) can also bring people together and show appreciation for your staff. Our work can be challenging. Celebrations can be a way to release some "steam" and build team cohesiveness and resilience.
 7. **Be Realistic** - Make sure you're aligned and realistic, and adjust as needed. Look at your team's shared goals (see #1) and work plans for the next few months and consider what can be adjusted and what absolutely needs to be prioritized, asking your staff for their input. Make the necessary adjustments. Revisit regularly, and be transparent about changes. This could be an agenda item for monthly team meetings or whatever cadence makes sense.

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8. **Remote Work Check In** - In order to have realistic expectations, you have to understand what impact the logistical and ecological impact working remotely – and the pandemic(s) are having on you and your team. This is a rapidly evolving environment, and this conversation needs to be regularly revisited. Ask, don't assume, whether your team member has everything they need to work successfully. Make sure you understand what challenges they are navigating – childcare, other caregiving, reduced income, limited digital access – and make adjustments or provide support.
 9. **Eye on the Impact** - Focus on impact and outcomes over activities. When you emphasize results over activities, you're showing that you trust your staff to be creative, and manage their time and workload. That trust is essential, and it can be challenging if you're used to seeing everything in person to go to having much more limited insight into activities. The focus on activities (as opposed to outcomes) can lead to inequities in how people working virtually are being judged. While how your team member achieves their outcomes is not irrelevant, it is also not necessary that we all get to outcomes the same way. This is also an opportunity to learn from your team members how they are approaching working with the community, and addressing barriers, needs, and cultural traditions as they are getting to shared goals.
 10. **Respecting Boundaries** - No, really. We talk about boundaries and consent so much in our work that we assume that we're skilled at it, but in terms of work, it is so easy to not know where work ends and home begins (especially when working remotely). Working virtually means for many of us working at home, while navigating technology, space, parenting, caregiving, etc. The separation between work and home is critical to our mental health and our ability to focus. It's also difficult within some of our communities because even when we weren't working virtually, we were always "on" because we were THE domestic



violence person or THE sexual assault person. Staff and volunteers were already navigating these blurred boundaries – it becomes even more essential for us to be vigilant with the folks we supervise and work with that we are respecting boundaries – not to mention that it models the healthy relationships we want to foster. With workforces dominated by women of color, and by staff who often share some of the challenges faced by the communities we serve, setting and respecting boundaries around time is the key to maintaining trust and balance while keeping the work going. Be flexible and don't expect that people's work hours will be the same as when they were in the office. Staff and volunteers were already navigating these blurred boundaries – it becomes even more essential for us to be vigilant with the folks we supervise and work with so we are being mindful about respecting boundaries.

11. **Schedule Check-up** - Your schedule is a moral document just as much as your budget is; it shows where you invest one of your most important resources: time. So audit your schedule, and observe where you are – and aren't – spending your time, and weigh that against your goals and values. Do you have supervision scheduled with each of your direct reports regularly? Is there anyone you end up canceling with more than others? Are there patterns with who you meet with and who you cancel? Do you set aside time for you to prepare for those meetings? What is your schedule communicating to your team about healthy boundaries and the ABC's (awareness, balance, connection) necessary for preventing burnout? Are you modeling setting aside time blocks to focus or turning work "off?"


Managing for sustainability takes time and intention. If this list of suggested practices seems daunting, pick a place to start and make a commitment to implement one practice. You can use the Single Commitment worksheet to make a plan and establish peer support in

sticking to it. This last part is essential – you, in your role as a manager and leader, are also an important piece in the ecosystem of your organization, and your community. Attending to your individual sustainability by utilizing these practices and modeling boundaries, clear communication, partnership, as well as relying on peers and your own supervisor for support will ensure you are able to provide your team what they need; in turn, they will be equipped to effectively support the survivors who need your services to navigate their own complex journeys of safety and healing. As you know, underserved communities like the ones you serve are facing a precarious time; the strength, resilience, and sustainability of the organizations they rely on is needed now, more than ever.

About the Author



Sharmili Majmudar, MSW, an ALSO Underserved TA Project consultant, is an experienced, adaptive, and strategic executive leader with trauma-informed management and advocacy skills committed to advancing gender justice and equity through an intersectional lens. She is a recognized expert on sexual and domestic violence issues and has been committed to social justice work for over 25 years, including as a clinician working directly with trauma survivors. She currently serves as Executive Vice President of Policy and Organizational Impact at Women Employed (WE), an organization widely recognized for its groundbreaking work to improve women’s economic status and remove barriers to economic equity. Sharmili also develops and leads the organization’s collaborations with employers to improve workplace practices, with a focus on fair scheduling, as well as leading the organization’s work with partners to address sexual harassment and advance an equal pay agenda with a racial equity lens.



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