

# Tips for global activists about running sound organizations

By JOY HYVARINEN and ELIZABETH WALL

NGOs (non-governmental organizations) sometimes see management as belonging in the corporate world, with little relevance to their organizations, be they citizens' groups, peace groups, environmental organizations or other interest groups.

However, management is not about expensive consultants, buzzwords or the latest in corporate management chic. It is about making best use of resources, creating a good working environment and being the most effective NGO that you can. Most of it is just common sense.

Some important DO's and DON'Ts for NGO managers are:

---

## 1. Set clear goals and priorities.

**DO** define what you are trying to achieve, as clearly as possible. Think strategically and assess how short-term goals fit in with long-term ones. You need to keep an eye out for any useful opportunities that come up, but don't be so opportunistic that you end up losing sight of long-term goals. Prioritize: how should you allocate available resources? If you have two great project ideas and just enough funds and staff to do both, nine times out of ten you will be more effective by focusing all your resources on only one of them.

**DON'T** try to do everything. This risks diluting your resources and weakening the overall impact of your activities. At the end of the day, you are likely to have little to show for it and may even have lost critical ground in important areas. Probably the single biggest mistake NGOs make is reacting to everything - don't do it. No NGO has unlimited resources and focusing your efforts is the best way to achieve results.

---

## 2. Clarify expectations.

**DO** ensure that everyone involved in a project or activity understands what is expected. Clarify what the different starting points are. People might have become involved having very different expectations and different levels of resources to dedicate to a project.

**DON'T** assume! If you find yourself saying "but I thought you were going to do it" to a colleague, or if you suddenly discover that a partner NGO will only be able to participate in part of a project, you should have clarified expectations earlier. Don't assume everyone has the same background knowledge or automatically understands a goal in the same way. If an NGO network is campaigning to be allowed to participate in a public meeting, "participation" might mean different things to different people (does it include the right to speak? To participate in all parts of the meeting?). Clarify, or you might find some campaign partners declaring victory to the press while others are announcing defeat.

---

### 3. Plan.

**DO** have a written work plan for both individual staff and activities. It reminds people of what the goals are, it helps keep things on track and - with major projects or campaigns - it helps people see where they fit into the big picture. Writing a plan helps you assess what kind of resources are required and when. It is a good tool when you need to revise your approach to a project and when you are assessing staff performance. "Plan your work and work your plan" might be a well-worn phrase, but it is still a good piece of advice.

**DON'T** expect people to automatically remember what to do and when. Be careful not to take on too many responsibilities and winding up letting a lot of people down. Most NGO staff are overworked and there is little margin for error - if one person in a project slips up, the knock-on effect can be disastrous. So, don't put your plan in a drawer and forget it.

---

### 4. Learn from both successes and failures.

**DO** aim to be a "learning organization". No, it is not just another management fad! It means becoming an effective NGO by thinking, on an on-going basis, about whether you are approaching things the right way. It includes learning from both successes and failures by evaluating work, which doesn't need to mean paying expensive consultants. A project team's work plan can simply note that the team will ask itself certain questions on certain dates. On a local project, the team might stop and ask itself after the first six months if it has gained the involvement and support of people living in the area. If not, why? Has the information reached the right people? Was the message unclear?

**DON'T** think that evaluation happens automatically when you discuss project results. People tend to repress negative experiences and it is easy to forget what you meant to do originally, once a project or campaign has been running for some time.

---

### 5. Get it right.

**DO** ensure that you get the facts right. Double-check information. If the information is critical - especially if it is part of a public message - triple-check. Your mistake can reflect negatively not just on your NGO but also on other organizations.

**DON'T** rely on others having checked their facts, unless you are absolutely certain that they did. Regardless of the time pressures, don't be tempted to fudge it now and make a correction later on. Mistakes happen and good organizations admit to them, but sloppy work creates credibility problems which can do you and your organization irreparable harm.

---

### 6. Change.

**DO** stay open to change. NGOs are the ultimate change agents and to be successful they themselves need to be able to change. While you should be closely guided by your organizational mission and will want to stick to your work plan and goals, the key to ultimate success is knowing when to adapt. NGOs work in a dynamic, constantly evolving environment, which means that you

need to be flexible and able to adjust to different scenarios and new challenges. Explore new ways of doing things.

***DON'T*** get stuck in a comfortable rut and assume that what you did before is automatically going to work again. If you hear yourself saying "I guess we'll just do it the usual way", it is probably time to wake up.

---

## 7. If you are the boss, lead!

***DO*** remember that if you are the boss, you are (probably) paid more than your colleagues for a reason: it is your job to take the decisions no one else wants to take. Take on the tough issues. Aim to be ahead of the game. Try to sort out problems and resolve conflicts before they happen. Hire staff for strength through diversity. Take responsibility when something goes wrong, consider what you and the organization can learn from it and take measures to ensure it doesn't happen again. Leaders know how to say "it was my mistake".

***DON'T*** hope that things will work out by themselves. Don't encourage a blame culture by blaming your mistakes on others. Don't hire people just because you feel comfortable with them or they remind you of yourself ten years ago. Don't turn staff empowerment into a way of avoiding leadership responsibility.

---

## 8. Be realistic.

***DO*** keep in mind that things seldom work out exactly as planned. Expect setbacks and have a contingency plan in place whenever possible. Be realistic about people: they often say they will do things and fail because they have too much to do or they forget (if you need something by the 20th, you might try to set the deadline as the 15th).

***DON'T*** sulk or wallow in self-pity if something doesn't come out as expected. You need to be strategic and find a way around the problem. If your NGO coalition falls apart because the steering committee members are immersed in conflict, don't let your own frustration and anger prolong the conflict. Put your ego on hold and try to make things work, provided you believe it is worth the effort.

---

## 9. Communicate strategically.

***DO*** keep lines of communication open all the time. Be strategic about information. Ensure you know who the relevant point people are. Consider who needs to know. Why do they need to know? How much information do they need? Everyone in your NGO needs to know about major public initiatives, such as a big press conference, but only those actively involved need all the detailed information (although give the information to anyone else who asks for it).

***DON'T*** assume that because you informed one person, he or she will automatically inform others. Don't overwhelm people with information. If you work in an international environment, don't assume that everyone understands the same language equally well. In particular, don't assume the whole world speaks English. Don't try to censor information or control people by not telling them what is happening - it doesn't work.

---

10. Do the right thing.

**DO** keep your word, treat your staff and colleagues with respect and fairness and lend a helping hand to other NGOs whenever possible. It will gain you respect and you will be able to count on help from others when you need it. It is the smart thing to do.

**DON'T** break promises, treat your staff or colleagues badly, "borrow" ideas from other NGOs or take credit when it belongs to someone else. The NGO world is small and what goes around is likely to come around sooner than you think.

---

**Source:**

©Earth Times News Service