

leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

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beyond survival: ensuring organizational sustainability



Keeping organizations afloat during a difficult economic climate is a challenge for leaders. Today, organizations—large and small—are constantly struggling for sustainability. Research shows that 30 percent of nonprofits see themselves as “challenged” when it comes to sustainability (York, n.d.).

As a result, some organizations have been forced to merge with others, close their doors or significantly reduce their capacity to provide services. These decisions ultimately affect the lives of numerous children, youth and families. Social work leaders can take critical steps to plan for the sustainability of their organizations. Quality, innovative programs, services or initiatives that are producing positive outcomes cannot be lost.

The following are key components to ensure that an organization is sustainable:

» **MAKE SURE YOU HAVE A CLEAR VISION AND MISSION.** As a leader, you can ensure that your organization’s vision and mission are clear. Developing clear vision and mission statements of what your organization aims to achieve

is important. However, in order to be effective, this information must also be communicated effectively with staff, board members, stakeholders, and potential partners and funders (York, n.d.). Vision and mission statements can also be used to inspire and generate buy-in from others.

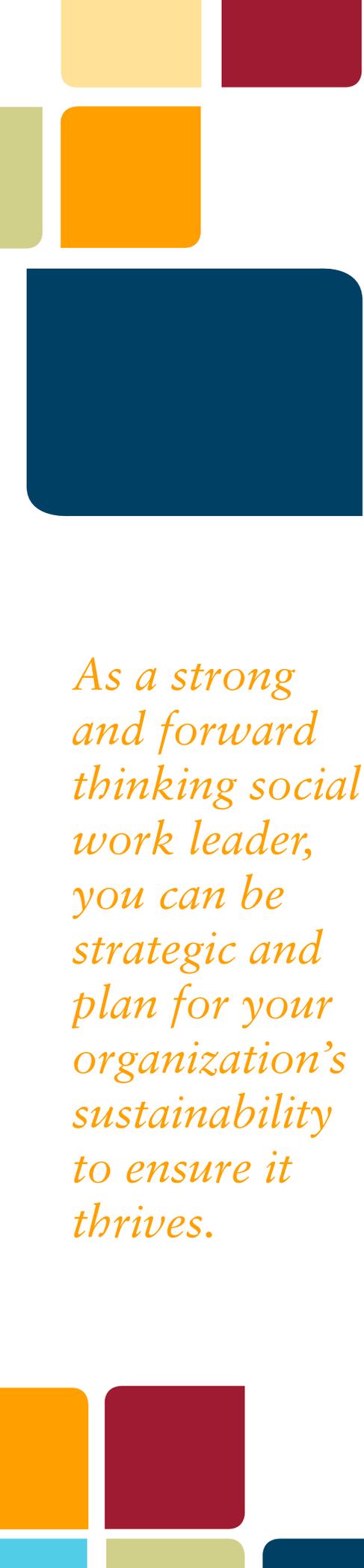
» **CREATE AND STRENGTHEN INTERNAL SYSTEMS.**

A sustainable organization requires strong leadership, competent staff and volunteers. However, it also requires strong human resources, technology, financial management systems and a sound risk management plan.

» **BE DATA-DRIVEN.** Gathering data is important to sustaining the work of your organization. Work closely with your team to define and be clear about the results your organization is trying to



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achieve (e.g., serve 500 families, provide mentoring services to 200 youth, etc.). It is also important to consider how your organization will measure its progress, use the results and disseminate the information. Measuring outcomes is not only useful in improving your program, but also in building long term relationships with funders. "Leaders of sustainable organizations connect with funders by sharing results at a level that resonates with them in order to inspire long-term commitments" (York, n.d., pg. 6).

- » **BE COST-EFFECTIVE AND STRATEGIC ABOUT FUNDING.** Think about how much it costs to carry out your organization's work (e.g., serve 200 children monthly, maintain 75 staff, etc.). What resources do you currently have and what gaps do you need to fill or will need to fill in the near future? These are important things to consider when thinking about an organization's finances. In order not to become too dependent on certain funding sources, make sure the organization's funds are diversified. You will also want to assure that your organization is tapping into a range of funding streams including, but not limited to, federal, state, local and private dollars. However, it is also critical to consider the organization's capacity to keep up with grant management and reporting tasks. For example, smaller organizations may not have the capacity to manage many different funding sources, whereas a large organization may have an entire department dedicated to these responsibilities. In addition to grants, consider other ways to increase the organization's revenue—perhaps you can plan a conference or a fundraiser. Whatever the investment, make sure that your efforts pay off in terms of sustainability—be strategic and avoid "chasing dollars."
- » **BE READY FOR CHANGE.** Circumstances constantly change—funders shift priorities, federal and state budgets are cut, new opportunities arise, or trends within communities change. A strong leader is on top of possible changes and is ready to adapt to whenever these changes occur. For example, new funding

opportunities may require reframing current work in a new way or developing new partnerships. Always be prepared for a possible change in climate.

» **CREATE COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION'S EFFORTS.**

Think about your agency's vision—whose support is essential to ensuring that you achieve it? Make sure you build relationships with others to solidify the community's support. It is particularly important to connect with community leaders and key decision makers that can support your causes. Other critical partnerships can be with local businesses, consumers, philanthropists, and service providers.

- » **WRITE IT DOWN.** A written sustainability plan is important for your organization. This document describes your organization's vision and mission, short and long term goals, challenges and approaches to overcoming these challenges, and measurements of success. This written plan also helps to keep your organization on task and to communicate your efforts with others.

Many organizations have faced tight financial challenges in the past and made it through with limited resources. However, as a strong and forward thinking social work leader, you can be strategic and plan for your organization's sustainability to ensure it thrives and continues to meet the needs of the children, youth and families you serve.

RESOURCES

» **National Association of Social Workers**

Center for Workforce Studies provides information on the social work workforce. This information includes helpful resources to enhance professional skills.

www.socialworkers.org

REFERENCES

York, P. (n.d.). *The sustainability formula: How nonprofit organizations can thrive in the emerging economy*. Retrieved from TCC group website: www.tccgrp.com/pdfs/SustainabilityFormula.pdf