



**SKYROCKET**  
COACHING

**LISTEN, LEAD,  
AND LOVE  
YOUR WORK**

*Reconnect with the **passion** that brought you into  
the non-profit world in the first place.*

By **Michele Stowe**, founder of **SkyRocket Coaching**

# LISTEN, LEAD + LOVE YOUR WORK

## Non-profit Leadership: DRUDGERY OR DELIGHT?

*"I can't do this. I'm overworked, overwhelmed and under-resourced. Leading my team and responding to my demanding and contentious board of directors. There's just not enough coffee for this."*

### HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU HAD THESE THOUGHTS?

If you're like me, you've entertained these thoughts many times because you're caught in a loop that looks something like this.



# LISTEN, LEAD + LOVE YOUR WORK

## Non-profit Leadership: DRUDGERY OR DELIGHT?

When I stepped into the role of Chief Operating Officer at Mercy Housing, I was responsible for many more functions, teams, and outcomes than I had been in my earlier Human Resources career. Mercy Housing is a national nonprofit affordable housing organization with more than 3,000 employees and over \$3.2b in assets. I was no longer an expert in all the things that I was responsible for, which included Legal & Risk Management, Information Technology, Marketing & Communications, Fundraising, Public Policy and Advocacy. Overwhelmed, I was struggling to balance the noble mission of my work with the reality of my every-day. Very nearly burning out, I was trying to “do” all the various activities, rather than “lead” the team.

I was caught in a relentless loop of activity that caused me to struggle with how to be effective as a leader. It was a complex, wonderful, challenging and deeply satisfying job, and I cared deeply about the purpose and mission of the organization, and so, I gave everything. I thought I needed to do it all because that had worked for me in the past. I also thought my team needed to see I wasn't afraid to get my hands dirty.




Eventually, and with help, I found my way back to being fulfilled in leadership. I dug into the purpose of my work and tapped into the joy that originally inspired me to choose a career in the nonprofit sector.

After 12 years of working at Mercy Housing, I founded SkyRocket Coaching. I am now coaching other leaders, and sharing what I have learned during my time as a Chief Operating Officer. I have continued to learn valuable leadership lessons from my clients. To build on our collective experience, I also surveyed more than 100 C-Suite leaders of nonprofit organizations. I asked this simple question:

**What ONE behavior or skill has helped you the MOST to be successful in your job?**

From their answers, I created the Listen, Lead, and Love Your Work framework to help leaders thrive in their current roles and be inspirational leaders.

A pattern quickly emerged from their feedback. These skills showed up overwhelmingly across many responses:

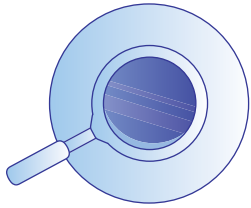
-  **1. Listen Deeply, Stay Curious**
-  **2. Role Model Self Care**
-  **3. Create & Cultivate Diverse Partnerships**

**Listen, Lead, and Love Your Work** is a process to assess your leadership effectiveness. It is a framework you can apply to achieve success in your challenging role, and provides small steps that you can take to get started and keep going.

# LISTEN, LEAD + LOVE YOUR WORK

## SKILL #1:

### LISTEN DEEPLY, STAY CURIOUS



The first step jumped right off the page as I studied the findings of my research. **Listen Deeply, Stay Curious** was the most frequently mentioned behavior that led non-profit leaders to personal and professional success.

#### What does it mean?

A core attribute of good leaders is listening to others *and* to themselves.

**First**, this requires that you make an intentional shift from being a doer of the activity to being a *leader* of the activity. And the key is to *pause, breathe, reflect, and take the best next step*. It is deceptively hard to do.

Knowing when to pause, when to take that breath is essential. This is especially critical when the pace and volume of work comes so fast that we go into “just do it” mode and forget to breathe.

When you feel like you need to interject, take over the meeting, or start “doing”, that is when you need to pause. Pausing is a way to intercept that impulse to “do”. Breathing then ensures that you slow down the need to jump in and “do”. It allows you to choose a different, wiser path. Neuroscience shows us that even a 10 second pause moves our decision-making to a different part of our brain and sidesteps the impulsive, action-oriented amygdala.

**And in that moment of reflection, when you tap into your whole brain, you have a precious opportunity to listen, understand, and define problems before acting. Back up, keep breathing, and ask yourself these questions:**

- Have I asked all the questions that I need to ask to understand the challenge?
- Am I the one that needs to do this?
- Does it need to be done now?
- What is the impact on my team member(s) if I step in?

#### After some practice, it will become more natural. You'll find that you are:

- Learning more about the challenges your team is facing,
- Empowering your team to take ownership of the solution, and
- Creating a culture of psychological safety by modeling openness and curiosity.

The added benefit of **Listen Deeply, Stay Curious** is that you will reduce your “doing” workload and the feeling of being overwhelmed by your position. Remember that purpose-filled excitement and happiness you felt when you first took the job? Yep, that starts to come back too.

## SKILL #1:

### LISTEN DEEPLY, STAY CURIOUS

Christopher Reed, President of Beacon Residential Management, was one of the 100 non-profit leaders that I surveyed. Christopher highlights the importance of making the time to listen: "I try to spend as much time as I can with our management, services and maintenance staff on our sites. While employees are often times nervous when executives visit, I see myself as the least important in that room. During these interactions, I am there to experience their world, listen to their concerns, ideas and desires, and ultimately support their well-being and success. When that intention is clear, employees will feel it."

And as a result, by using **Listen Deeply, Stay Curious**, we as leaders end up saying less, directing less, and listening for ideas that will

take hold in our organizations. Buy-in often depends on trust. If you act on a suggestion, the team will respect your openness. They will feel heard and increase their commitment.

Sister Rose Marie Jasinski, CEO of the Sisters of Bon Secours, responded to the survey with this summary of the importance of listening, "Non-profit work is not done alone, so it is important to know that 'we'll get through this together' is an important phrase. Actively listening provides a rich context for that 'together' to happen effectively. And, I love this line from one of Mary Oliver's poems that, for me, also speaks of the importance of listening, 'To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.'"

## LISTEN, LEAD + LOVE YOUR WORK

### SKILL #2:

### ROLE MODEL SELF CARE



I have had the great privilege to coach hundreds of nonprofit leaders in reaching, and aspiring to reach, the highest levels of leadership in their organizations. But I've also been fortunate to coach many people who simply wish to be able to contribute to important work professionally and maintain a personal life.

The old "oxygen mask" adage applies here. The air is getting thin. It's hard to breathe. You feel overwhelmed. You start to feel light-headed from the stress and lack of oxygen.... And then it hits you. The survival of the organization depends on you taking care of yourself first.

If you are unable to breathe and think clearly, then your team, and organizational results, will also sputter out.

So, what does it mean to **Role Model Self Care**?

## SKILL #2: ROLE MODEL SELF CARE

Julie Gould, former President of Mercy Community Capital, summarized Role Modeling Vulnerability best as, “bright energy, a steady-on demeanor, and being a listener and inquisitive.” This description evokes a Gandhian balance that seems utterly elusive. With the right focus, each of us can build the skills needed to achieve this balance.

There are three major components to Role Modeling Self Care:

- Build and grow your **self-awareness**,
- Role model and cultivate a **growth mindset**, and
- **Take care of yourself.**

**Self-awareness** doesn't just mean knowing which Harry Potter character shares your Myers-Briggs type. It means knowing how your personality traits impact your work product and your team around you. You might ask yourself:

- What do I naturally do well that I should continue doing?
- What is my style under stress?
- What habits of mine make it hard to work with me?

Many tools can help support your self-awareness. Personality assessments like the Hogan Assessment or 360 feedback surveys are powerful starting places. These can be done online or verbally, formally or informally. In many ways, how you get this feedback matters less than just getting it.

**Once you have the results of an assessment, then take some or all of these next steps:**

1. Read the results with an analytical mindset. Try to keep an emotional response at bay.
2. Decide on the first step that you will take to respond to this feedback in order to improve how you show up as a leader.
3. Reflect on how you did with that one small step. And if you successfully took that step, what is the next one?
4. Find yourself an accountability buddy - a peer, trusted colleague, or executive coach - to challenge you to continue improving.

**A growth mindset** was defined by Dr. Carol Dweck more than 30 years ago as she researched students' attitudes about failure. She uses “growth mindset” to explain how high achievers believe that a person can get smarter through hard work. She found that the contrast, a “fixed mindset”, held students back.

Eduardo Briceno and Dawn Young, in a 2017 article about law students, wrote: *... students in a fixed mindset ... are likely to view setbacks, such as lower-than-expected grades, as a sign that they are incapable. On the other hand, students in a growth mindset who understand that abilities can be developed, tend to look at the inevitable setbacks differently ... They actively seek feedback and strategies to tweak their approaches so that they achieve greater improvement and outcomes the next time.*

With regards to the topic of **taking care of yourself**, Dan Nissenbaum, President and CEO of the Low Income Investment Fund, adds this perspective to our dynamic, fast-paced environment of leadership, “You are rarely granted the time that you would want to

## SKILL #2:

### ROLE MODEL **SELF CARE**

have to make a carefully considered decision. And ultimately, everyone is watching you. So you need to be as level, and as consistent, as possible in decision-making.”

And let’s face it, taking care of yourself is hard work. It’s deep heart work. So, just like going to the gym, eating your veggies, and getting a good night’s sleep, self-care is something we can all do for ourselves. We just need to make

the commitment to do it.

Role-modeling self care asks you to take this skill one step further, and that’s creating a space and making it safe for your team to also take care of themselves. “Most of your time is spent working, so if you’re not having fun, what’s the point?”, ponders Jane Graf, former CEO of Mercy Housing. “As a leader you need to give permission for your team to have fun.”

## **LISTEN, LEAD + LOVE YOUR WORK**

### SKILL #3:

### **CREATE & CULTIVATE DIVERSE PARTNERSHIPS**



The last of our three skills for leadership effectiveness is **Create & Cultivate Diverse Partnerships**, which means connecting purpose and aligning stakeholders internally and externally.

Brandy Bertram, Principal of Great Big Good, has this to say about partnerships and aligning stakeholders: “One of the most important behaviors I have identified in leadership is seeking alignment - big visions and fancy plans mean nothing if your stakeholders aren’t aligned with both.”

Having the energy to align stakeholders may be tough. Here are a few frustrating truths about leading a nonprofit:

- There are moments when it is lonely and isolating,
- The work can be utterly overwhelming,
- Funders ask for reporting about the funding that involves resources that may end up costing more than the funding itself, and
- Some days, you may ask yourself, “What exactly did I get done today?”

## SKILL #3:

# CREATE & CULTIVATE DIVERSE PARTNERSHIPS

Fortunately, these other truths also define non-profit leadership:

- The community of people doing this work are beautiful, humble, brave and brilliant,
- The impact of your work is gratifying because it is deep, lasting and so very needed,
- Infrastructure grants are manna from heaven, and
- The idea of working in an organization focused on “shareholder value” is not in any way consistent with your values.

**Creating and Cultivating Diverse Partnerships** means holding onto these divergent truths and taking action to make sure the good news stays front of mind. Not only do we not need to do this work alone, we can't!

Elizabeth Prutch, Chief Impact Officer of the Colorado Nonprofit Association, sums it up best, “Find the ‘win, win, win’, when building partnerships/relationships. Is it a win for your organization? Is it a win for the partner (corporate, funder, etc.)? Is it a win for the community and/or people you serve?”

So what am I looking for in diverse partnerships? A community of like-minded individuals and organizations focused on a similar purpose to your organization. Well-cultivated partnerships amplify and support your organization's mission because you now have more voices and perspectives working together.

Creating and Cultivating Diverse Partnerships takes time, and it has to be a priority. Some questions to ask yourself are:

- What partners do we already have?
- How effective/impactful are these partnerships? How can we make them stronger?
- Who is missing from our partners?
- How do we bring our partners closer to our work and create a WIN, WIN, WIN?

Regardless of your role in an organization, whether it be Resource Development, Program Delivery, or Accounting, your intentional cultivation of these partnerships will support not just the organization, but, in the end, your success as a leader.

Reflecting on her sustained success as President of Eden Housing for over 20 years, Linda Mandolini, says, “My unique contribution to Eden has been the ability to see at 10,000 feet, manage the political and partnership ecosystem we work in... and relentlessly pursue achievement of our mission.”

Additionally, cultivating strong partnerships also helps to alleviate the pressure of saying “YES” to every request or idea that comes from your board or community. Your partnerships will enable you to “spread the wealth.” The more you know of the potential partners out there, the easier it is for you to say, “Yes, and I'd love to introduce you to an organization that does this work really well.”



## SKILL #3:

# CREATE & CULTIVATE DIVERSE PARTNERSHIPS

By surveying 100 non-profit C-Suite leaders, I learned that focusing on these important leadership behaviors will lead to your success, make the work a lot more fun and support reconnecting you to your own purpose.

Being a non-profit leader is a complex and challenging job that requires leaders to balance the noble mission of the work with the reality of the day-to-day demands. The Listen, Lead and Love Your Work framework has emerged as a valuable tool to help leaders thrive in their roles. By following this framework, leaders can find the joy again in their work and inspire others to do the same.



### 1. Listen Deeply, Stay Curious



### 2. Role Model Self Care



### 3. Create & Cultivate Diverse Partnerships