Leading Change That Matters

By Erik Hanberg

A special download to accompany

"The Little Book of Nonprofit Leadership"

Sometimes all a nonprofit will demand of you is to ably steward the mission without any big changes during your tenure. You take the job, you do your best for the next few years, and then you pass the job on to the next person, leaving the nonprofit either about the same or slightly improved than when it was entrusted to you.

Increasingly, though, I think nonprofit leadership calls us to *transform* the nonprofit—whether we want it to or not. Whether it's a pandemic, or a dramatic change in funding priorities, or a sudden politicization of your mission, or something more prosaic like a capital campaign goal that seems out of reach, we are being asked to lead our nonprofits through real change.

Everything that precedes this chapter is the groundwork that you need to be a good steward of the mission. And that's all incredibly important. Because it's the base from which you can launch big change. If you don't have a handle on the mission, people, and money of your nonprofit, and if you don't have a good working relationship with your board, then leading change is going to be that much harder.

But whether you see a new opportunity or whether the world is forcing opportunity on you—also known as a crisis—let's talk about change.

What does change actually look like?

True change and transformation carries a level of risk, of course. It can be scary, no question! But my experiences going through real change remind me that leaning into change can be intensely rewarding. And the results can open up a whole world of possibility that didn't exist before.

Contemplating change is like standing at the edge of a cliff, looking down into a valley shrouded with fog. The fog is so thick you can't truly see what's in it. Great new wonders? Unknown terrors? Who knows? And you're thinking, "Really? I'm supposed to go down into

that muck? I can't see what's there! What if it's too steep? What if there's something lurking down there that I'm not ready for? I'm just going to turn around."

It's easy to fear the worst.

In my experience, this fear of creating change is (often) because we don't know what the process of change actually looks like. I'd like to give you a simple visual of the change process. It's possible you experience it every morning, in fact: change looks like pouring cream into coffee. Want to see what I mean? Find a transparent mug. Pour your coffee in. And then pour some cream in. And watch. Really watch how the cream flows up from the bottom. You can't predict how or where each bit of cream will go. But it moves and changes like it's alive.

It does that until, at some point, your coffee is beige instead of black. It's changed and it's not going back. Simple. Obvious, even. But there's a key lesson in the image. Change will almost certainly bring a period of disorder and unpredictability before the new thing emerges.

If your nonprofit is the coffee in this metaphor, and the change you are introducing is the cream, you should expect a lively and free-flowing process full of kinetic energy. This is pleasant, if not beautiful—when viewed through a transparent mug. But if you are *inside* the coffee, lively and free-flowing may feel tumultuous and scary. This is why so many stories of change sound better in hindsight: "I fired our bookkeeper after years of not trusting her. Now, three months later, I can tell you it was the best thing I did!"

Sure. Great.

But what were the three months like? I bet they weren't very easy.

Lived change can feel chaotic.

Knowing that key fact before you start will help you be prepared to navigate these waters. Preparation helps a lot, but at some point, it's going to feel a little scary or overwhelming.

I've read some writers who describe the change process as being like the letter *U*. On the left of the U is the current state of you and your nonprofit. Then you descend—it can certainly feel like a descent at times—into a questioning period with a lot of uncertainty. Then you slowly begin to move up the right side of the U as the "new" emerges.

I hope at least one of those images (the coffee or the U) is helpful to you as you think about creating change in your organization. If you know that this is normal, that this is part of the process, it will help you push through to the other side of the U.

Where are you stuck?

Contemplating change can be daunting when you don't know where to start. It might leave you feeling stuck or worried that your attempt to lead change will blow up in your face. Let's dive into that feeling and try to help you know where to start.

But first: a nature lesson.

Did you know that beavers change their environment more than any other animal species on Earth (after, you know…us)? Some beaver dams are so well-built, they can support the weight of literally millions of gallons of water. Beaver dams are intricate and surprisingly sophisticated pieces of engineering, though we think of them as just a bunch of sticks.

Contemplating change—especially real, important, and lasting change—can feel like standing at the bottom of a beaver dam and being asked to start pulling out logs. What if you pull out the wrong log and the whole thing collapses in an enormous flood that takes you with it? Or (maybe worse) what if you pull out a dozen logs and nothing happens?

How do you choose where to start when there are so many problems you could tackle? The answer is to get as clear-eyed as you possibly can about what the problems actually are.

Here's a way to begin this process.

First, I'd like you to get out of the office, just as Linda did early on in this book. Go to a coffee shop, the waterfront, or a museum (unless you work in a museum). "Change your location, change your life," as the saying goes. Bring a pad of paper and a pen and think about the biggest changes you would like to see at your nonprofit.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What are the biggest "pain points" in your daily job? What do you "tolerate" day in and day out? Even if it's as simple as "my desk drawer is broken," write it down. Don't filter, just write, and see where it takes you.
- Who are the people you work with who cause you anxiety or who ask for more of your time than you would like to give them?
- What loops are you or your organization caught in? (i.e. "I can't do A until I have B, but I can't do B until I have A.") Write down both sides of the loop. Try to list barriers on both sides.

- Where do you wish you could be spending time working on the organization? And what's keeping you from it?

- Are there opportunities you've seen pass by because you didn't have the bandwidth or capacity to deal with them? Write down "pie in the sky" opportunities as well as smaller ones, like an annual grant opportunity you can never seem to get to because it requires too much reporting or paperwork.

- If you could "waste" money on an activity that would significantly improve your daily life, your staff's daily life, or the overall feel of the nonprofit, what would you spend it on? (I love this question because whatever you come up with is almost certainly treated as being an essential use of funds at another organization. Whether it's "a new donor database" or "my own office" or "a water cooler in the break room," chances are the benefits of this "waste" of money are well worth the cost. Your unconscious mind knows what you need to be successful! Listen.)

These should serve as an excellent way to start brainstorming what you would like to see transformed at your nonprofit.

Identifying "first causes"

Once you've done that, you should have a clearer understanding of what's weighing on you. Now pick one of these issues that is really getting to you. We need to investigate if it's a *symptom* of a bigger problem or if it's the problem itself. To answer that, we're going to go through another exercise: looking for first causes.

"First causes" means looking for the problem *behind* the problem. To keep it simple at first, here's how an individual might go looking for first causes:

Problem: "I drink too much coffee in the morning."

Well, why do you drink too much coffee?

"I wake up overtired every morning."

Why do you wake up overtired?

"I guess I go to bed too late."

Why do you go to bed too late?

"Hmm. Well, I'm bingeing a lot of Netflix every night."

Now we're getting somewhere! And see how easily it lends itself to a clear chain of logic: watch less TV at night and you won't drink so much coffee in the morning.

(Of course, if this person were feeling truthful and self-reflective, the next question would be "Why are you watching so much TV?" and who knows what inner feelings are driving that decision. But we'll close this line of inquiry.)

The same chain of logic is true of problems at your nonprofit. It's important to do this as you assess your nonprofit and the problems you wrote down. What if several of your problems have the same first cause? Then you would really know where the problem lies.

Here's an example of the "first cause" logic chain in a nonprofit setting:

Problem: "I can't get my board to do anything! They come to a meeting once a month and just sit there listening to me. Every time we start talking about anything real they just argue and bicker."

Why don't they do anything?

"Because they can never agree on anything. They all have their own interests."

Why do they all have their own interests?

"Everyone on the board is appointed by their church so they don't really care about us. They're more interested in their own church."

Why do churches get to appoint your board members?

"Because we were set up as a consortium of church programs. The bylaws say that's how the board works."

Yikes! Now we know the real problem. The board doesn't do anything because the structure of the board is bad (and it is, I've worked with organizations that are consortiums or amalgamations in this way and it's almost always difficult).

But again, this leads us to a clear solution: change the bylaws and the board will start to do more work on behalf of the nonprofit.

The "right" problem

Now, in a very real way this exercise *increased* the difficulty of the problem for this Executive Director. There are ways to get the board onto the same page and work together more harmoniously—I've talked about those in previous chapters. But for this organization, it may not

be enough. The more effective fix, but also the more complex, is to get them to agree to change the bylaws on how all future board members are appointed. That's the *right* problem to face.

To go back to our beaver dam, this is the right stick to pull from the dam if we wanted to see real change. It doesn't mean it's easy, but knowing that helps us understand what's ahead of us. And it prevents us from spending hours and hours fretting over "why doesn't the board get along or want to do anything?"

Own your part

If there's something you want to change at your nonprofit, then you have to acknowledge that you have some role in creating the thing you are trying to change! Let's say you have difficulty with a particular employee. You have to own the fact that you are that employee's manager. Could you have been a better mentor or leader? Should you have fired her already? You have some part in this.

Similarly, a poor relationship with the board president is partly on you because the relationship has coevolved between you and the president to be that way. Maybe you should have been better at providing documents. Maybe you shouldn't have surprised the board president at those meetings. It takes two to tango. Own your role.

By flagging ways that you partly own a problem, you are laying the foundation for the steps that will lead to (and preserve) change. So don't let this part make you feel too bad. It's about being clear-eyed about your own role.

(And if you are the type to feel guilty about all the things you could or should be doing, think about this exercise as a way to figure out what you actually own. Sure maybe you could have been more gracious in your last meeting with the board president; that's on you. But if the board president is snapping at board members and creating friction at all levels, that's most definitely not on you, no matter how much you worry about it or want to take it on your shoulders.)

Sit with it

After you've identified the situation or problem that you'd like to address, please take a moment before you actually start trying to fix anything! You've identified the problem. You've looked for the problem behind the problem, and you've reflected on your own role in that problem. That's enough for one day.

So sit with what you've assembled. Look for signs over the next few days that tell you if your assessment still feels right. Creating change can take time, and a few days of just thinking about it will give you the resolve you need to say, "Yep, these big problems need fixing."

Or maybe the time will make you realize you were a little off in your assessment, in which case you now have the tools to go back to your notebook and change your answers to something that better fits the new problems you see.

Or maybe you will think: "Yes, this big problem is definitely a first-cause-level problem, but it's just too big and daunting and (frankly) I have more pressing needs over on this other side of the dam first. I'm going to focus over there." That's fine too. You can't tackle everything at once. We're just identifying what you might want to work on over the next few months. Some of them might need to wait, and that's totally ok.

Knowing the lay of the land will help you find opportunities later, should they arise. And you can approach the dam with confidence that you've been level-headed when assessing it.

Aim before you fire

One of the biggest secrets I've found to making successful change is having a really good idea of what you're aiming for. Here's what I mean: Let's say that you've identified that a root cause of your anxiety as an Executive Director is a poor relationship with the board president. You've also owned your part in that: perhaps you've been angry with her, perhaps you've withheld information you should have passed on. Whatever it is, you know the problem, and you've thought about your own role.

So as the next step, I want you to consider: What *should* this relationship look like? Or speaking more broadly to any problem you've identified… *What is good (or good enough) to you?* Don't focus on specific solutions yet, focus instead on the other side of the U—the other side of the problem. You can't solve a problem, especially a big problem, if you don't know what you're aiming for.

In the above example (the poor relationship with the board president), how can you fix that if you don't know what a healthy relationship between the president and ED should look like? If you're a new ED, you may not know the answer. So the first step, if you're not sure what "good" looks like, is learning. Take other EDs out for coffee. Read an online resource, post in a nonprofit forum, or find a book that addresses it.

The point is: don't sit your board president down and say "this has to change" without knowing where you want the relationship to end up.

Possibly, you already *do* know where you want to end up. The answer to "what does good look like" is very clear in your head. For example, Linda, who has struggled with her bookkeeper since she started, might think: "I want a bookkeeper I can trust." Someone else might say, "I want sustainable cash flow to get me through the slow spring months." Or "I want a board that can manage to reach a quorum every month."

Notice that these are positive "end states." They are not just negations of the problem or wishing that the problem would go away. What does a good—or good enough—end state look like to you? What are the feelings associated with it?

Write it all down so you can refer back to it later.

Visualize different paths to success

When you know (generally) what you're aiming for, now you can assess a range of options of how you might get there. Having a range of acceptable outcomes you would be happy with is key to making change work. As they say, "the perfect is the enemy of the good." Take your problem, take "the good" that you are seeking, and then visualize a range of paths that get you where you want to go.

For example, for Linda, who doesn't trust her bookkeeper, there are a variety of options she might write down as being acceptable outcomes:

- implementing new financial checks and balances that protect the organization and give her peace of mind, no matter who the bookkeeper is
- a one-time financial audit from an outside source that gives her peace of mind
- a renewed relationship between her and the bookkeeper that restores her sense of trust

- a new bookkeeper

Any of these will deal with the problem. In fact, if she doesn't trust her bookkeeper, there's a chance that she could end up implementing all of them in some way. But each of these are paths she might choose to follow. Based on her sense of the problem, one of them might be preferred to another. But they all get her to her goal. That's what we're looking for: paths, not solutions. Embarking on change means setting on a path to success, not being wedded to a single solution.

Let's try another couple of examples, just to get in the groove.

Problem: "I want sustainable cash flow to get me through the slow spring months."

Possible paths:

- You could add a fundraiser in February or March.
- You could move your current fundraiser.
- You could ask your board to give in the spring or make their gifts through an automatic monthly gift.
- You could reconfigure your workforce to be more seasonal to save expenses in the spring.
- You could focus on taking your most profitable or successful means of building income, no matter the season, and increase it. (More money, no matter when it arrives, would help fix this problem.)

Problem: "I want a board that can manage to reach a quorum every month."

Possible paths:

- You could work with the board to change the bylaws to reduce the number you need for a quorum (note: if your bylaws require more than half of the current board members to be present for a quorum, you should definitely bring it down to half or half plus one).
- You could ask the board president to forcefully lean on current board members to attend.
- You could ask the board president to take steps to remove board members who aren't attending, thus allowing you to reach a quorum.
- You could recruit a couple new board members quickly.

Any of these are a workable path.

There are multiple possible paths to address any given problem. Your job is to work out how many are acceptable to you. This frees you from rigid thinking. Believing something like "Unless my board president steps down, I'm going to quit" is rigid and it will likely lead to an explosive conflict in you quitting (or you being miserable for months and months on end).

We're in an exploratory phase right now. Be open to possibilities. Visualize what successful feels like more than tying yourself to a single outcome. Look for paths that address a problem from the side instead of from the front. Look at what other nonprofits are doing and ask whether it applies to your nonprofit. Get creative.

What first step keeps the most possible paths open?

Let's review some paths to see what I mean. For Linda, we identified a few possible paths to restoring trust in her bookkeeper. My question to Linda is this: *Is there a first step that keeps as many possible paths open?* Looking at the list of paths again, I can see a couple possible first steps:

- Talking to the treasurer or finance committee about new checks and balances or whether the organization needs an outside audit.
- Taking the bookkeeper to lunch and working to get to know her better.

Neither of these steps counteracts the other and they both leave many options open. So why not do both? These are tentative and safe first steps.

Here's the same exercise for the other problems:

Problem: "I want a board that can manage to reach a quorum every month."

I can see a couple first steps that keep your options open. Talking to the board president about leaning on current board members to attend while simultaneously identifying possible new board members seem like pretty solid options. These two steps aren't confrontational (like removing board members may be) and they aren't too dramatic (like changing bylaws).

The key lesson is this—if you started with a confrontational or dramatic first step, other paths may be closed off. Those steps may need to come later. Change can sometimes require confrontation or drama. But *starting* with confrontation or drama will continue to leave you feeling boxed in.

I prefer to leave as many paths open for as long as possible.

Big steps and safe steps

I also like to think of this time in the change process as the time to balance what feels like a big step and what feels like a safe step.

I'll return to Linda and the bookkeeper example. Linda has identified that the part of the problem she owns is that she hasn't been a great supervisor to the bookkeeper. She hasn't praised her performance when it's been good and she hasn't asked her to change her performance when it's strayed.

So a big step would be for Linda to reassert her role as her supervisor. This would feel like a big step, because the ED hasn't done this in a while, but it's also a safe one, because it is clearly within the job description of the ED to supervise the bookkeeper. Linda is not stepping out onto a limb to do this.

An ED who has a difficult relationship with a board president might choose to have a hard conversation with the board president about how her behavior is hurting the organization. That's a big step! But it's *not* a safe step. The ED is out on a limb in a variety of ways. It risks a lot.

Change can mean risk, for sure. But it doesn't mean we should go courting it this early in the change process. Look for first steps that are as big as you can manage while still being as safe as possible. And, as I said earlier, that don't close off too many paths just yet.

When a plan meets reality

There's an old saying from a general: "No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy." That may be a little dramatic for what we're talking about, but the idea remains the same: things often won't go according to plan.

But we knew this already! Remember our "U" of change? We're entering the bottom of the U where we should expect a messy process. During this phase, we'll simultaneously try to overcome obstacles while also discerning which path we should be following. When we started and were looking down into the fog, we didn't know what obstacles we might face. But after starting a process of change, with a series of first steps, it's likely that we will learn soon enough where the resistance is going to come from.

Let's check in on Linda.

Linda took the bookkeeper to lunch and tried to establish a better rapport. She also praised the bookkeeper for good work whenever she could. This is in keeping with the one of her paths to success—establishing trust and becoming a better manager). She also met with the treasurer and discussed a handful of new cash-handling and financial policies as well as the idea of a one-time financial audit, which were some of her paths to success. All good steps!

Two weeks later, though, when the financial documents were late (again) and Linda didn't have them in time for the finance committee (again), Linda told her bookkeeper that this was unacceptable, and it couldn't happen again. The bookkeeper got angry and said she needed to be paid for an additional ten hours a week to get the job done on time. It led to an argument with a promise from the ED to review the bookkeeper's hours, but nothing else was resolved.

Things were awkward between them after that.

Three days later the bookkeeper called in sick. Which also happened to be the day the board president dropped in because he "happened to be in the neighborhood" and wanted to "check in" with the ED.

If you've been an ED for any length of time, you probably know what's coming. The board president is going to chat about a couple innocuous topics for a few minutes and then, all casual-like, say, "So, Linda, I bumped into our bookkeeper yesterday…"

Uh-huh. "Bumped into."

Some things should be immediately clear from this. For one, the bookkeeper called the board president and—to some extent that we don't know—complained about her boss. For another, this should make it clear that Linda was right not to trust her bookkeeper.

When this happens, we shouldn't fret. It's all part of the plan. Well, maybe not "the plan," per se. But it's all part of the process of making change. Think of it like this: Linda knew there was going to be resistance somewhere, and now it's made itself known. It's much easier to deal with now.

The paths not taken will stay…not taken

In some ways, this moment of change is easier to deal with than standing at the top of the U looking down into the fog of the unknown. Before, it was all options and possibilities and such. But at some point there's a moment like this one with Linda and her board president that brings *clarity*—even though it also brings a measure of conflict. Because it's now clear to Linda that a number of paths to success she had hoped to follow are now closed. Linda didn't close them, to be clear. The bookkeeper and the board president closed them.

When Linda first envisioned the possible paths to success, she came up with four possible paths. But now that the bookkeeper "bumped into" the board president, let's review these paths. New financial checks and balances sound pretty good regardless of the bookkeeper. A one-time financial audit is appealing. And getting a new bookkeeper is really appealing, but the board president seems to be an ally of the bookkeeper's, which may make that harder. But option three? A renewed sense of trust? Not anymore, as far as Linda's concerned.

(To be clear, I'm not saying that going to the board president alone should be a reason to distrust a staff member like this. In this story, the problem was that there had been distrust for a long time already. This event should crystalize that Linda was right to feel that way.)

So now what?

Well. We have clarity, but we also have a new problem: the board president is in the ED's office advocating on behalf of the bookkeeper. He's saying that things are hard for her, you've got to cut her some slack, a nonprofit is only as strong as its people, etc., etc., etc.

How do we handle that?

This is why we wanted first steps that were safe. Because our ED in this story has done nothing out of line. Think about it: Linda talked to the treasurer about new policies. She took her bookkeeper out to lunch. She praised her when appropriate. And she asked the bookkeeper to improve her performance when the financial documents were late.

This is what a board president should be expecting from the ED. (This is what anyone should be expecting from the ED.)

This is an excellent time for Linda to open up to the board president. Up until this point, he has only heard the bookkeeper's side of the story. Linda should not start an argument with the board president or tell him this is none of his business (though it's not really). She should take charge: here's the problem and here's what I've been doing about it.

Still keeping paths open

In my experience, this kind of approach will get most board presidents onto your side pretty quickly, especially if you have a degree of trust with them. But not always. You might also find that you are enacting change that someone is actively against. Whether it's the board president, a rogue board member, or a major donor, you might decide they hold enough power for you to rule out a path.

So, let's say that the ED's meeting with the board president goes really poorly

Linda encounters fierce resistance from the board president to any hint that the bookkeeper is not performing her duties. He's talking about giving her another chance, she's been with the organization so long, we can't lose her. In short, he's making it clear that the ED should not replace the bookkeeper. He's trying to take another path off the table. Now what?

Watch out for the dip!

Dealing with external resistance to change can be hard. And yet, at this moment, Linda is farther along a trajectory up the right side of the U of change than at any point before.

And yet it may not *feel* like it to her.

When external resistance raises its head, it can be easy to get overwhelmed. When a project hits a speed bump, that's when an ED is at risk of abandoning the project of leading change, even though it's actually close to being seen all the way through!

In many ways, when I've counseled spending the time on focus, visioning, and planning, it's in preparation for this moment. Because I want to give the ED the encouragement to get through a dip in momentum and enthusiasm.

Everyone experiences "the dip" in big and complex projects. Maybe there's a flurry of productivity at the beginning when excitement is high. And then when the next step comes we just…don't take it.

There are a few reasons we might encounter an emotional dip while leading change:

We're not wedded to the vision.
If the vision isn't clear enough, or the benefits of the vision aren't apparent enough, it's easy to let a project go. That's why I suggested a lot of thinking and visioning at the beginning. The bigger the change, the clearer you need to be about why you want it so you can push through the dip. (I owe a lot to Seth Godin's short book *The Dip* for how to think about this process. It's not about nonprofits at all, but for a seventy-six-page book, the concepts discussed can be universalized fairly easily.)

We're not ok with changing ourselves.

Remember how we "owned" our part of the problem earlier? We often have investments in how things are (or were). In the story we've been running with, Linda had to own up to the fact that she had not been a great manager of the bookkeeper. That means that, as part of the change process, there are things she will need to tackle that are going to challenge her.

But she who is good with a hammer tends to think everything is a nail. To truly lead change, we've got to pick up new tools other than a hammer. For Linda, that might mean learning new skills as a manager and maybe getting a much clearer understanding in her own head of what accrual accounting is. But she's going to need to adapt if she wants change to stick. Otherwise she'll keep coming up against the same roadblock—herself.

We're not ok with being uncomfortable.

Discomfort is hard. It's not fun. Having your bookkeeper angry at you is uncomfortable. On a daily level, maybe it would feel easier to have things how they were before starting this process. Maybe it wasn't great, but at least it didn't feel uncomfortable like this. If you have problems with the messy part at the bottom of the U and how it triggers feelings of discomfort, that's ok! It's natural. Sit with it. Notice it. Let yourself feel it. And remember the vision you're working toward. But you don't necessarily have to act on it. Discomfort is just a feeling. It doesn't, by itself, mean you have to do anything about it.

We're not ok with letting go.

It's easy to say we want change. But change—real change—means letting go of something without knowing exactly where we're going. This is why people say they'd rather deal with the devil they know than the devil they don't.

You can *say* that you want your employees to take more initiative without you, but if you always swoop in and fix the problems for them, you aren't actually creating the conditions to get to your goal. You aren't letting go of the old to make way for the new.

But, as I said earlier, "What got you here may not get you there." Sometimes we need to let go of what was in order to get where we're going. It takes hard work and habit building, but it can happen.

We're overwhelmed with other work.

It's hard to do this work. Leading change demands time. If you're too essential to the day-to-day operations of the nonprofit, it's going to be hard to carve out time for things like surprise visits from the board president. You owe it to yourself to make sure that—before you start pulling big logs from the dam—you have the day-to-day operations fairly well handled.

Those are the most likely reasons for not getting through the dip of momentum and excitement: no clear vision, not being willing to change yourself, discomfort with being uncomfortable, too wedded to the past, and no time to manage the process.

The more you can recognize the symptoms, the more you will be able to push through. Many people lose the thread at this point. But pushing through the dip is what will complete the U of change and help you get to the change you're looking for.

We've known the bottom of the U is a messy place to be. Accept it, know that it's going to happen as you enter, and keep your vision strong for getting out, and you'll have a good chance of cementing real change at your organization.

(I will add one note: that it's *possible* that the dip is because you shouldn't be embarking on this project in the first place. Most likely, this is just the feeling of being at the bottom of the U talking. Here's my brief litmus test: If every single path to success has been closed, and not just delayed, but actually closed, then yes, possibly this project should be abandoned and you should focus your attention elsewhere. But if it's just hard, and there are still paths to success, and the vision of the new end state is compelling, then you should keep pushing through the dip.)

Moving up the right side of the U

As we go through the period of external resistance and questioning, it's important to remember one of the first maxims of this process: keep paths open. It's because of this difficult moment that we need other ways to satisfactorily end the process. And it's why we're trying not to be wedded too hard to a single outcome.

For Linda, trust appears to be gone between her and the bookkeeper—that option is off the table. And the board president has seemingly ruled out firing the bookkeeper and replacing her (for now). That leaves two possible paths left:

- implementing new financial checks and balances that protect the organization that give Linda peace of mind
- a one-time financial audit from an outside source that gives her peace of mind

The board president, having intervened so heavily, will see these as compromises and readily agree to these goals. And, in fact, they're already underway! Because Linda started on these steps a while before with the finance committee.

This is a win.

If the bookkeeper follows the policies, great. Then she can trust the bookkeeper more because she will trust the policies that she's following. If everything comes back clean from an audit, also great. Linda can live with it, even if she personally finds the bookkeeper difficult.

Securing change

Having gone through the U, the goal is now to secure and "lock-in" the new status quo. In Linda's case, she has new policies and an audit. She should have a meeting with her staff to talk about the board's new policies for cash-handling. She should create a form or a checklist that covers the new procedures. She should report to the finance committee a couple of months after implementation on how it's going. She should commend her employees when seeing them following the new procedures. And Linda, if she ever handles money on her own, should scrupulously follow the new policy—otherwise her staff will see that she's not living it herself.

It's this kind of doggedness and persistence that prevents a new idea or plan from sliding away over time. Change can often be lost in this moment because an ED just assumes everyone is on board. But it's not a given. It needs to be *lived* for a while. They need to develop muscle memory for the new way to go about their jobs.

Defining done

But there's something else important that Linda needs to do—she needs to call the job done. There shouldn't be any new changes to the financial procedures for some time.

If she found new ways to change and tweak them right away, people would feel like she was just making change for change's sake, and they are going to lose trust in her. They need to see the new reality and live with it for a while. Linda should focus on some other area of the nonprofit that needs her attention after this has been cemented. Leave this the same for a while and let it settle.

And in Linda's case in particular she should definitely not keep gunning for her bookkeeper. It's easy to be resentful that the board president intervened. But Linda won in the end. She got what she needed—financial systems that make her trust the numbers, and accountability for the bookkeeper, not just to Linda but to the board. She needs to be ok calling this done.

If you are at one of the "end states" that you envisioned early on in the process, then call it a win, or at least "good enough," and move on.

Further change happens a lot more easily

It's also true that Linda has laid the groundwork to make further change in this area happen without all the heavy lifting we did earlier. What if, four months later, the bookkeeper doesn't follow the new policies? That information should go straight to the finance committee and then the board. This is another "safe" step. Because the board passed a policy, it's not being followed, and Linda is advising them of that.

Now the option of "getting a new bookkeeper" is back on the table in a real way.

Even if the board president is still an ally of the bookkeeper, the process by which Linda has arrived here is a series of steps that no one can really argue with. That's the benefit of the process we've been on—it's a series of slow turns of the wheel that feel inevitable. A ratchet of change.

But of course, we know that they weren't inevitable. Things could have gone differently if the bookkeeper had changed her attitude, if the board president hadn't intervened, and in any number of areas.

To go back to the metaphor of pouring cream in coffee for a moment, Linda can think of her board as being outside of the coffee cup. They weren't part of the change process, but when they look inside the cup, they will see beige coffee, not black coffee. Change will be apparent and the logic of it will drive others to new ideas they might have resisted before.

Should Linda want to take the step of finding a new bookkeeper, she won't need the big scoping and planning and visioning that happened before. She's been through the options, and she got two of them. So if she's ready for this one, the board will almost certainly back her on it.

Big change

This story follows a (relatively) small change—though that doesn't mean it was easy by any means. Linda isn't reimagining her mission statement. She's not dramatically expanding services or thinking about a capital campaign. It's very internal. But the same process is involved for a large change as well. It just takes longer and involves more people.

The research phase might involve several coffee meetings, phone calls, and listening sessions with board members and donors and other key stakeholders. The first "safe" steps might mean hiring a new position or asking a donor to fund a pilot project. These are much larger than Linda's first steps.

But the process is the same.

For these complex projects, you'll need to really engage with people relationally. And you'll also need to keep track of the project with lists or other regular check-ins so it doesn't slip away during "the dip."
In the next chapter, we'll talk about some key tools that will help you do just that.