

Thriving in Your Role as Executive Director

By Erik Hanberg

A special download to accompany

“The Little Book of Nonprofit Leadership”

In order to truly lead your nonprofit, you will have to change yourself as well. No one walks into the job as an already perfect Executive Director. You will need to learn and grow.

Many EDs of small nonprofits who follow their passion into nonprofit leadership may not have had this kind of management experience before. And even if you have, let's be clear—this job can be hard. There's a lot to do and a lot to keep track of! But it is also hard *emotionally*. The ever-present need for decisions can be taxing on the mind. There's the possibility—if not likelihood—of long hours during crunch times. And the weight of responsibility for your employees and the people you serve can grow very heavy.

I've been there. I've felt it. This chapter is a blend of practical steps, advice, and lenses with which to view your job that will help you thrive—not just survive—in your role as ED. Consider it a follow-up to the chapter “What Does a Nonprofit Executive Director Actually Do?” Where that chapter discussed what the job entails, this chapter will dive into *how* to get it done.

I won't list any ideas or routines that I don't use myself.

Systems, defining done, and saying no

The first step of anything is to acknowledge that there are infinite calls on your time and you can't possibly do everything. I'm serious. There's always more marketing you could do. There's always more fundraising. There's always more planning. There's always one more idea. It's a reality of our world that you need to accept, both in terms of calls on your time and calls on the time of the people of the organization.

You need to get clear-eyed about what you can accomplish and what's worth spending time on. And then for the thing you do spend time on, you will benefit from creating systems around them to make sure they get done.

I'll give you an example. In *The Little Book of Likes: Social Media for Small (and Very Small) Nonprofits*, I spell out key elements to a social media marketing plan and then counsel you to create something workable with those elements. For Linda, she chose a monthly e-newsletter, a monthly blog post about Smallville history (and on the blog she put a call to action to get email signups), and two to three posts on Facebook every week. Linda felt like this was doable. Someone else might be able to do more and someone else might be able to do less. The key part is this: She wasn't going to constantly worry about whether she should be on this new social media platform or that one. She wasn't going to have an account that she opened and then never updated for months or years at a time. She had defined what she was going to do and she was going to focus on that.

This is a model that will truly reward Executive Directors. The world is overwhelming. The amount of social media advice or fundraising advice or anything advice is functionally infinite. You have to be able to take what you can and operationalize it for a while without always worrying about what else you can be doing.

(That doesn't mean a plan will never change. It helps to reserve time in your schedule every so often to brainstorm, research, plan, and tweak. But sometimes we just have to implement, with the understanding we are *choosing* not to do more.)

Filling the jar

Have you heard the story of the professor who wanted to illustrate effective time management to his students?

He showed them a jar and said, "This jar represents your day." And he showed them a pile of large rocks and said, "These are the most important things you're trying to do today." He filled the jar with the rocks until no more would fit. He asked his class, "Is the jar full? Is our day full?" The students said yes.

The professor then filled in the spaces around the large rocks with small pebbles. Now the jar was filled with several large rocks and many pebbles. "Is the jar full?" he asked. Some of the students still said yes.

Then he poured sand in the jar. It filled in the cracks of the rocks and pebbles. "Is the jar full?" he asked. Students (who had now wised up) said no.

They were right. The professor poured water into the jar until there truly was no more room. The day was totally filled.

“What is the lesson of this demonstration?” the professor asked.

One student answered, “No matter what, there’s always room to do more.”

The professor shook his head. “No,” he said. “The lesson is that if we had filled the jar with sand first, there wouldn’t have been room for the rocks.”

EDs are especially prone to forgetting this lesson.

Sometimes we fill our days with sand or water or small pebbles and then we bemoan the fact that we can’t fit in the rocks. (If you are embarking on a major change project as discussed in the last chapter, know that it is a rock. You need to give it plenty of time and let other things flow around it.)

“Getting Things Done”

But how to make time in your day? I’m a fan of David Allen’s *Getting Things Done*, which I’ve used as a manual for productivity for more than fifteen years. The habits of the book have become ingrained in me. I can’t recommend it enough.

Some of the best lessons:

Trust your brain to make decisions, not to hold information.

This is one of the most important overarching lessons of GTD. Your brain is great at a lot of things but remembering things to do is not one of them. That’s why we remember we need batteries for the flashlight only when we try to turn it on and not when we’re at the store passing the battery aisle. The more we can get out of our head and onto paper or into a trusted app, the better we can remember what we actually need to do (when we need to do it).

Create projects with action words.

We often write pseudo-projects like “Accounting software” but that’s not really a project. What does it mean? What does it look like when it’s done? Clarifying projects helps tremendously. “Decide on the right accounting software” is a good project. Note the strong action word. After you’ve completed this project, the next project may be something like “Transition to new

accounting software.” It takes a nebulous idea and breaks it into two discrete projects, each with their own set of steps.

What is the next action?

Once you have a project, determining the next action is vitally important. “Research accounting software online” is a good step. So is “Email three Executive Directors and ask what accounting software they use and if they’d recommend it” is another good one. Projects are comprised of action steps. The more you can assign and then complete tasks within a project, the more you will be able to make tangible progress.

Sometimes though the next action isn’t what you think it is. If you have an ongoing area of responsibility to “Steward donors” you might think your next action is to “Write three handwritten notes” or something like that. But if you’re putting it off and it’s not getting done for whatever reason, it’s probably not actually the next action. In those situations, there’s likely a more immediate action that is holding you back. What’s preventing you from moving forward? “Buy nicer thank-you cards” might do it. “Ask the membership coordinator to run a weekly report of new donors with their addresses” might give you a list to work from if that’s what’s holding you back. These might be the true next action.

The two-minute rule.

If you come up with a task that can be done in less than two minutes, don’t put it off or schedule it or take the time to write it on a list. Just do it. And you’d be surprised what can be done in two minutes! “Email three Executive Directors and ask what accounting software they use and if they’d recommend it” is actually a task that can probably be done in two minutes, though many of us build it up in our head to be a bigger task than it is. The first minute is spent writing a simple email to a trusted ED colleague.

Hi Angela,

Quick question!

*I’m considering options for new accounting software at the
Historical Society. We’re using an outdated piece of software but*

I'd like something better suited to a nonprofit. Is there anything you've used and liked (or really don't like?).

Thanks so much!

Linda

That's one minute. The next minute is a copy and paste to two other EDs.

I know some folks reading this might be surprised that I think it's a good idea to send three emails in two minutes. But once the task is decided, the actual emails can be written quite quickly. They don't have to be labored over. You can do a lot in two minutes.

Conduct a weekly review.

I promised that I wouldn't recommend anything that I don't do myself. So I should note that while I do weekly reviews regularly, this is the part of the GTD system where I fall down most often. And yet, when I do them, I feel so much better, even if I only get to my weekly review every other week. But I find it's an essential way to close loops I might have otherwise forgotten about. There's a whole process in the book (find and go through loose papers, review last week's and next week's calendars, review project list, etc.) that is very useful. And when I *do* make time for the weekly review, I go through those steps religiously. It's a solid way to make sure that after you've finished "Decide on the right accounting software" (for example) you remember to create your next project—"Transition to new accounting software."

Set reminders.

I set so many reminders it's not even funny. But this way I know for certain that I won't forget something. I have repeating reminders that return a week, a month, a quarter, or a year after I've checked them off. For example, I have a reminder every four months to check a certain printed document and make sure that it's still current. Otherwise I run the risk of going too long without updating it. And I have other reminders that are set to specific days or times. I just checked my reminders and I literally have a reminder set for two years in the future, reminding me to talk to my wife about whether we should make plans to go to the next solar eclipse in the United States. Otherwise, I might not remember until it's too late!

Every so often, look at the big picture.

In *Getting Things Done*, David Allen also advocates for annual or semiregular times to review the big picture. What do you want to accomplish over the next couple months? The next couple years? The next decade? With the rest of your life? Checking in on these things every so often will put new projects on your list and make you decide to remove projects that don't resonate anymore.

Busy-ness is a trap

For all that talk about “getting things done,” it's also true that prioritizing productivity on its own is a form of the busy trap. Don't fall for it. The goal is not to be busy, but to make sure you're doing the right things going toward the right goals. Free time is good. Downtime is good. (Even David Allen believes GTD is important because it makes it easier to enjoy the downtimes, because you have a system you trust for when you come back.)

This is a small thing, but I find it's a useful mental note to myself: When someone asks how things are going, I work hard not to automatically answer, “Busy!” So many people say this, and it's like they want a gold sticker for it. *I* want a gold sticker for it. But I truly believe that it's hard to be a great Executive Director if you're “busy” all the time. You need time to think. You need time to read reports, to deeply connect with donors, to learn from the people you serve. This means you need to fight to keep open hours on your schedule. It feels like a luxury because we so often want to justify our job with “busy-ness.” But it's worth fighting for. Let's talk about your calendar, because that's often where we unknowingly allow busy-ness to take over.

Make your calendar work for you

Lots of people aren't in charge of their own calendars, and it's one of the leading causes of unhappiness. Executive Directors have much more control over their own calendar than many people with salaried jobs, but they often don't act like it!

Don't let other people dictate your day. Make your calendar work for you. You get to be the boss, remember? Here's how to take charge of your calendar:

Schedule important things long in advance.

These are the rocks in our time-management metaphor. You shouldn't be caught off guard by board meetings, committee meetings, or important family functions. At the beginning of each fiscal year, prepare a list of dates for the board meetings and distribute them to the board. Put them on your own calendar as well! If you have kids, you should know their full year's school schedule in the fall. Put all the important dates—half days, parent-teacher conferences, and such—on the calendar as soon as you know them. If there are three afternoons for parent-teacher conferences, block them off to be “held” and then when you actually know the date of your parent-teacher conference, you can free up the rest of the time.

Try to preserve half days or full days on your calendar wherever possible.

If have meetings at 9:00, 10:30, and 1:00 (with travel between them), getting work done between those meetings is going to be a challenge. Even though it's only three hours of meetings, it's hard to be productive in those spare fifteen or thirty minutes between things, and it's hard to get into a groove when you're running all over town for meetings. I'd probably finish this day feeling like I hadn't really gotten to much real work.

Instead, as much as you possibly can, build your appointments around each other in terms of both time and geography. Maybe you can meet your board president for breakfast at 8:30, followed by meeting a donor at a coffee shop across the street at 10:00, with your next meeting at the same coffee shop at 11:00. This way you're back in the office right after lunch with the rest of the day ahead of you. Back-to-back-to-back meetings can be exhausting if you have too many days like that. But you can make up for it by having long open times to get your work done.

If you run a nonprofit that needs you on-site regularly, then don't add extra stress to your day by having nonessential meetings outside the office. Consider the ED who accepts an appointment out of the office, only to have emergencies blow up right before she leaves. Then she cancels or is late, and the feeling of being busy and overwhelmed rears its ugly head. Instead, look for ways to create a hospitable environment in your own office. Get a nice coffeemaker, some beans, and two comfortable chairs and invite people to come to you!

Avoid scheduling meetings that can be emails.

Lots of people, like major donors and board members, can ask for an hour of your time and expect to get it. But you don't have to give of your time to *everyone*. The more you can connect with people over phone or email, the better you will have a handle on your schedule.

When you are about to request a meeting of someone, or are about to respond to an invitation to a meeting, take a moment to ask yourself, "Can I do this over email?" Will a short video call be a better use of my time? (This has become a lot more common since the pandemic.)

Being more circumspect in how you give of your time will help you prevent your schedule from becoming overloaded.

Would I be willing to do this tomorrow?

Another trick to keep your schedule from becoming overloaded is to be cautious about invitations to things far into the future. If it's February, it's easy to say yes to speak at a conference in May. That's months in the future. Future You can certainly handle it. But when May arrives, you haven't found the time to craft the amazing presentation that Past You thought you would. And now you're kind of upset at yourself for agreeing to it because you need to put in a bunch of work at the last minute.

If you ever get these invitations for things far in the future, ask yourself if you would be willing to do it *tomorrow*. Is the opportunity so good that you would be willing to stay up late working on the presentation tonight to get it ready for the next day? Because that's probably what will happen anyway.

If so, say yes. If not, maybe you should decline.

If you're not willing to drop everything to do it tomorrow, it's a good sign you won't be that excited to do it in a few months either.

Extreme calendaring.

Sometimes, in the morning, I write out my whole day in half-hour increments. If I have anything on the calendar, I put those on the list. I schedule time for lunch and a break or two. And then I try to assign the things that are weighing on me around those. An hour for this task, a half hour for that one. "Processing email" might be an hour. "Weekly review" might be ninety minutes. "Call donors and thank them for their gift" might go long but if you know that and don't put it

right before a hard stop, it will usually work out ok. We're better at guessing at these things than we think we are.

I find this system helpful on busy days when I need to get a lot done. Counterintuitively, I also find it helpful on slow days when I have the whole day in front of me and I'm not sure how to spend it. I don't do it every day, to be certain, but I find I'm doing it more and more often.

It's akin to what's called the "pomodoro" method, if you want to look into that—short sprints with focused concentration, followed by short breaks. It's surprisingly effective.

Habits are better than goals

I've found that small tasks that become habits are almost always better than big, huge goals that I abandon. Consider a goal to *really* steward your donors this year. That doesn't really mean anything if you can't put it into action. But consider a *habit*: Every morning when you get to the office, you handwrite a postcard to a donor, let them know you're thinking of them, and thank them for their support of the nonprofit. That's more than 250 postcards a year—and it takes only a few minutes every day. It would also be *powerful* to your donors. The key is forming the habit.

Habits are hard. Reminders help. Being forgiving with yourself when you let them slip is important. Getting outside feedback *really* helps. (Donors will start thanking you for your cards very quickly and that might become motivation enough.) The longer you can stick with it, the more these small habits will pay off for you and your organization.

Train people how to communicate with you

The Grand Cinema was open seven days a week, 365 days a year. Our biggest days were holidays. Movies sometimes started at 9:00 at night or later. Cult movies showed late on Fridays and Saturdays. All of this is to say that someone from the Grand might call me asking for help or to ask a question at nearly any time of the day or night. My phone was liable to ring on Saturday nights, Monday mornings, or Christmas Day.

I learned very quickly that I needed to be clear about communication. Here's what I told them: The staff on-site should always feel free to call me if they needed something. But

sometimes, I just wasn't going to pick up. (One person laughed at this point. But I was most definitely not joking.) The important part was the next part—if it's truly important that they talk to me, call a second time and I will drop everything and get on the line as soon as possible. But if it wasn't important enough to justify that second call, I trusted them to figure it out.

I laid it out like this because I wanted staff to know that they were welcome to call me, but also to give myself a buffer if needed. Because sometimes I just really didn't want to answer the phone. Maybe I was with my family. Maybe I was in a movie myself! But if I answered the phone every time an employee called...then I'd never get time to myself because they would call for every tiny thing.

But at the same time, I wanted them to know that, in case of emergency, they shouldn't give up. They should definitely call back!

It paid to be clear about how I wanted the staff to communicate with me.

You may need to be as explicit as I was, but you can also train someone how to reach you by simply being selective in how and when you reply to inbound emails, texts, and phone calls.

The best way to get emails late at night is to *reply* to emails late at night. If a board member texts you at 10:30 and you're lying in bed, you don't have to start a text conversation! Leave it unread and reply in the morning. You should be responsive to your board, but you don't have to be *that* responsive. Pretty soon, they will stop texting you at 10:30 and just send an email so that it's waiting for you in the morning.

If you are the kind of person who needs to get emails out before you can sleep, then schedule them to go out in the morning. It's a simple step but it sets good boundaries for how people email or reply to you.

What does rest look like for you?

There's a video by Tony Schwartz, who founded The Energy Project, about the importance of rest. He uses a metaphor for work and rest that really resonates with me. He says that the best athletes are not those who train the hardest. Rather, the best athletes are the ones who *rest* the best. Because getting really good at resting shortens the time they need for rest, and thus can train more. If they don't get good at resting, then training overworks their bodies and they injure themselves.

I think there's a real lesson here for Executive Directors. Figure out how you recharge. Cooking and baking helps me because I like short-term activities that have a clear "end." Did I make a good loaf of bread? Was tonight's dinner healthy and tasty? It's (mostly) a yes or no question. And I can do better the next time. I often say that success at nonprofits is measured in years, so I find these little tasks are a good balance, because the feedback is so immediate.

I also love reading novels. The experience of time changes when I'm reading a good book. I can *totally* lose myself in a book. That's a restful feeling for me and it's incredibly energizing. My ideal vacation is a stack of novels next to a pool. Sign me up!

For you it might be season tickets at your local minor league baseball team. Or kayaking every morning before anyone else wakes up. Or jumping out of airplanes. Or weekend getaways to big cities. The important thing is to figure it out so that you can make sure you get it. Figure out how you recharge and make time for it.

Watch out for fake work (and fake rest)

The counter to all of this about productivity and rest is that it's so easy to waste hours doing things that aren't actually meaningful to our job or to our personal life or to resting. Sometimes we can spend hours in front of a computer and not really get anything done. Or we can have a weekend that isn't actually restful because we checked email the whole time or never did the things that would really help us unwind.

On the one hand, I firmly believe this is normal. I still have days where I ask myself "What exactly did I accomplish today?" and come up with a handful of minor things that didn't really advance anything. So it's not worth beating ourselves up about.

But on the other hand, I also believe that we can catch ourselves and work to get out of these moods. The Getting Things Done method helps me because I have a list of "real" work I could be doing. When I'm in these moods I might choose the absolutely easiest things on the list and check them off. Even if the task is "Skim a magazine about my nonprofit's field," it's finally done and I can recycle the magazine. The next task I choose might be a little more on the ball than skimming a magazine, but I'll still choose easy things. Do this a few times, and pretty soon I'm taking important steps on a meaningful project. This sets up a series of small wins and I can start to get myself out of a funk.

Or, on the other hand, I might close my computer, put down my phone, and figure out something else to do with my time. Can I take a walk and make calls while I get my blood moving? Can I escape to a coffee shop and work from there? All of these can jolt me out of a funk. Sometimes I don't even realize that I'm in that mood until I realize that I'm doing fake work or fake rest. But once I realize I'm there, it's gotten easier to find ways to get out of it.

There is another kind of “fake work” worth flagging. Sometimes we engage in tasks or routines that aren't actually preparation, they just *feel* like preparation. I call it “getting ready to get ready.” This applies to ways we spend our time that don't actually move something forward but it feels like it does. Some tasks are just procrastination techniques you've figured out to fool your brain into thinking you're working. Once you can name it, it's easier to spot it. So watch for it in your work.

Mentally and emotionally handling your job

The more we get away from productivity and time management, the more we need to talk about the *internal* work that you might have to do as a leader of a nonprofit. That's what we're going to tackle next.

There are true difficulties that come with this job. I don't just mean decisions and challenges. I mean that there are emotional and mental health considerations that we should dig into as well.

“Heavy is the head that wears the crown...” they say.

Yes, that's an overblown comparison for a small nonprofit Executive Director, but it does get to a core truth of the job—it's easy to feel alone and to feel the burden of responsibility.

Let's talk about some of the ways to handle the emotions and the stress that can come with this position.

Slipping out the back door sometimes

This is the *opposite* of productivity. On a cold Monday morning in January...take an extra hour at home with your family so you're ready to meet the day. On a beautiful Friday afternoon

in August...slip out the back door and get some sun. (And maybe give your staff the freedom to do the same!)

One of the perks of the job is that it is flexible. You are “on” so much. You have board meetings and other evening events that keep you out until after dinner. Weekend appointments. Early mornings. So I hope you will sometimes cut yourself some slack and simply enjoy one of the perks of the job. You are making the hours up elsewhere, I’m sure of it.

No one from your board of directors is there to see if you punch the clock. And if you are like many EDs, you have many appointments that keep you out of the office at various hours, so your staff doesn’t know if you’re playing hooky or talking to a major donor. And even if they do, you don’t work for them! They work for you. If you let them be flexible, as I’ve suggested earlier, then you too should be able to be flexible now and then.

Like anything, use your power for good and don’t abuse it! But don’t be stingy with yourself. The same kindness you show to your employees you can show to yourself.

You are not your nonprofit

Sometimes I feel like I’m writing these nonprofit books to my younger self. And this is one of those points. I’m more aware of it now, which helps (ED, know thyself!), but sometimes I won’t catch it in time. But I had a habit of internalizing bad things that happened at the nonprofit as if they were personal attacks.

Here’s how it worked for me, and I share it here because maybe it’s the same for you. I once tried to get a new education program launched at the Grand. In the same budget discussion, I asked for a raise. I was excused from the meeting for them to talk about the raise during executive session and they suggested I just leave for the night. The next day, they told me the results of the raise, but they also told me that they had decided not to fund the education program.

I was *so* upset. I wasn’t there to defend it! They were making a decision without me! Why were they talking about this during executive session! I was *mad*.

It’s interesting, looking back on it, how upset I was. I think it’s ok to be upset. I’m not afraid of anger! But, in retrospect, I was significantly more upset than I needed to be. I was taking everything *so* personally. I was identifying my self-worth with the success of the

nonprofit and what I was trying to do. But I was not the Grand. And you are not your nonprofit. You are not your job. Bad things will happen sometimes and good things will happen sometimes. Do your best. The setbacks the nonprofit will experience are not personal failings.

Find other EDs you can be honest with

I strongly recommend finding other Executive Directors of nonprofits and creating strong relationships with them. This could be formal—I know of a group of EDs that get together regularly—or it could just be regular reminders to yourself to invite other EDs out for coffee.

The job is hard. And it can be isolating. Some problems you can't take to staff (because it involves them) and you're not ready to take them to the board (because you don't have a good solution yet and want to do more research). So who do you turn to?

Other EDs. People in the same boat as you are.

I recommend building relationships with other EDs of nonprofits that are a similar size, or slightly bigger, than yours. Ask each other questions, share frustrations, offer advice. The trust and confidentiality over time will really pay off.

Having trusted people can really help.

Mistakes

Everyone makes mistakes. You will too. It may take months to realize that a decision was a mistake or it might be apparent very quickly! Either way, you need to undertake this work with the knowledge that you're fallible and are going to make mistakes. But here's the truth of it—handling mistakes gracefully and with aplomb is way better in the long run than excessively trying to avoid them. Really.

Mistakes are normal. Most mistakes—99.9% of them—are not fatal to you or the organization. So when you make mistakes at the nonprofit, the truly important part is how you learn from them and how you react. Showing your staff and board how you react to a mistake is incredibly important—they will both take cues from you.

Some mistakes no one but you will see, which can be private learning moments. But many will be visible to someone else. In those cases, you need to be clear with the other party that you

also see the mistake. You need to make a direct and sincere apology—an apology that, in some situations, may need to be in front of others, such as at a staff meeting or in your report to the board. And you need to take steps to make sure that this kind of mistake doesn't happen again. Those are the three public-facing steps, and they will model to everyone at your nonprofit what they should expect from you and how you expect them to behave as well.

But there's a final step here—you need to forgive yourself. Some of us have perfectionist tendencies or tend to beat ourselves up for failings for a long, long time. Do your best to chalk a mistake up to a learning experience. You might need a trick to help. For example, I told myself that I wasn't going to be hard on myself for a mistake...the first time. That was my goal: to not make the same mistake twice at a nonprofit. There might be some trick like that to help you move on.

Consider a therapist

I said at the beginning of this chapter that I wouldn't recommend any strategy that I didn't use myself. So keep that in mind when I say that EDs should really consider finding a regular therapist. I was lucky that in high school I had a friend whose mom was a pastoral counselor. She told me, "Everyone can benefit from some sort of counseling." When I was older and running a nonprofit, I was glad I still had that perspective in mind.

A year into my job at the Grand, I went to therapy because I noticed that I was angry *a lot*. And I wasn't sure why. I took the plunge, found a therapist, and I'm so glad I did. It helped me gain perspective and separate myself from tying my identity so closely to the job and the nonprofit. It was hugely important.

So I will repeat what my friend's mom said: I think everyone can benefit from some form of therapy. When you're squeezed, as an Executive Director often is, it's nice to have a place to vent, to get ideas, and to find new perspectives. Whatever preconceived notions you have about therapy, I hope you will consider it.

Finding both purpose and gratitude

One of the most significant dangers of the job is burnout. What we've covered so far should help fight that problem. But there are two ways you can reconnect emotionally with your work that can also help.

The first is to reconnect to the purpose of the nonprofit at the most visceral level. Talk to the patrons of the theater and the ticket takers. Talk to the people who line up at the soup kitchen and participate in making them a meal. Connecting with the reason your nonprofit exists as closely as possible is a good way to remember why you do the work you do.

When I was the managing director at the Grand Cinema, I used to take a shift every couple of months as "house manager," a job that was selling tickets and working with the volunteers to make popcorn and other concessions. This is the very essence of the daily operations that I encouraged you to get out of earlier! If I had done a shift every week, it probably would not have been a good use of my time. But a shift here and there felt good and helped me in the long run.

In addition, two years in a row I scheduled myself to be the house manager on Christmas Eve. It was a kindness to the employees, because they all had the night off (and many of them would be working the next day, so they appreciated it), but it was also special to me to connect with the Grand at that time. When I was a teenager, my family often went to movies after Christmas dinner—it was part of my holiday tradition. Seeing people come into the theater as part of their own holiday traditions felt really good. And it reminded me why I was at the Grand and why people loved the work we did.

You are in the job because you want to help people in a specific way. So look for those opportunities to do so when you're feeling disconnected or burned out.

The other emotional state that you can practice is one of gratitude. The job of Executive Director of a nonprofit is a privileged position. It's an honor that a group of people, on behalf of the entire community, have chosen you to lead an organization. If you find yourself feeling resentful or upset about how something has gone, this is the cure. Look for ways to reflect on this. Find reasons to appreciate your board, volunteers, and staff. Appreciate your paycheck! Appreciate the tangible and intangible benefits the job has provided.

The job has highs and lows. But all in all, I think it's hard to beat. When the lows have you down, some focus here will help tremendously.