

11 KEY INGREDIENTS OF GROWTH

One of the most rewarding things about serving as a nonprofit board member is the opportunity it affords to help create positive change. In 2008, Billy Shore, founder and chief executive officer of Share Our Strength — an organization dedicated to ending childhood hunger through its No Kid Hungry campaign — realized that his organization was stuck. Marooned on a no-growth plateau, he concluded that nothing short of a dramatic transformation was needed to move it forward. With the board's support and assistance, the organization sharpened its strategy and made investments in capacity that led to growth. Looking back in 2011, founder Billy Shore teased out the key ingredients of Share Our Strength's success during a difficult economic period, with the hope that his insights might benefit other nonprofit leaders.

1. TAKE A LEAP OF IMAGINATION.

Imagination is a vital instrument of leadership. Don't focus on something that other groups are already doing. Follow Jonathan Kozol's advice — pick battles big enough to matter but small enough to win. Define your goal. Share Our Strength refocused its anti-hunger efforts on a specific subset — hungry children.

2. GO BIG OR GO HOME.

Establish a big goal. For Share Our Strength, setting its sights on actually ending childhood hunger in the U.S. represented transformational change and more than any other factor was responsible for its growth. It required a different strategy, which, in Share Our Strength's case, is premised on connecting children to effective nutrition programs.

3. INCREASE CAPACITY.

It is difficult to increase impact without increasing capacity in such things as staff and technology. This can be difficult when many, if not most, stakeholders favor investments in program instead of capacity. Board and staff leaders must assert and defend the direct connection between capacity and impact. (See [Measuring Fundraising Effectiveness](#) and the [Overhead Myth](#).)

4. INVEST IN TALENT FIRST.

Adding staff is an expensive investment but great ideas, strategy, and execution flow from a great team. The challenge is not only financial; it can be cultural as well. Top talent wants to work with top talent. The goal is to build a culture that attracts others. Beware, however: Rapid growth can fray parts of your culture that you cherish. Be intentional and explicit in sharing which styles and behaviors are acceptable and which are not. Combine talented long-time staff with new people and form a cohesive team.

5. BUILD INTERNAL UNITY.

Work to ensure that all staff members agree on the new strategy and understand it in the same way. No one is more invested in your success than your colleagues.

6. BUILD A NETWORK OF EXTERNAL EVANGELISTS.

Committed staff are only a fraction of the people needed to change lives. Collaborate, partner, forge coalitions. Give ownership to those you are working with toward a shared objective. Whenever you are thinking your ambitious mission is the sole province of your own small, dedicated team, you are thinking too small and are destined to fall short. (See [The Power of Possibility](#).)

7. BUILD POLITICAL WILL.

People are not enough. If your mission is ambitious and impactful, the odds are that it cannot be achieved without a public policy component. This need not necessarily mean lobbying. Rather, advocate for your mission. Share and advance ideas with policy makers and ultimately bring some political pressure to bear on behalf of your ideas. (See [Stand for Your Mission](#).)

8. PLAY OFFENSE.

If you want to score big points against your mission, you must put financial instability behind you and play an offensive game. Share Our Strength found two tactics valuable — diversify your revenue stream (Share Our Strength's compelling investment opportunity appealed to foundations, philanthropists, and corporations for support) and be mindful and strategic with expenditures.

9. BE COLLABORATIVE BUT ALSO COMPETITIVE.

Nonprofits need not compete to take market share or to put others out of business, but rather to be the best version of themselves that they can possibly be. For example, pay competitive compensation so you can attract and retain the best people.

10. HOLD YOURSELF ACCOUNTABLE.

Hold yourself accountable to specific outcomes rather than aspirations. It costs money to measure and communicate what you've measured but in the longer term, accountability will yield more resources as it will differentiate you from other organizations.

11. FOCUS ON WHAT MATTERS MOST.

Don't detour from your strategy in the face of criticism or lack of understanding. Educate those who may stand in your way or have biases about how you should work. They do not have the expertise in solving the specific set of social problems your organization was created to solve.

Adapted from "A Leap of Imagination," which appeared in the December 2011 issue of Board Member.