



*Why Organizations Thrive – a Teaser*  
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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Thrive*. The article will detail fifteen lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV), buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country. (I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009).

No one of these lessons is all that interesting by itself. Collectively, I believe they are a very useful set of principles that any Executive Director can use to improve their organization's capacity to fulfill its mission.

Readers will have to wait a bit longer for the full article.

But here's an initial lesson from it:

Lesson 1: Pick some aspect of your program and get exceptionally good at it.

No organization can realistically be the best at every aspect of conducting its program. Yet, it's important to be the best at something. Of course, it should be something where you can articulate the strategic rationale for why the activity furthers your mission.

At OLCV, we made a conscious decision in 1997-1998 (when we were small organization with just a tiny staff) that we were going to get exceptionally good at grassroots politics. We were never going to write the largest checks in Oregon politics. But we would tap into the passion Oregonians have for their natural legacy by creating the largest and most effective grassroots force in Oregon politics.

We invested heavily in field staff and data systems to support them. Our programs were designed to maximize the number of volunteers we would effectively engage in our election work. By 2004, we were involving more than 1000 volunteers in our election activities – generating more than 100,000 contacts with voters that cycle. I don't know for sure that OLCV was the largest and most effective grassroots force in Oregon politics, but we could make the claim with a strong basis in fact.

Getting a reputation for being really good at one aspect of your work carries many institutional benefits.

Most obviously, there are fundraising benefits. If you can articulate to donors that you're the best at something connected to fulfilling your mission, some subset of them will ramp up their commitment as they recognize the value. People want to invest in winning strategies and if you can articulate why you're the best at something they will view you as winning.

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There are also staff morale benefits. Staff at nonprofits almost always could make more money in the private sector. They take on your important work because they believe in your mission. The more you can add intangible benefits to supplement their pay the better. Pride is a great intangible benefit and being part of a team that's the best at something is a great example of that. (Pride can also help board members be better fundraisers, buttressing the fundraising benefit noted above).

Being the best at something also helps an organization stay focused. I've watched several groups that have appeared to follow a "let's try every strategy we can think of" approach to their program, the result of which has invariably been that their program work is mediocre. They don't know how to say no to things. Having a plan predicated on first getting really exceptional at one strategy is a great tool for an Executive Director and a board to help them say no to other strategies and focus resources.

Of course, once you've established you're the best at something, your organization shouldn't feel locked into that strategic focus. All strategies have a shelf life and should be reevaluated from time to time. In Oregon, other groups came onto the scene that also were exceptional at grassroots politics. As a result, OLCV's strategies evolved. But the focus on being great at one aspect of our program had served its purpose of helping OLCV thrive.

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