

A friend was recently describing to me a challenge he faced as a new board member of a relatively healthy organization, but one that seemed to have a frenetic culture.

He said the situation reminded him of an allegory a colleague once told him and I liked the story so much I'm repeating it here. (If anyone knows the source of this allegory, please let me know).

*Once upon a time, there was a woodsman who made his living cutting logs into firewood. People kept coming to him requesting his work, so he got very busy. He complained to his neighbor about how busy he was.*

*The next day, when he had a lot of wood to cut, the neighbor came by to observe his work and asked him why he didn't stop to sharpen his axe.*

*The woodsman replied: "Can't you see I'm too busy to sharpen my axe?"*

Of course, the moral of the story is that the woodsman would actually cut more wood in less time with a sharper axe.

This lesson applies to organizations and not just individuals.

I've known many nonprofit organizations with a culture of "getting it done" that are constantly overwhelmed with "stuff to do" so they never take the time to "sharpen their axe."

In the organizational context, sharpening the axe can mean many things:

- Professional development/training for staff and/or the board.
- Strategic or other long-term or short-term planning
- Team-building exercises/retreats

So organizational leaders out there as you plot the year ahead, don't forget to build in multiple ways in which you're sharpening the axe and not just swinging it.