


The Four Elements of Effective Organizations

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As a rule, effective organizations are more likely to achieve their goals and to secure higher levels of support. “*Effective*” here means that an organization stewards resources responsibly to produce tangible results in fulfillment of a well-defined vision for its target populations. Effective ministries evidence a high degree of *focus*: they have a clear sense of who they serve; of what they want to happen for those people; of how they could prove that those things have happened; of what strategies will produce those proofs; of how to steward their resources to support those strategies; and of how to secure those resources.



Note that the symbol  in the diagram above stands for the word “drive(s).” Everything an effective organization does is driven by the needs of its targets, of the people/communities it seeks to serve.

FOCUS & DRIVERS

- *Focused targets* drive a *focused vision*: you know exactly *how* you want the world to change for *who*.
- *A focused vision* drives *focused indicators*: you know how to prove that the changes you seek are (or are not) becoming reality.
- *Focused indicators* drive *focused strategies*: you only spend time and money doing things that make a tangible difference.
- *Focused strategies* drive *focused allocations*: anyone who looked at your budget and calendar could see that you prioritize activities that produce results.
- *Focused allocations* drive *focused fundraising*: when you ask people for money or for volunteer time, they know exactly what you're asking for and why. There's never any doubt that an investment in your organization will change the world for someone.



THE FOUR ELEMENTS

The Elemental Group considers a number of factors in assessing an organization's effectiveness and fundability. These success factors fall into four broad categories of organizational traits: *Integrity*, *Passion*, *Servanthood*, and *Imagination*. For sake of memory, we represent each category with one of the "four elements" of classical Greek philosophy:

Integrity = Earth
Passion = Fire
Servanthood = Water
Imagination = Air

Your ability to impact the world and to secure funding will depend largely on the extent to which you demonstrate each of these four elements and maintain a healthy balance between them. If any of these four elements is lacking, it will be difficult to achieve success and to attract donations and volunteers.



INTEGRITY | Earth



Earth represents an organization's ability to develop and maintain effective systems and processes. Organizations with integrity follow recognized best practices and their own guiding documents, and they produce consistent results by always doing things the right way. Building on the solid ground of realistic plans, functional systems, and predictable patterns of behavior, organizations with integrity steward resources well to fulfill and sustain their missions.

Integrity is essential to fundraising generally and grant writing specifically because it increases donor confidence. Many organizations have a compelling vision but lack the ability to develop and execute realistic plans that produce consistent results. Donors and granting entities may affirm your aspirations and applaud the good work you do, but an absence of healthy processes tied to clear strategies with focused outcomes will make them hesitant to trust you with their money. Integrity makes donors and volunteers believe that their investment will yield predictable fruit.

When assessing an organization's effectiveness, Earth/Integrity covers traits and topics such as:

- *Vision and Mission:* Do you have clear vision and mission statements that have been updated to reflect what you're doing now to serve who you're serving now? Can you explain why you exist and what you're doing for who in clear and simple terms?
- *Outcomes:* Do you measure success using tangible indicators tied to your vision and mission? Can you prove that the mission is being accomplished and that the world is changing for the people you serve? And if you do many things or/and address multiple problems, do you have clear measures of success for each area of activity?
- *Planning:* Do you make plans tied to your desired outcomes that leverage sources to support key strategies? Do you follow the plans you make and review your progress regularly to be sure your strategies are working?
- *Governance:* Does the structure of your organization make it harder or easier to accomplish your plans? Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are the policies, procedures, and patterns of activity that guide your work working?

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PASSION | Fire

Fire represents an organization's ability to generate and sustain *enthusiasm*. A passionate organization attracts and inspires people who will fight for the cause even in the face of challenges.

Passion is essential to fundraising generally and grant writing specifically because it demonstrates your ability to attract resources and overcome obstacles. Passionate organizations are driven to reach their goals, and they find ways to bring the world they envision into being regardless of circumstances. Donors and granting entities are paying you to produce results, so they need to be sure you have the will to push through obstacles. Passion shows that you won't give up.

When assessing an organization's effectiveness, Fire/Passion covers traits and topics such as:

- *History*: Do you have a clear sense of where you've come from that drives where you're going (and not going)?
- *Attractiveness*: Can you attract and retain the people and money you need? Do people who get involved stay involved, or do they drop off once they see what's really going on?
- *Commitment*: Do your Board members, employees, and volunteers enthusiastically support your vision and mission with their time and money?
- *Pride*: Are your volunteers and donors proud to tell their friends and family that they support you? Do the people you serve tell other people with similar needs to come to you for help?



SERVANTHOOD | Water

Water represents an organization's outward focus. While stewardship is vital, a service-minded organization cares less about its own survival than about the problems it's trying to solve. It wants to keep going so it can benefit others, not simply for the sake of existing. The spirit of servanthood leads organizations to consistently look beyond their walls.

Servanthood is essential to fundraising generally and to grant writing specifically because it shows that you're focused on the needs you say you exist to meet. Most people care much more about the work you're doing than whether you're the ones doing it. Many donors—and almost all granting entities—don't care if your organization continues

to exist for its own sake, which is why very few foundations are willing to fund general operating expenses. They care about *what* you do for *who* out there, and they invest in people who invest in other people. Servanthood shows you care most about what you're called to do.

When assessing an organization's effectiveness, Water/Servanthood covers traits and topics such as:

- *Targets:* Knowing that you can't solve every problem, do you know what problems you're trying to solve? You can't save everyone, so who are you trying to help? And who are you *not* going to help because you know that spreading yourself too thin will make it impossible to impact the people who need you the most?
- *Alignment:* Could you easily explain how all your activities and expenses—even the everyday stuff—ultimately address the problems you're trying to solve?
- *Priorities:* Would a review of your budget, org chart, and calendar show that you prioritize the target problem(s) over your own survival? What percentage of your resources are invested in your mission, and what percentage are invested in just keeping the doors open?
- *Reputation:* Are you known as a service-minded organization? If you closed down tomorrow, who would care? If you're doing something that matters, somebody will notice.

Servanthood is essential to fundraising because it demonstrates that your organization is less concerned about its own survival than about the needs it seeks to meet. Internally, service-minded organizations are characterized by a healthy culture that increases employee and volunteer loyalty and retention. Granting entities do not care if your organization continues to exist for its own sake, and few are willing to fund regular operational expenses. A spirit of servanthood shows that you care most about what you're called to do.

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IMAGINATION | Air

Air represents an organization's ability to stay fresh. An imaginative organization remains relevant by adapting to evolving trends and envisioning new ways to do things.

Imagination is essential to fundraising generally and grant writing specifically because it demonstrates your capacity to change. Imaginative organizations learn from the world around them and from their own mistakes, and they adjust to ensure that they continue to meet real needs in effective ways. Imagination is particularly vital to

fundraising because high-capacity donors and granting foundations often prefer to fund new initiatives or to take what's already working to a new level. Funding appeals that demonstrate a reasoned risk tolerance tied to a changing landscape are more likely to be successful than requests that reflect a rigid commitment to what's worked in the past no matter how things are now. Imagination is evidence that you'll be able to accomplish your mission the day after tomorrow.

When assessing an organization's effectiveness, Air/Imagination covers traits and topics such as

- *Creativity*: Do you develop your own ideas and innovate on what has worked for others as you're thinking about the best ways to do things?
- *Flexibility*: Is your organization adaptive and entrepreneurial? Can you change the way you think and do things when you need to?
- *Change Capacity*: Do you keep track of cultural and contextual factors that impact the people you serve and try to respond to those? Can you envision a future that is different from the present and adapt to that new reality?
- *Risk Tolerance*: Are you willing to try new things even if they might fail? Do you encourage your staff and volunteers to experiment and reward them for trying? Do you openly talk about past failures and what you've learned from them?

As key indicators of health and effectiveness, these four elements are essential to your efforts. Organizations that demonstrate a healthy balance of Integrity, Passion, Servanthood, and Imagination will attract potential donors and partners by inspiring confidence.

Want more info on how we can help? Contact info@elementalgroup.org or 513.400.4595

The Elemental Group 

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