



# What Comes First, the Mission or Me?

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*Many leaders are unaware of how often and in what ways they pursue internal comfort at the expense of external impact. Whether they are putting off tough but necessary decisions or avoiding confrontations that could spark conflict but resolve important issues, we call this unconscious drive for personal comfort the “me before the mission” phenomenon.*

*Seeking comfort (or avoiding discomfort) is the default mode for all humans, but this has particular implications for senior executives of NGOs/nonprofits navigating critical change. When they put their comfort first (knowingly or not), they jeopardize the mission of their organizations and the welfare of those they have pledged to serve.*

*In this paper we provide a four-part framework that helps leaders and their teams determine when and how a “me first” mindset takes hold and outlines the steps they can take to minimize its impact on their decisions and behaviors.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the course of our work with NGOs and nonprofits as they navigate major change, we have observed a phenomenon that is both universal and devastating to accomplishing intended outcomes for mission-driven organizations. We call this phenomenon “me before the mission.”

NGOs and nonprofits around the globe are filled with people at all levels who are truly dedicated to the causes they are advancing and the constituencies they are serving. They consider themselves deeply committed to their organization’s purpose and wouldn’t hesitate to say that they prioritize the humanitarian goals of the mission over any personal preferences or concerns that might interfere. One could argue that this is a distinguishing and enviable feature of most NGO and nonprofit organizations compared to many organizations in the private sector. Their employees are true believers—they aspire to live by the axiom that what is best for the greater good takes precedence over their individual wishes and needs, and they expect their colleagues to adhere to the same value.

As praiseworthy as these assertions are, however, they don’t always match the reality of day-to-day NGO/nonprofit operations. Unfortunately, the civil society sector is populated with well-meaning

people whose pursuit of “personal agendas” hinders, and sometimes thwarts altogether, the very objectives they are so impassioned about accomplishing. In fact, given how strongly people believe they are living out a “mission first” mandate, it is remarkable the extent to which a “me before the mission” mindset prevails.

“Me before the mission” is the unconscious tendency to seek internal comfort at the expense of external impact. Leaders protect their feelings of “comfort” by choosing actions like:

- Avoiding necessary, heated debates over key policies or procedures
- Refusing to make unpopular decisions
- Shying away from confronting difficult people about the dysfunction they create
- Allowing people to shirk the commitments they have made without repercussions
- Maintaining popular programs despite their diverting resources from more pressing initiatives
- Preserving problematic reporting structures to avoid disrupting well-established influence patterns

To reiterate, the problem we’re talking about occurs when people unconsciously place a higher priority on their own preferences or wishes than they do on pursuing what is best for those their organization has pledged to serve. This issue is far more common than people realize. While they readily espouse the notion of prioritizing their organization’s purpose above their own comfort, they simultaneously—and often unintentionally—take actions to reduce their own insecurities, protect their egos, and calm their fears to such an extent that they hurt the organization’s ability to meet recipients’ needs.

It’s important to call out the unconscious nature of the “me before the mission” mindset and behavior. There are no sinister or nefarious intentions here, just hard-working people going about

their daily routines without realizing how much of their time and energy is consumed avoiding their own uneasiness instead of meeting the needs of their organization and those they have pledged to serve.

“Mission before me” is the other side of that same coin. This mindset doesn’t relish contentious situations but is prepared to engage in them when necessary to ensure the organization’s primary purpose is fully realized. Difficult conversations, hurt feelings, bruised egos, territorial losses, and job security are never prioritized over even the most uncomfortable actions that are necessary to safeguard the mission’s success.

The “mission first” mindset is evident when people take on tension-producing circumstances in order to protect the integrity of their organization’s fundamental purpose. This outlook is demonstrated with actions such as:

- Finding a way to work effectively with people despite a strong preference to avoid them
- Speaking up on controversial issues and surfacing sensitive concerns no one wants to discuss
- Making necessary decisions that are contrary to one’s deep personal desires
- Conveying important messages with unequivocal, explicit language rather than watering down key points with passive-aggressive innuendos or indirect comments
- Calling out others (including peers) who are allowing personal feelings to hamper fulfilling the organization’s promise
- Focusing on problem-solving rather than blame or retribution

*What comes first, the mission or me?* is a relevant question at all levels of an organization. However, within an NGO or nonprofit organization, senior executives have both the broadest and deepest impact; therefore, we are going to explore how “mission or me” dynamics play out specifically among

this group. Also, though this behavior can occur under routine conditions, it is particularly evident when leaders are contending with the stress of implementing strategic initiatives. For this reason, we'll be addressing how the impact of change can intensify the "me before the mission" problem. What follows is an examination of where the "me first" mentality comes from, how it hinders NGOs/nonprofits from fulfilling their change aspirations, and what to do about it.

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

On the surface, it might seem puzzling that executives who think of themselves as fully committed to their organization's mission would jeopardize that by putting their own interests ahead of what is best for recipients. After much observation, however, we have gleaned some insight into what's going on "under the hood." Many factors contribute to the "me first" problem, but here we will limit ourselves to exploring several of the most frequently encountered conditions under which leaders retreat to their own comfort zones and fail to live up to a higher standard.

### Recognizing Unintentionality

First and foremost, for the vast majority of civil society executives, "me before the mission" actions are never intentional.

Early in their careers, senior leaders learn that fulfilling their responsibilities is challenging, to say the least. However, most NGO/nonprofit leaders think about the difficulties of dealing with the circumstances they face or some of the people they encounter—not how they, the executive, may be contributing to these struggles. In fact, these leaders typically see themselves as the problem solver, the mitigator, the crafter of resolutions. No doubt these characterizations are accurate in many instances, but this paper is pointing out the possibility that in certain situations, these same leaders may be inadvertently putting themselves ahead of the mission and inhibiting their organization's important work.

The question to ask is, ***“Am I putting my personal comfort or priorities ahead of my organization’s mission, and/or am I failing to step up and say something when others display this behavior?”***

Maybe, after considering the question, the answer will be an emphatic “no”—no one on the senior team ever allows their ego, insecurities, or personal agendas to get in the way of serving the organization’s recipients. Yet given that the problem is so antithetical to what mission-orientated organizations are about and so pervasive among senior teams throughout the civil society sector, the question is most definitely worth asking.

If the answer turns out to be “yes,” to whatever degree, we suggest applying both *compassion* and *commitment*. Compassion is warranted because of the challenges associated with living up to a “mission first” standard, especially while attempting to orchestrate major change. Self-preservation and avoiding unease are natural default modes for our species, so people can’t be faulted for leaning in that direction. Kindness here is more productive than blame.

When it comes to acting on those tendencies, however, that’s when commitment comes into play. Recognizing and managing these tendencies is an obligation that comes with accepting a senior position. An uncompromising discipline and tenacity must be applied in order to keep the mission everyone’s first priority at all times.

## Attempting to Maintain Control

Currently, many if not most NGOs and nonprofits are facing the urgent need to transform themselves in the face of the greatest disruptive threats the sector has seen since the end of World War II. Among these challenges are: increased demand for services at a time when traditional sources and levels of funding are decreasing; increased risks for delivering services in remote, hostile, and fragile contexts; and attacks by some reactionary forces that question the very legitimacy of organizations who are trying to improve the lives of citizens in their communities. In the face of these struggles, change is imminent, and with change comes the overwhelming feeling that leaders have less and less control than they did historically.



This is at the heart of the struggle with change: the loss of control that happens when expectations don't match reality. When we get what we want, or when we can at least accurately anticipate what is about to happen, we feel to some extent in control, which, in turn, promotes a degree of comfort. Then, staying within our comfort zone is all about securing, protecting, or regaining that sense of control. "Me before the mission" behavior happens when this need for control is prioritized above what is best for recipients.

## Avoiding Discomfort

During times of change, leaders are frequently called on to make decisions or take actions that can feel extremely uncomfortable. This often occurs when they are trying to balance the competing needs of various stakeholders (recipients, donors, board, staff, etc.). When this happens, they tend to toggle back and forth between which need feels the strongest at any one time—"me" or "mission." While some fluctuation is to be expected, there is a tipping point at which too much time and energy are being used to appease executives' own discomfort.

Senior leaders shouldn't be admonished for wishing to escape the weight and uneasiness that often come with their responsibilities. Yearning for a respite from the emotional turmoil that accompanies leadership duties is perfectly understandable. Acting on those urges in ways that jeopardize properly serving recipients, however, is not. When executives accept their place on the senior team of an organization dedicated to aiding others, they forfeit the option of putting their personal agendas and ease ahead of the organization's mission.

## Faltering on a Higher Standard

The last thing most of us want to do is run into a burning building, toward flood-ravaged neighborhoods, or across a minefield—and we don't expect the average person to act in these ways, either. We have a different standard, however, for firemen, other first responders, and combat soldiers. We not only expect but require that they do precisely what most of us are unable or unwilling to do: step into harm's way to fulfill their pledge of service.



In their capacity as senior executives, most NGO/nonprofit leaders rarely face life-or-death scenarios; however, they have no less of an obligation to live up to this higher standard. For some leaders, this may take the form of making decisions that threaten, if not guarantee, the loss of a major donor or funding source. For others it is the blowback they know will come when removing a long-tenured and well-loved executive from the organization whose contribution is falling short in some significant way. Finally, it could be making a major strategic decision that they know will provoke a showdown with some members of their board and put the leader's own job in jeopardy.

Here is the problem: firemen, other first responders, and the military are held accountable for their commitment to the public. They aren't required to jeopardize their own safety every moment of every day, but when they are called into action, we expect them to comply 100%—no exceptions. When they don't, they are typically relieved from service. In the civil society sector, leaders are not often held to this standard.

While senior NGO/nonprofit executives may be "mission first" regarding how they carry out many (if not most) of their duties, they often aren't held accountable for the times when their own egos and insecurities take precedence over what is best for the organization. Yet the quality of recipients' lives (and sometimes the lives themselves) hangs in the balance. If it's unacceptable for public servants to falter, even occasionally, when they are called on to fulfill the commitment they have made, why are we reluctant to hold civil society executives to the same standard?

## Inadequately Vetting Leaders

The integrity of firefighters, first responders, and those in the armed forces depends on the public believing that their well-being will be the top priority when one of these professionals shows up. These civil servants take pride in their reputations and are highly protective of the respect and trust such a reputation garners. As a result, generally speaking, they are careful to populate their senior ranks with people deserving of such admiration.

"Mission before me" is considered so fundamental to these professions that there is simply no place for senior leaders who fail to demonstrate this behavior whenever they are called on to do so. On the

occasion when someone is hired or promoted to a top position and then displays a pattern of choosing their own interests over those they serve, the problem is immediately brought to the person's attention and they are provided whatever coaching and guidance is needed. If the behavior persists, they are typically removed from their role.

Contrast this fairly cut-and-dried process with what commonly happens within NGOs/nonprofits. Most C-suite vetting lacks any measures for the emotional intelligence required to put aside one's own internal comfort for the sake of a larger purpose. Seldom do interview protocols explore a person's ability to advance the organization's purpose above his or her own personal aspirations when the two run contrary to each other. As a result, far too many NGO/nonprofit senior ranks are populated with leaders who, on occasion, inadvertently put their own emotional needs ahead of what is best for recipients.

## Ignoring Unacceptable Leadership Behavior

When "me before the mission" behavior arises, it often isn't acknowledged among top leaders. Even when they recognize that others are shifting their priorities in favor of "me" over the mission, executives tend not to say anything. They ignore it or deal with it in a peripheral manner so as not to offend anyone or pose a perceived threat.

This is another form of "discomfort avoidance," but it is even more odious because here, leaders cannot claim ignorance; they recognize "me first" behavior in others but do nothing. They are fully responsible for the negative repercussions felt by recipients who are left underserved because leaders cannot bring themselves to address issues that are hindering the organization from realizing its purpose.

## Normalizing "Me First"

Given the frequency with which top executives allow their personal agendas to delay, diffuse, or outright halt progress toward realizing their organization's mission, many NGOs and nonprofits appear to have a limitless tolerance for this behavior. Despite how intellectually unacceptable "me

first” thinking and behavior among the top echelon may be, far too many mission-driven organizations have learned to adjust to it. This process of accommodation enables “normalization.”

Normalization occurs when people become more accustomed to and less disturbed by what is happening around them. This mindset shift desensitizes them to the damage being done to the point that what was once shocking, offensive, and unacceptable becomes familiar—unpleasant, but tolerable. Over time, outrage turns to complacency.

In the past few years, several NGOs and nonprofits have been caught up in scandals involving unacceptable behavior by their leaders. Upon closer investigation, these incidents have turned out not to be one-off failures by a single leader, but regular patterns of misbehavior that was tolerated by others in the organization who knew about it. That is, the behaviors were *normalized* until someone had the courage to call them out. The same pattern holds true for “me first” behavior: until someone stands up and names it for what it is, this behavior—and any other inappropriate behaviors that have been normalized—will continue to undermine the important work of civil society organizations.

## The Bottom Line

As the six contributing factors described above suggest, seeking comfort is the human default mode—and leaders are nothing if not human. As a result, most senior executives are unaware of how often they pursue internal comfort in ways that hinder mission impact. Whether for five minutes or during the course of an entire career, when the unconscious drive for personal comfort outweighs what is best for recipients, “me before the mission” is alive and well.

It seems ironic that top executives will fight tooth and nail against inhospitable physical environments, adverse political conditions, insufficient funding, and other obstacles to ensure those in need receive aid, yet they become surprisingly complacent when the impediments are closer to home. The bravery they find to fight these external battles seems harder to come by when the obstacles threaten their own personal comfort . . . and yet that is exactly when they most need to remain tenacious and see their organization’s mission through.

# A CALL TO ACTION

At this point, we have described the “me first” phenomenon and some of the factors that contribute to it. Senior executives at NGOs and nonprofits are wasting precious resources and jeopardizing the missions of the organizations they lead as well as the welfare of those they have pledged to serve by periodically and unintentionally putting themselves first. This is an ongoing issue, but it is particularly problematic when such actions inhibit or derail the execution of important strategic change intended to better serve those in need. So, the question is: Can anything be done about this? And, if so, what?

The short answer is that “me before the mission” behavior, even when exhibited the most senior ranks of NGO/nonprofit organizations, can be addressed. To that end, this call to action comes in the form of a framework that can help senior leaders minimize the “me first” problem. It consists of four elements: awareness, urgency, acknowledgment, and actions. Each element must be adapted according to the challenges a senior team is facing, but the overall framework will apply to virtually any “me first” circumstances.

## I. Awareness (That the Problem Exists)

*Without recognizing the problem, resolution is impossible.*

Eliminating “me before the mission” involves raising awareness that such mindsets and behavior patterns exist and that, when displayed by members of senior teams, they deter NGOs/nonprofits from realizing their stated missions. What’s especially tricky is that they are largely unintended. A quote from one CEO sums it up nicely: *“Me before the mission’ thinking surfaces so often among a couple of our senior officers that I consider it one of our biggest risks. It could actually jeopardize us achieving our strategic change objectives. I’ve had countless conversations with both of them, and each time, things calm down for a while, but then before long, one or both of them is back at it again. These are seasoned executives, and I’m their CEO; if telling them what needs to change isn’t enough, I don’t know what else to do. I don’t want to be viewed as too pushy...**that’s not the kind of leader I am.**”*

And there you have it. The CEO wants members of the senior team to step outside their comfort zones in order to better serve recipients, but he isn't willing to do it himself. He sees the "me first" dynamic being manifested by the two problematic leaders but fails to recognize that by succumbing to his own discomfort with being seen as "too pushy," he is demonstrating the same behavior. This inability to spot that there is a problem and where it resides is why awareness is the first element in the framework to combat "me before the mission" behavior—if you can't see the problem, you can't solve it.

Awareness must also include an acknowledgement of how serious the "me before the mission" problem really is. These aren't just small infractions, and the fact that they typically stem from an unconscious motivation is no excuse. When top leaders allow their emotional needs to thwart the mission, they are forgoing their obligation to always prioritize recipients first. This isn't a tangential violation; it cuts to the very essence of the senior leaders' role. (And if for any reason you think it isn't happening or couldn't happen within your senior team, you might not be looking closely enough.)

It is a fundamental job requirement for executives to, at times, make unpopular decisions, force difficult conversations, call out sensitive issues, overcome personal grievances with key people, recognize and address their own shortcomings, destabilize the status quo, and otherwise take actions that leave them—and others—feeling uncomfortable. If leaders can't or won't engage in activities of this nature, they are no different from firefighters who can't bring themselves to enter burning buildings. It doesn't mean they are bad people; they just aren't qualified for the job.

## REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

### Increasing Awareness by Setting the Example

We observed the CEO of a large international relief organization create a heightened awareness of this "me first" behavior pattern by initially calling out his own failures to "put the mission first" during executive leadership team meetings. In one instance, he stopped the discussion and declared

that he had not spoken as clearly or as directly as he should have earlier in the meeting when the team was discussing missed commitments. He had avoided discomfort (for himself and the others) by not holding himself and his executive team members to account in public and in the moment. In subsequent meetings, this CEO continued to raise awareness of “me first” behavior patterns by calling out his senior executives (in addition to himself) when he suspected that they were avoiding discussions that involved critical but potentially painful topics and truths.

This call to action begins with an invitation to wake up to what is happening, how prevalent it is, and the necessity of doing something about it. The bottom line is that without top executives who can prioritize recipients’ needs (and what the organization requires in order to properly serve them) ahead of the executives’ personal interests and comfort, NGOs/nonprofits will never fully realize their missions, particularly amidst the disruptive change currently buffeting the sector.

## II. Urgency (to Act)

### *If not now, when?*

Once leaders wake up to the inappropriateness of what was previously condoned (or at least tolerated), immediate corrective action is required. For example, racial discrimination and sexual harassment are no longer acceptable norms for leaders, regardless of what was permitted during earlier eras. Why should “me before the mission” behavior be any different? A “mission first” standard is what an NGO/nonprofit organization needs to fulfill its mission, so anything less cannot be tolerated.

Furthermore, a “mission first” standard isn’t something to gradually embrace over time. It’s not enough to slowly add team members who possess this inherent mindset and wait for the “old timers” to fade away; the “mission first” priority is too urgent. Yes, it is imperative that new members put the mission first, but incumbents must also be held accountable for their actions the moment they become cognizant of the standard’s existence.

We recognize that this means retrofitting a new requirement that didn't exist when many incumbent leaders joined the senior team; however, with awareness come responsibilities. Ignorance doesn't excuse impropriety, regardless of its nature, but it does establish a definitive line that separates pre- and post-culpability. Prior to awareness, the damage done is regrettable, but assigning blame serves no purpose. Insight, however, comes with a price: the obligation to do what needs to be done as soon as possible.

The necessity for such urgent correction can be daunting, but a slower pace cannot be justified. Imagine engaging in the following discussion with underserved populations who are not receiving the resources and support they need due to one (or more) senior team member operating from a "me first" orientation:

*"I hate to tell you this, but you'll need to wait to receive the full benefits of what we pledged to deliver to you until Harry retires and Sally decides to move on to another organization.*

*We now realize that they periodically put their own comfort ahead of what is best for you, and we feel terrible about it. Harry is always dragging his feet and undermining strategic changes he doesn't like, and Sally can react pretty poorly when other team members give her negative feedback. You must understand, however: Harry and Sally are good people! This kind of self-centeredness isn't intentional on their part. Nonetheless, we now understand that the unconscious nature of their actions doesn't lessen the negative impact on you, which is why we are going to do something about the problem . . . eventually.*

*I wish we could correct the situation right now, but being too explicit with Harry and Sally could appear ungrateful after their years of hard work and sacrifice. It would also hurt their feelings; after all, their hearts are in the right place. They just have this tendency, particularly when pressured by key changes we're implementing, to sometimes do what makes them feel better rather than what is best for you. Nobody's perfect, right?*

*Besides, I'm not comfortable myself with much conflict or tension within the senior team, and it would make me feel bad if I disrupted our equilibrium by making too big a deal about this just now.*



*I want you to know, I have tried to address the problem. I've mentioned it to them several times, even in front of their senior team peers. But to be honest, their behavior probably won't change much, so you'll need to hold on until they're gone and we can hire someone else who is hopefully less prone to putting their needs ahead of yours.*

*All this is regrettable, but I want you to know that we really are committed to your well-being. As soon as we can adjust how our senior leaders operate, without too much discomfort for ourselves, of course, you have my word we will do so."*

Without a doubt, the conversation is cringeworthy. In fact, the whole vignette sounds ridiculous until you recognize that these kinds of unconscious motives and their negative impact on recipients are real. The trouble is that they are rarely discussed so explicitly, because we don't normally see what is going on, much less admit it. Absent this awareness, the sketch seems completely unrealistic, maybe even comical. It takes on a different tone, however, when it is read by executives who have gained a degree of insight into how, despite their dedication to their organization's mission, they have inadvertently become complicit in scenarios of a similar nature. For them, the scenario becomes painfully, personally tragic.

The particulars may differ, but the underlying mindset and the damage it causes are always the same. Once leaders see how they have unknowingly participated in and allowed the "me first" mindset to prevail, they usually feel compelled to take immediate action to ensure the problem is addressed. This urgency is warranted for two reasons:

1. Leaders owe it to recipients to recalibrate their priorities as quickly as possible, and
2. Without rapidly addressing this problem, it is likely that other strategic challenges will overtake the senior team's attention, and the "me first" problem will fall back into being just another "normalized" disappointment that everyone accepts and learns to ignore.

Therefore, once leaders comprehended the degree to which “Harry” and “Sally” are capable of diverting energy away from serving recipients in order to serve themselves, two questions must be quickly answered:

**What’s to be done?** Create a clear and compelling definition of what “mission first” means for the organization and establish it as the standard by which the entire organization consistently operates.

**When?** Now.

## REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

### Heightening Urgency with “Who Pays the Price”

In order to heighten the urgency to act, a leader of an international development organization has formed the habit of constantly reminding herself and her executive team of the commitment they have made to transform the lives of ten million girls over the next five years. These girls depend on the executive team always putting the mission first—in every way, on every day. And when the executive team falls short of the “mission first” standard, the CEO reminds them: these girls pay the price.

There have been occasions when reminders weren’t enough. In these instances, the CEO openly admonished one or more leaders who had fallen into a “me first” pattern. She was explicit that she wouldn’t hesitate to apply consequences if that’s what it took for everyone to keep recipients’ needs as their top priority. Unfortunately, negative consequences were necessary for one member of the team, but taking this action quickly established for everyone that the CEO was serious.

## III. Acknowledgment (of What is Missing)

***There can be no place for top executives who fail to demonstrate “mission before me” behavior on a consistent basis.***

Once the problem of “me first” behavior, its prevalence, and its urgency are recognized, there will likely be lots of enthusiasm for seeking remedies. Before adding anything to the landscape, however, it is important to first look at what might be missing. There are numerous organizational elements whose absence contributes to the “me before the mission” problem and whose institution could help promote solutions. Here we highlight three that especially impact senior teams: selection, accountability, and consequences.

## Selection

By the time executives are candidates for positions on a senior team, they have already established clear behavioral patterns in line with (or opposed to) a “mission first” mindset. Therefore, the ball game is won or lost, so to speak, at the time when executives are added to the top team.

Yet, selection processes for senior team members seldom include attempts to determine if candidates possess the emotional intelligence to suspend their own personal agendas for the sake of serving a larger purpose. What is missing are enquiries like, “Tell me about a time when you strongly disagreed with a superior’s decision but were expected to carry out both the letter and spirit of what it entailed. How did you come to terms with managing your own feelings about supporting something you didn’t believe was the right course of action, and how did you behave with others when executing the decision?”

Those who do enquire about this attribute usually do so tacitly or treat the “mission first” orientation as secondary in importance. If candidates do express a “mission before me” perspective, it is often accepted at face value without any follow-up challenge. These are indications that if all other criteria are met except this one, a candidate will likely still be seen as acceptable for the job.

What needs to happen is that during the vetting process, qualified candidates should be asked to provide evidence of actual decisions and actions they have engaged under challenging circumstances that clearly indicate an ability and willingness to subjugate their own self-interest in order to best serve recipients. Furthermore, candidates’ commitment to “mission before me” can’t be viewed as a second-tier “nice to have” characteristic. This mindset and related track record should be considered

just as essential as any education, experience, technical knowledge, or sector familiarity requirements that exist.

## Accountability

Accountability follows proper vetting; it has little practical value if applied to leaders who lack sufficient predisposition for prioritizing the organization's strategic intent over their own personal agendas.

To be accountable is to be answerable to someone specific about doing something specific. This kind of specificity is often missing but is exactly what NGOs/nonprofits need when it comes to requiring that senior leaders elevate the organization's purpose above their own interests or wishes.

Creditable accountability is often in short supply at all levels within NGOs/nonprofits, whether proper vetting has been performed or not. The way many of these organizations are structured, it is difficult to nail down who, if anyone, has sole responsibility for something getting done—particularly when the enterprise is facing major change. Add to that the fact that many organizational cultures are based on implicit directions and loose understandings rather than definitive guidance and explicit expectations. And finally, within this broad characterization, things only get worse when we look for top executive accountability to consistently apply a “mission first” approach to challenges.

## Consequences

NGOs/nonprofits are notorious for their infrequent and often ineffective use of consequences to achieve stated objectives. Here, we are using the term “consequences” in a neutral manner—it applies to both positive feedback (praise, promotions, rewards, etc.) directed toward leaders demonstrating “mission before me” behaviors and to negative repercussions levied against those engaging in the “me before the mission” alternative.

Even when the vetting process identifies leaders who are properly predisposed and they are then exposed to well-constructed accountability systems, it's all pointless if meaningful consequences are not in place to reinforce the requirement that recipients' interests always come first.

While most CEOs and their senior teams never initiate overt, concerted efforts to establish a “mission first” norm among themselves, those who do typically proceed with weak-to-non-existent consequence management frameworks. Pep talks and friendly reminders usually take the place of more tenacious mechanisms designed to reward those who embody the norm and put pressure on those who don’t. The types of actions they need to be taking include openly praising individuals on the executive team when they put the mission before their own needs or, conversely, reprimanding executives privately and in front of their peers when me-first behaviors surface. Of course, one of the most dramatic yet powerful steps we have seen taken is when an executive is relieved of their duties because of a chronic pattern of me-first behavior in their decision making and interactions with others. When this happens, the senior team as well as the organization as a whole very quickly come to understand that there are personal consequences in failing to live up to mission-first mindsets and behaviors. And yet without such mechanisms, all the vetting and accountability in the world are unlikely to sustain real change. After all, the senior team is still human, so the “me first” default is likely to creep back in.

## IV. Actions (What to do Within the Senior Team)

### *Good intentions aren’t enough.*

After becoming aware that a problem exists, seeing the need for urgent mitigation, and acknowledging what is missing within an organization, the good news is that there are actions to take that will minimize, if not eliminate, further “me first” displays by top executives. The bad news is none of them are easy.

What follows are examples of actions senior teams can pursue. Each team should, of course, craft its own steps to address its unique situation, but hopefully what is provided here can serve as a jumping-off point for exploratory discussions.

### CEO-focused Undertakings

CEOs ensure that everyone on the senior team consistently operates on the basis of “mission before me.”

- The CEO serves as an impeccable role model by closely scrutinizing his/her own behavior, and when “me first” actions arise (and they will), he/she recognizes the shortfall and takes corrective action.
- All senior team members are made aware of what “me before the mission” mentality is and the threat it currently poses or could pose to realization of the organization’s purpose.
- All key deliberations, decisions, and actions are filtered through a “mission before me” perspective before moving forward.
- There is a forum for team members to call out “me first” behavior in themselves and each other.
- Frequent team discussions take place about how easy it is to unknowingly fall prey to this mindset when in the midst of disruptive change and how important it is for members to remain vigilant of their own behavior and supportive of each other.
- There is a zero-tolerance policy within the senior team for “opting out”—once determinations have been made after appropriate input and debate, under no circumstances will it be acceptable to openly or subtly disagree or refuse to fully comply with senior team decisions.
- Adherence to “mission first” prioritization is considered a fundamental job requirement, and only leaders who consistently operate this way have a role within the top team.
  - Incumbents are required to live up to this standard, and new executives are added to the team only if they show a predisposition for doing the same.
  - Interview protocols for open positions on the senior team include a thorough inquiry into candidates’ predispositions for and previous demonstrations of “mission first” behavior.

- All members of the executive team are held accountable for functioning in this manner, and meaningful consequences are applied to reinforce the importance of prioritizing recipient needs above personal agendas.

## Senior Team-focused Undertakings

Top executive teams establish norms for themselves specifically designed to foster a “mission first” mindset.

- Each team member first develops a greater *understanding* of their own “me first” mindsets and behaviors. Using whatever approach to introspection works for them, they must rigorously uncover and be on the lookout for any unintended “me first” tendencies as they arise.
- After developing this insight, team members are expected to stay true to their “mission before me” *commitment* by employing courage (to face the discomfort that comes with deprioritizing personal agendas) and discipline (to remain focused on what is best for recipients despite powerful influences pulling them toward other outcomes).
- Since the strongest support for sustaining “mission first” behavior over the long term comes from a peer-to-peer sense of obligation and vigilance, the team needs to *align* around the following kinds of mindsets:
  - “We don’t wait for the CEO to take action—we are the first to support or challenge each other to ensure our collective commitment is upheld.”
  - “We owe it to ourselves and each other to uphold the standard—it is a matter of personal pride and collective integrity that we live up to this challenging and worthy benchmark.”
  - “A complacent, ‘comfortably numb’ state is not an acceptable option for us—incidents where personal agendas override recipient needs are met with emphatic peer feedback that such lapses in judgment must be corrected immediately.”



Taken together, an effort to develop an understanding among the senior team about their own patterns of thinking and acting, as well as a deep commitment to specific shifts as individuals and as a team will enhance the odds that “me first” behaviors are discouraged and that “mission first” mindsets are reinforced.

## Call-To-Action Summary

In this call to action, we have offered a framework with four elements that senior leaders can use to move toward minimizing “mission first” behavior with members of their senior team. As is true for any meaningful journey, this one begins with the first of a thousand steps. Step one is for executives to open a dialogue—initially with oneself, and then with other members of their senior teams. These exchanges are about owning the fact that every leader, on multiple occasions, has in some way placed themselves ahead of those they promised to serve; the only variables are how often such incidents take place and how much damage is done. Without this kind of vulnerable exploration, any attempt to execute the four elements of the framework we have suggested will remain superficial and ineffective. It takes courage and discipline to face one’s own shortcomings, but as a member of a senior team leading an organization that is pursuing changes that matter, courage and discipline are key requirements for the job.

Once members of the leadership team establish that personal comfort can and have on occasion come before fulfilling their pledge to serve those in need, CEOs must determine how best to act on the urgency of the situation with their teams. After that, they should come to terms with what elements are missing from the senior team landscape that, if they were in place, would strengthen a mission-first focus. Finally, the CEO and the team members themselves must engage specific individual and collective actions to recognize and stop “me-first” behavior when, despite best efforts, it happens anyway, all while promoting “mission first” behavior.

## CONCLUSION

When buffeted by sustained storms of change—like what is happening within the civil society sector today—leaders struggle to adapt their organizations as fast as circumstances require. Furthermore, there are a set of conditions that often arise during times of major change that make it difficult to consistently prioritize an organization’s mission ahead of one’s own personal need for comfort. Few leaders think of themselves as needing to address this challenge because they typically don’t perceive their actions as self-serving. Yet as we have discussed, the reality is that many more NGO/nonprofit executives are prone to the “me first” syndrome than most people realize, and it is hampering civil society organizations’ ability to accomplish what they have pledged to those in need.

If implementing this framework seems like a daunting endeavor, that’s because it is. If avoiding a “me before the mission” mentality were easy, the prevalence of the problem wouldn’t be so high. Is this a formidable undertaking? Yes, but it is doable—and more to the point, it is imperative.

To eliminate “me first” behavior within the senior team, there are many hurdles to overcome, but none as formidable as coming to terms with our own inadvertent contribution to the problem.

**Conner Advisory will continue to monitor and study the factors that are aiding or impeding the progress of INGO leaders and their organizations as they adapt to—and hopefully thrive in—this unprecedented environment of change and disruption. We invite you to download our other research papers and follow our future insights on our website, [conneradvisory.com](https://conneradvisory.com).**

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Daryl is co-founder and Chairman of Conner Advisory, a consulting firm providing change execution support to civil society organizations who are advancing the quality of the human experience and who find themselves facing transformations beyond their capacity to successfully execute. Conner Advisory serves INGO and non-profit leaders addressing some of the world's most intractable and critical challenges of our day, including homelessness, hunger, medical crises, and healthcare. Representative clients include: Habitat for Humanity, Doctors without Borders, Pact, and YWCA.

During his 45-plus years of practice, Daryl has educated and advised strategic leaders and seasoned change practitioners in many of the world's most successful organizations. His focus has always been on helping them both understand and address the challenges and opportunities they face during transformational change.

Daryl's work is built on a strong foundation of research, extensive consulting experience, and a master's degree in psychology. He has authored two books—*Managing at the Speed of Change* (Random House, 1993) and *Leading at the Edge of Chaos* (John Wiley & Sons, 1998)—and more than 250 publications, including journal and magazine articles, monographs, book chapters, and videos. In recent years, his newer published work has been made available through blogs, essays, and white

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## Ed Boswell

Ed is co-founder and CEO of Conner Advisory, a consulting firm established for the sole purpose of supporting leaders who are pursuing *changes that matter*. In this capacity, he collaborates with leaders from a diverse set of humanitarian and development organizations such as World Vision International, BRAC, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Plan USA, ChildFund International, and Terres des Hommes, as well as associations such as the International Civil Society Centre and InterAction that support the global NGO community.

Prior to starting Conner Advisory, Ed was a partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) where he headed up the US People and Organization consulting practice. In this role, Ed was responsible for leading a team of more than 400 practitioners who helped clients execute large-scale strategic change. Before that, he served as President and Chief Executive Officer of The Forum Corporation, where he advised senior business leaders involved in major change initiatives.

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