BOARD GOVERNANCE • FRACTIONAL CEO
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Enhancing Missions. Transforming Communities.

You Are Not Your Title

Reclaim Your Identity, Protect Your Time, and Prevent Burnout

A mini handbook for nonprofit executive directors and senior leaders

Topic: Professional identity beyond your organization (burnout prevention, not succession or exit)

Why This Matters

Most nonprofit leaders can tell you their organization's mission from memory. Fewer can tell you, without pausing, who they are outside of it.

That gap is not a character flaw. It is what happens when a job asks for everything you have, every day, for years. The mission becomes the story you tell about yourself. The title becomes the answer to “who are you.” And somewhere along the way, the rest of you gets quieter.

This matters for more than your own peace of mind. Leaders who have nothing left of themselves outside their organization are the ones most likely to make decisions from exhaustion instead of clarity, to stay in situations they should have left long before, and to burn out in ways that take years to recover from. Protecting a sense of self outside your role is not a distraction from the work. It is what makes you able to keep doing the work well.

I've spent over two decades in nonprofit leadership, including years running two organizations at once. I understand this because I've lived it, not because I read about it. What has kept me steady was never a better system for managing time. It was knowing, clearly, what belongs to me and what belongs to the mission: the relationships outside of work, the interests I chose for no reason other than wanting them, the parts of my reputation that are mine and not my employer's.

Use the next few minutes to check in with yourself honestly. Then use the space on the next page to name what you will do about it this week.

Check In With Yourself

Answer honestly. No one is grading this but you.

Are You You, or Are You Your Title?

1. Name one group, board, or activity in your community where nobody there knows your job title.
2. Think back on the last three times you showed up somewhere in your community. How many were you attending as yourself, and how many on behalf of your organization?
3. If you left your current role tomorrow, which of your community connections would still be yours?

Where Does Your Time Actually Go?

Think about your last two weekends. Which list below describes more of your time?

Genuinely Mine	Still the Job, Wearing Different Clothes
A hobby you do purely for enjoyment	Catching up on email
Travel that isn't a work trip	Reading leadership or nonprofit management journals
A book you read for pleasure	Stopping by the office on a day off
Time with people who have nothing to do with your job	Working on the next fundraiser
Volunteering somewhere nobody knows your title	Mentoring a staff member off the clock

Be honest. Which list looks more like your actual life right now?

Three Commitments

Before you leave this session, write one answer to each.

One relationship I will nurture this month, outside of work:

One interest or skill I will invest in, just because I want to:

One boundary I will set this week to protect the rest of my life:

I work with nonprofit executive directors and boards on board governance and development, executive coaching, fractional CEO services, and strategic planning and implementation. Learn more at cooperconsulting.online.

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