

“Can-If Thinking: Rapid Strategic Planning in a Time of Constraint”

North Carolina Center for Nonprofits Conference
November 20, 2025
2:15 pm – 3:30 pm

moSS+ross
Impact that matters





01

Welcome, Introductions,
Framing

Your Presenters

Today's Outcomes



Dave Monaco
Partner



Jeanne Murray
Partner



Dennis Markatos-Soriano
Executive Director



Niles Barnes
Deputy Director



1. Identify and reframe constraints
2. Apply Can-If thinking to challenges
3. Leave with tools for adaptive planning

moss+ross: 16 years of nonprofit partnerships



Mission:

Providing experienced consulting to strengthen North Carolina nonprofits

Vision:

Impact that matters, in a place we love

Values:

Client Success

Our team is dedicated to client success.

We listen respectfully, assess carefully, and offer honest solutions to help clients achieve their goals.

Relationships

We care deeply about relationships.

We are dedicated to building long-term client relationships through personal attention, unquestionable integrity, proven experience, and services that add value.

Belonging

We are committed to inclusion and belonging.

We support open and welcoming environments by embracing these values in our firm and through our work with community partners.

Services We Offer



Build sustainability for your mission. We offer campaign planning and management, feasibility studies, case statements and messaging, peer benchmarking, prospect research, and wealth screening.



Strengthen your ability to dream big, plan well, and execute on your goals. We offer comprehensive strategic planning, goal setting, and organizational assessments.



Recruit and retain talent through short-term help and executive search services. We offer comprehensive talent services including transition and succession plans and leadership development.

Our Presentation Partner



Connecting Maine to Florida



greenway.org

Turn and Talk...

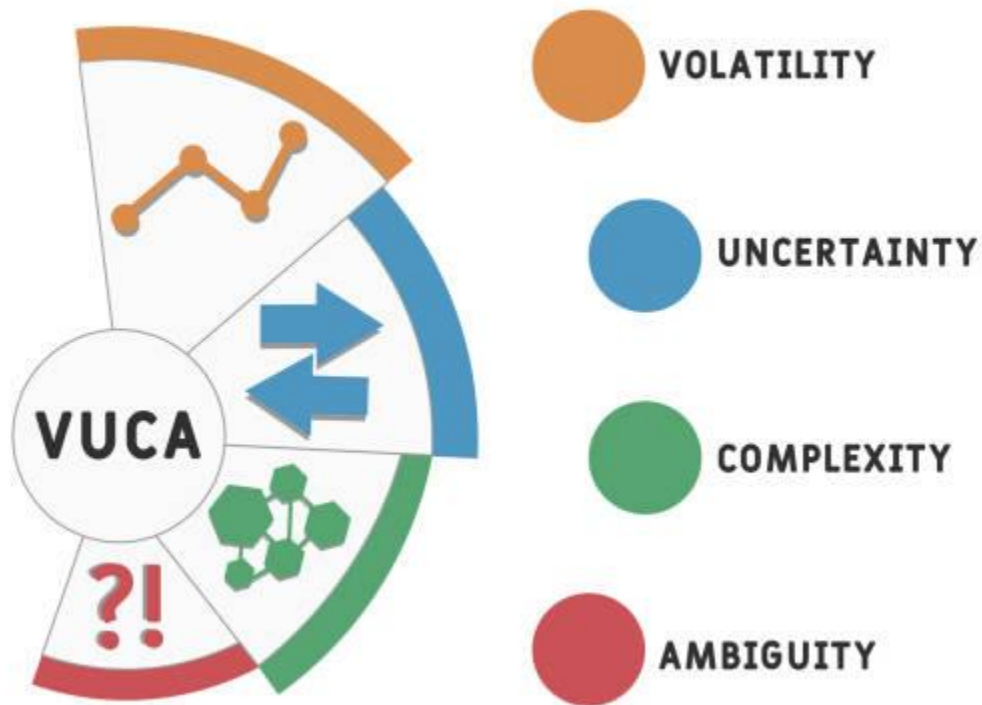
What Drew You to Today's Session?

02

Leading Amidst Constraints



One Certainty for Nonprofit Boards and Executives



"The world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you."

Tod Bolsinger, Canoeing the Mountains

Leadership Imperative:

Executives and Boards must forge a partnership to navigate and adapt amidst volatility and change (planned or unexpected)

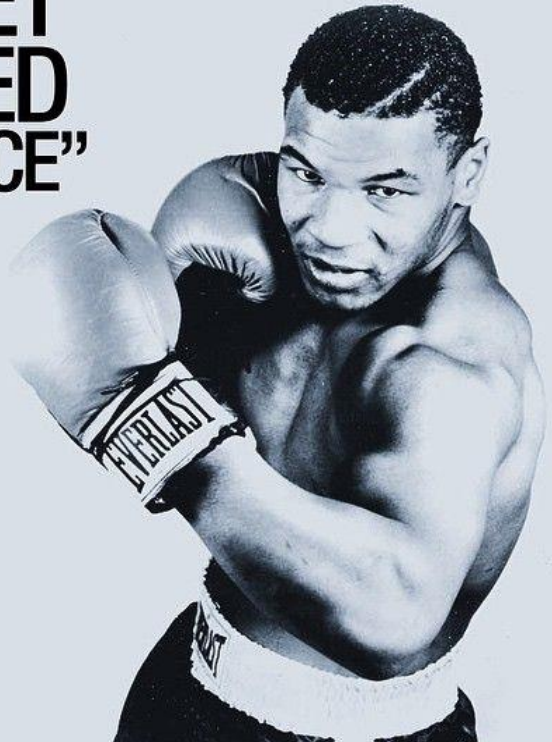
How Many of You Have A Strategic Plan?



You Know What They Say About (Strategic) Plans?

“EVERYBODY HAS A PLAN UNTIL
THEY GET
PUNCHED
IN THE FACE”

~ MIKE TYSON



Your VUCA World

(Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous)

Partner Turn and Talk

What kinds of blows (e.g. **unforeseen, unexpected challenges & constraints**) confront your organization at the moment?



03

East Coast Greenway:
A Model for Bold Thinking
Amidst Constraint



East Coast
Greenway®
ALLIANCE

Accelerate Connection

East Coast Greenway Alliance's
Strategic Plan (2026 - 2030)

Develop. Promote. Transform.



greenway.org

moss
+
ross






Mission, Vision & Values

Our Mission

The East Coast Greenway Alliance leads the development of a safe, welcoming East Coast Greenway that connects communities from Maine to Florida, boosts local economies and helps people move in healthy, sustainable and joyful ways.



Our Vision

A brown rectangular sign with white text and a white arrow pointing upwards.

Eastwick Trail ↑



The East Coast Greenway is a nationally connected, locally rooted trail for safe active transportation and recreation that transforms the way people move toward health, community and sustainability.

Our Values

Boldness

We dream big and solve challenges with imagination and heart.

Collaboration

We build the Greenway together through trusted partnerships and shared purpose.

Community

We connect people to one another and to the restorative power of nature.

Safety

We design trails that promote free and confident movement for all.

Stewardship

We amplify and protect the benefits of our natural landscape.

Tenacity

We stay the course and deliver long-term impact.



Transformational Outcomes

- 1 Establish and promote model corridors in each region of the East Coast Greenway
- 2 Double biking and walking in the Greenway corridor to hit an unprecedented 100 million annual visits
- 3 Share inspiring stories of transformation for community, health, the economy and the environment



Goals

Develop

Advance the completion of a safe, connected route from Maine to Florida.

Promote

Raise awareness, inspire usage and demonstrate the value of the Greenway.

Transform

Strengthen lives and communities through exceptional trail experiences and lasting impact.

Advocate

Activate

Plan

Fund

Partner



Strategies



Advocate

Garner support for the Greenway as essential transportation infrastructure for public health, economic growth and accessible connection to nature.



Activate

Create meaningful experiences that invite people of all backgrounds to explore, celebrate and steward the Greenway as a community asset.



Plan

Develop safe, connected corridors that model best-in-class design for mobility, access and long-term climate resilience.



Fund

Secure and sustain the diverse funding needed to develop, maintain and amplify the Greenway's reach and impact.



Partner

Foster shared ownership, expand support and accelerate progress across the Greenway through collaboration.



04

From Constraint to
"Can-if" Thinking



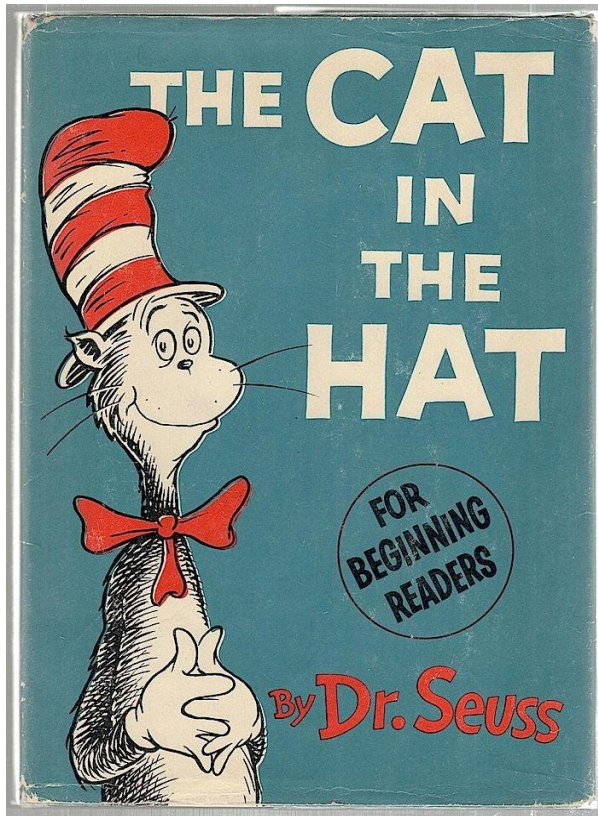
The Leadership Challenge....



**Rapid Strategic Shifting
(aka Planning)**

Where Do We Begin?

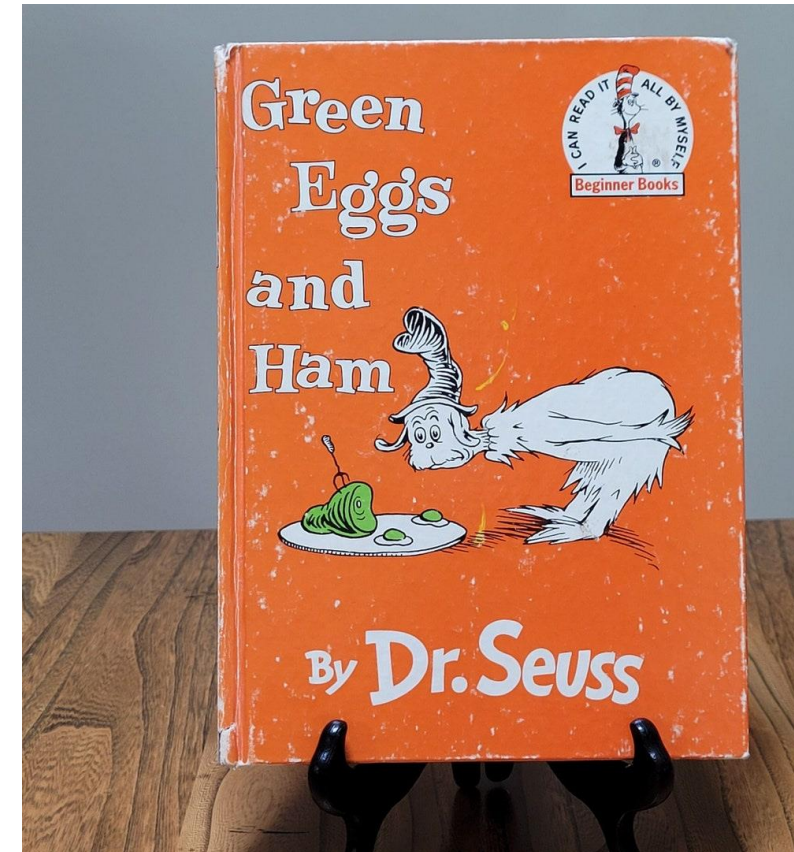
Step 1: Consider Your Mindset



225 specified words



**Constraint
Sparks
Ingenuity...**



49 one-syllable words and "anywhere!"

Step 2: Leverage Critical Relationships



Critical Relationships: Key to Navigating Turbulence

- **Structural:** Board Chair; Governance Chair; Leadership/Executive Team
- **Stakeholders:** Key donors; critical partners
- **VIPs:** Past board chairs; former ED/board members; community leaders

Circle of Trust Relationships

- Dedicated to preserve the mission
- Offer windows and mirrors
- Bring long-range perspective



Step 3: Name Your Lane



Where Should You Focus?

- Steadfast to mission
- Where can you have small wins?
- Where can you deliver the most impactful results?
- How can you marshal resources through partnership?

Step 4: Ask Propelling Questions



Pair your **bold ambition** with an **evident**



How might we **serve 25% more households over the next 60 days** despite a significant reduction in grocery store donations and federal food support?

Step 5: Answer Your Propelling Question with a "Can-if" Statement



Propelling Question:

How might we **serve 25% more households over the next 60 days** despite a significant reduction in grocery store donations and federal food support?

Can-if Ambition Statements:

- **We can, if** we mobilize corporate and community partners to sponsor emergency food boxes for families affected by missed paychecks.
- **We can, if** we activate a network of faith communities and schools to host temporary food distribution pop-ups in high-need neighborhoods.
- **We can, if** we leverage media partnerships to raise both awareness and emergency funds for expanded distribution.

Step 5: Answer Your Propelling Question with a "Can-if" Statement



Propelling Question:

What if could complete 100 new miles of trail without a single dollar of federal funding (Growth)?

Can-if Ambition Statements:

- **We can, if** we build a coalition of corporate sponsors who want sustainability and visibility in trail towns.
- **We can, if** we empower municipalities with DIY trail planning kits and technical support.
- **We can, if** we inspire state leaders and philanthropy to step up in this historic moment.

**"Can-if" Statements Promote Action
(thinking, prototyping, idea generation, hope)**



05

Participant Practice with
Propelling Questions and
Can-if Statements

Applying Propelling Questions and "Can-if" Statements



1. On Your Own (using worksheet):

Step 1: List your bold ambition.

Step 2: Identify a significant constraint (money, time, people, alignment).

Step 3: List your Circle of Trust partners.

Step 4: Name your lane: Where should you focus for optimal impact?

Step 5: Draft 1–2 propelling questions that pair your bold ambition with one of the constraints you face.

Step 6: Choose one question and generate “We can, if...” responses.

Applying Propelling Questions and "Can-if" Statements



2. In Small Groups

Step 1: Share an example of your “We can, if” statements

Step 2: Discuss - How could we use a tool like this as you lead your organization?

3. Share and discussion

06

Final Reflections



Points of Reflection



1. Strategic Planning Aligns Mission with Action

- Use strategic planning to affirm or revise your mission, vision, and core values.
- Build consensus on goals that will guide decision-making and resource allocation over the next 3-5 years.

2. Leverage Critical Relationships for Rapid Strategic Planning

- Engage board leaders, staff, funders, and community partners as thought partners to assess constraints and opportunities.
- Activate “circle of trust” relationships (structural, stakeholders, VIPs) to provide perspective, credibility, and support in shaping pivots.
- Choose areas of focus.

3. Harness Propelling Questions and Can-if Thinking to Drive Action

- Use propelling questions to pair bold ambitions with real constraints, sparking creativity.
- Apply Can-if statements to shift ideas into actionable pathways for innovation, growth, and impact.

Please Contact Us!



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Thank you.

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