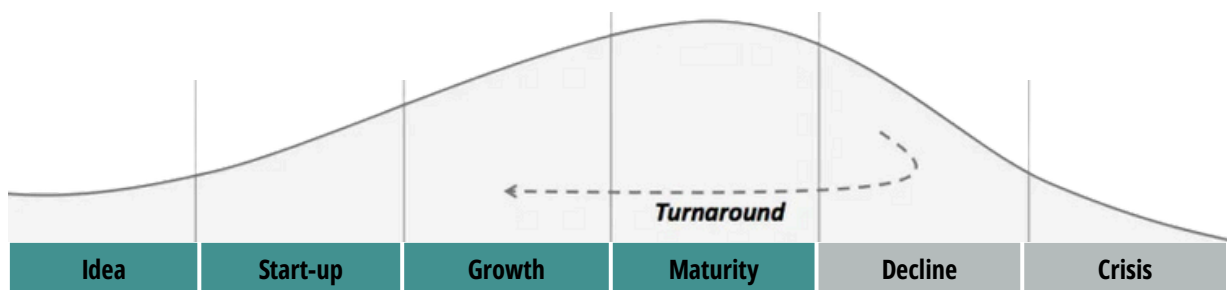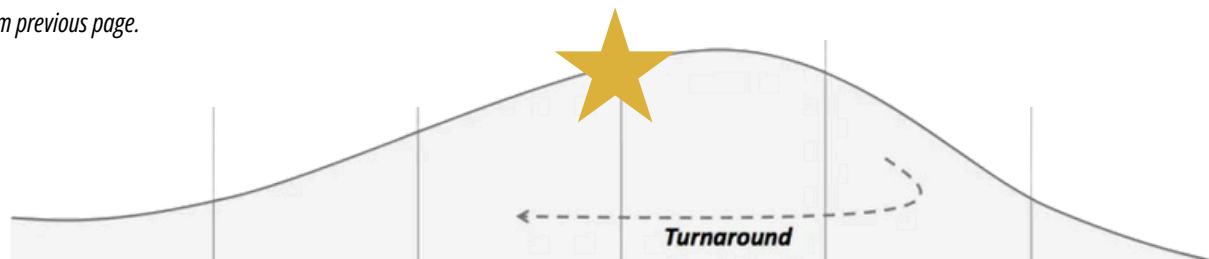# Navigating the Nonprofit Lifecycle

The nonprofit lifecycle, initially developed by Social Impact Architects, provides a framework that helps nonprofit leaders, staff, and boards navigate the complexities of organizational development. It supports informed decision-making, strategic planning, and effective management, ultimately enhancing the nonprofit's ability to achieve its mission and sustain its impact.

Waller Consulting has taken the initial rubric created by Social Impact Architects and added recommendations for how an organization might focus its efforts for maximum success.

Turnaround

	Idea	Start-up	Growth	Maturity	Decline	Crisis
1 Impact	Informal - Need established, best practices integrated, pilot launched	Pilot successful - Lessons integrated into design; Measurement starts	Established in marketplace - Strong results, partner-of-choice & consistent delivery	Consistent results through robust evaluation; Focused on continuous improvement, scale, system-building	Need exists, but nonprofit isn't partner-of-choice; Market duplication from other orgs	Demand near zero; Intense competition for resources & energy
	Gather data to confirm and refine the community need	*Document results, refine programs*	*Build M&E systems, establish review & revision processes*	*Standardize evaluation, share results, scale successful models*	*Reassess alignment between mission & community demand; Reduce duplication*	*Reconsider program viability; Pivot or exit areas with minimal demand*
2 Brand	Not utilized	First official PR materials; Primary method of marketing is work-of-mouth	Build-out of marketing & communication need, including public & media relations	Sophisticated marketing & comms plan using multiple channels; Everyone equipped to tell the story	Decreased public interest; Issue are not discussed in the media	Unable to attract media or public attention; Messaging does not resonate with public
	Create basic PR materials and ensure consistent messaging	*Develop a comms plan with media outreach and intentional visibility*	*Strengthen storytelling, expand to multi-channel marketing, train staff/volunteers as ambassadors*	*Monitor impact, refresh as needed; invest in stakeholder engagement*	*Reintroduce your mission to the community with a bold comms reset*	*Consider rebranding or partnership to rebuild trust & attention*
3 Revenue	Most are in-kind	Limited financial resources; hand-to-mouth	More diverse financial resources with established relationships with funders, but still unpredictable	High financial diversity with established relationships with multiple funders; Endowment exists; High financial predictability	Funders are not renewing contracts; Low cash reserves; Decreasing donor retention & loyalty	Cash reserves insufficient to cover operating expenses; Long-time donors tapped out
	Formalize donor/funder relationships	*Broaden & diversify funding sources*	*Secure multi-year commitments, deepen stewardship, build reserves*	*Strengthen donor recruitment & retention strategies; Refresh case for support as needed*	*Seek bridge funding, restructure budgets, reconnect with core funders*	*Explore mergers, shared services, or new revenue models*

Turnaround

	Idea	Start-up	Growth	Maturity	Decline	Crisis
4 **Operations**	Entrepreneurial founder using volunteer resources for guidance	Flat organization - decisions are likely made by founder; Volunteers needed for hands-on support	Founder has hired or becomes ED and is key decision-maker with board guidance; Volunteers used as resources	Leadership is often 2nd or 3rd generation from founder; Clear division of labor & accountability among staff	Increasing turnover; Decreased ability to attract top talent	Inability to fill key roles
	Establish a founding CEO/ED role and clarify authority with board input	*Create basic staff structure, policies, and systems to manage growth*	*Build strong management layers, succession planning, workflows, & HR systems*	*Reassess structure for efficiency; invest in leadership & staff development; ensure updated succession, emergency, & disaster planning*	*Prioritize stabilizing core functions; Retain essential staff*	*Rebuild operations from a lean base, aligned with mission-critical work*
5 **Culture**	Culture is defined by the Founder	Culture is action-oriented	Increased division of labor & accountability as staff is hired; Culture is results-oriented	Culture is well-defined and serves as a competitive advantage; Volunteers seen as ambassadors	Decreased transparency, collaboration, etc.	High contention & division among staff; Mistrust of leadership
	Translate founder's vision into shared values	*Foster a results-oriented culture as staff grows*	*Codify culture and invest in staff engagement*	*Reinforce transparency, collaboration, and shared values to counteract complacency*	*Conduct culture reset sessions; rebuild trust and morale.*	*Re-anchor culture in the mission to re-energize staff and volunteers*
6 **Governance**	Not yet developed	Formal governance starts; Likely homogenous	Board expansion - more diversity with more focus on planning & oversight	Board focused on policy & strategy; Board delegates management to ED	Board members are hard to recruit, retain & engage; Low focus on strategy	Board not fulfilling fiduciary responsibilities
	Formalize a board with clear bylaws, roles, & expectations	*Expand board diversity, skills, & role in strategic planning*	*Ensure board focus on governance, policy, and long-term strategy; Improve structure & processes*	*Reassess structure for efficiency; invest in board development; ensure updated succession, emergency, & disaster planning*	*Rebuild accountability and ensure fiduciary responsibilities are met; Re-engage board members with meaningful work; Sharpen strategic oversight*	*Recruit new leadership aligned with organizational turnaround*

Planning for the Nonprofit Lifecycle

Use the Nonprofit Lifecycle rubric to assess where your organization fits in each domain and plan your next steps.

Domain: □ Impact   □ Brand   □ Revenue   □ Operations   □ Culture   □ Governance

Current Status: □ Idea   □ Start-Up   □ Growth   □ Maturity   □ Decline   □ Crisis

Traits indicating current status:

Stop doing:

Do less of:

Keep doing:

Do more of:

Start doing:

Resources needed: