



Blue Garnet's briefings pull together our best thinking, research, and experience on topics related to strategy and management in the social sector. Our aim is to provide you with actionable resources that ignite conversations and action.

## Briefing

# How to Be an “Impact Do-er”

In our last briefing we explored “impact thinking” and how to practice it. Those who translate this thinking into action are what we call “impact doers.” These exceptional nonprofit leaders and funders have confidence in taking a long-term view on how the world will be different because of their work. They think about the whole organization, how its various parts connect and integrate, and the systems and tools needed to chart progress. Read on to learn how three local nonprofits are managing this journey, and the practices we know to be required for “impact doing.”



Be Exceptional.

## Introduction

Nonprofit leaders and funders juggle tough issues and big questions—How best to allocate resources? Which programs are most effective in the long run? Where to focus the board’s fundraising efforts? For Shara Fisler, Executive Director of the Ocean Discovery Institute, the thorny issue was quantifying and tracking progress towards a 10-year vision, or what she calls a “fuzzy picture.”

Driven by funding requirements and external pressures, many organizations create goals and measures within each department, using tools such as financial dashboards and program statistic reports. However, we have found that these practices often fall short of their good intentions by holding leaders back from seeing an integrated system. They can create pigeonholed discussions where leaders struggle to get on the same page with funders, community members, employees, and other stakeholders on what impact really means for their organization.

**Impact Doing:** An organization’s impact-focused approach to tracking progress towards and achieving outcomes. Impact doing requires a clearly defined and measurable desired impact, integrated with a business model and learning and evaluation systems.

## A Three-Step Journey

What can you do to look at your organization in an integrated way and become a more effective impact doer? Exceptional organizations take part in a three-step journey.

- 1) **They start with the end in mind.** Leaders must be honest about where they are at today in achieving their mission to be able to work with stakeholders to define a desired future state. Taking a 10-year perspective typically helps people stretch beyond their current agendas and constraints while envisioning a future that is within reach. We recommend developing a 10-year impact statement that describes specific, tangible results for what can be accomplished (in other words, a measurable goal).

Maricela Rios-Faust, Associate Executive Director/COO of Human Options, an Orange County nonprofit working to break the cycle of domestic violence, realized that “we had an appetite but not the capacity to do everything. What’s changed is that there has to be viable impact – [our desired impact] is viable now and we know how to get there.” An Impact statement can align stakeholders to exactly what an organization intends to do (and not do), and communicate those expectations clearly.

*“If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading”*  
—Lao Tzu

- 2) **They develop a clear understanding of their organization’s business model** (i.e., who is served, how they are served, and how to afford it) and how it must be aligned with desired impact. This requires understanding how organizational elements must work in concert to drive results towards a vision for impact.

Shara Fisler at Ocean Discovery Institute puts it simply: “To be really exceptional you need to know what you do well and focus on that.” Back in 2008, Ocean Discovery Institute had defined their desired programmatic impact, but they had not yet tackled their business model. It took almost 18 months, but now they understand what a healthy financial picture looks like – not just how much money to raise, but how to use resources to help the Institute grow and take risks to best serve their community.

- 3) **They establish measures and accountability systems that foster a culture of inquiry**, systematic learning, and continuous improvement. Colleen Mensel, President & CEO of El Viento, describes how looking differently at organizational measures has helped them to “redefine what we think is good,

and that good isn't enough for us, so we are constantly asking ourselves how we can be better.” Ongoing evaluation efforts help draw out how and why efforts are working, or not; in other words, how business model elements create successful outcomes. For this reason, learning and evaluation systems must be linked to an organization's business model – these two components can and should be mutually reinforcing.

As an example, El Viento has established an organizational dashboard<sup>1</sup> that measures the whole organization, not just finances, which has helped them to make data-driven decisions in a new way. As Colleen puts it, “impact doing means always looking, having an ideal of where you want to be, but also having the courage to not always do it the same. Even if you're successful, it's about having the courage to change, and although people have questioned some of our changes, we pushed forward and now are in a better place.”

**In sum**, impact doing means keeping the end (your desired impact) in mind, then understanding how your business model will achieve that desired impact, and learning along the way in order to change course as needed. These steps become a mutually reinforcing, virtuous cycle of defining, designing, and learning, which will lead you to exceptional social impact.

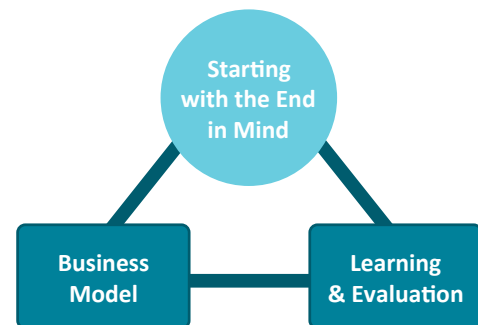


Image: impact doing is a three-step journey

## Principles of Impact Doing

What's needed to get on the path to creating this virtuous cycle? Here are some principles to keep in mind:

- **Invest the time.** This is an ongoing journey that requires going deep in iterative discussions to gain consensus and clarity. These are not conversations that can be squeezed in to regular staff or board meetings; they demand their own space. As Maricela and Human Options discovered, developing readiness for these discussions at funder, board, and staff levels can take time. And these conversations never end – impact does not only protect time for necessary, deeper conversations, but also build impact-focused discussions into their everyday work.
- **Engage diverse stakeholders.** Insights gathered from varied perspectives are more likely to result in insightful and useful measures and targets. It's critical that staff leadership and board members are part of these discussions, and are aligned on how the organization's impact statement is translated into reasonable performance goals and expectations. Likewise, funders and nonprofits need to get their heads together for honest conversations about expectations for performance and measurement, and to periodically revisit those expectations. Taking the time to engage others also helps ensure that constituents keep their eye on the prize and stick with the effort.
- **Do not forget the head and the heart.** The rigor that comes with impact doing can seem cold at first, but if you take it slowly and realize you don't need to take a one-size-fits-all approach, you'll have a better chance. Changing behavior is harder than changing thinking; it requires mutual understanding and a desire to truly understand your organization's impact

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<sup>1</sup> Performance dashboards and implementation roadmaps are great tools for converting long-term targets into reality. They help identify what activities and data are needed to close the gap between where the organization is today and its aspirations. Performance dashboards help find answers to learning questions and set both short- and long-term performance targets. A roadmap can identify and track interdependencies among activities, and their resource needs and milestones, enabling leaders to make decisions at a systems level.

## Benefits of Impact Doing

As evidenced by our clients and affirmed throughout the sector, there are three major benefits of building organizational capacity for impact.

- 1) **Impact doing organizations find ways to maximize opportunities.** The practice of impact doing keeps strategy on track by connecting long-term goals to near term actions and their measures, which provides clarity on where an organization is at and what is needed in order to be more effective. For Colleen, having “a” plan, “an overarching model that everything plugs into,” has made El Viento braver and more proactive rather than reactive.

El Viento used their impact statement and business model work to evaluate an opportunity that arose regarding reimbursement from school districts for tutoring services. “Before we just jumped into the opportunity, we went back to look at our business model and the impact that this decision would have on our overall aim. Going back to the model helped us to understand through analysis that we could take this opportunity and make it a social enterprise.” The “impact doer” lens steered El Viento away from focusing solely on the nature of the opportunity, to understanding how the opportunity could contribute value towards achieving their organizational impact.

- 2) **Impact doing organizations can articulate their unique value.** Maricela at Human Options shares an example of how their conversation has changed with funders: “We have a foundation that provides us with significant support for capacity building – with them, the change has been being able to talk about “the whole” and rarely with funders can you do that. I learned to look at the organization as a whole and to have a conversation about organization health and sustainability vs. survival and need.”
- 3) **Impact doing organizations have greater confidence in the difference they are making.** El Viento has changed their conversations with funders in the way in which they think about donations: “You have to be aware of the dollars that are coming in to you and make the most of that generosity. If you aren’t an impact thinker, then you’re doing a disservice to your contributors.” With confidence, El Viento is able to speak to exactly how their unique model rises above program-level outputs and is making headway towards their intended impact.

## Your Impact Doing Journey

We encourage you to rethink how you “do” impact by considering the three steps and principles shared in this briefing. Get curious and have these conversations with your board and leadership, and let us know how it is going. We hope you will soon reap the benefits akin to those experienced by our local nonprofit examples.

In response to the need we see in the sector for greater impact doing, we recognize that a fundamentally different approach is necessary to meet the needs to help nonprofit leaders and their funders build their abilities to operate in an outcomes-focused world. In response, Blue Garnet has created the Impact Accelerator – an evolution in our services to accelerate our sector’s ability to tackle “impact.” For more information on Impact Accelerator workshops, please contact [hello@bluegarnet.net](mailto:hello@bluegarnet.net).

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