Strive for Small to Win Big

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Across this country, Americans are grappling with unprecedented stress and anxiety generated by two crises: the global pandemic and unchecked systemic racism. The complexities of these two social issues are vast. Some states have started reopening slowly, and others are experiencing what public health officials are calling a "second wave" (did the first wave ever really end?). Nonprofit leaders might be excited to think that normalcy is on the horizon.

Civil rights demonstrations have shown the desperate need for bold action to address institutional, structural, and systemic racism. Amidst the worry, anger, and frustration, we see signs of hope and inspiration that the future can and will be different from the past. Fueled by this hope, you might be looking for your organization's next "big win," a bold new idea that proclaims your mission is alive and well; a grand gesture to say, "We're back, and we're ok." But you may be feeling hesitant, believing that you don't have the resources to "go big or go home." Consider a different approach: stack up the small wins.

Nonprofit teams are witnessing daily raw pain within their communities. The desire to rush to aid the cause, heal the wounds, and take bold actions is more than palpable. However, the wisdom that Karl E. Weick, professor at the University of Michigan, organizational theorist, and social scientist, shared in his 1984 study "Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems," published in *American Psychologist*, is more relevant than ever.

Weick notes that attempting to solve "big problems" can often be *the* problem. Tackling major issues might lead to inaction because the sheer enormity of massive endeavors activates "processes such as frustration, arousal, and helplessness." He suggests a provocative solution; give your organization permission to reexamine problems or goals and apply a laser-like focus on areas that produce immediate, *visible* results. By Weick's definition, a small win is "a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance."

Consider the following concepts to start small and win big.

Take time to learn. Avid readers are often drawn to a particular genre. NRMC's executive director loves biographies and business books. Take time every single day to supplement your understanding of topics outside your reading comfort zone. Two books we recommend without reservation are, *How to Be An Antiracist*, by Ibram X. Kendi and *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo. Or if you're a visual learner, check out a livestream event (now available for on-demand viewing) with The Bridgespan Group and PBS News Hour addressing how to talk about racial equity in your workplace.

Take it one day at a time. When going for the small wins, start one at a time, and don't obsess about alignment and continuity between the small wins at first. Stackable, small wins add up over time, much like a series of small software patches help strengthen an overall program just as much as a brand-new version. Staff teams and volunteers will gain confidence from each triumph that the organization is moving in a positive direction.

You've got nothing to lose. If you focus your efforts on micro-scale changes, the risk of failure becomes less daunting. In a recent Risk eNews, we explored the benefits of embracing failure. With small-scale change, taking

a chance on a risky idea could be at worst a bummer; the probability that you'll be facing a catastrophic setback is relatively low. Practicing these small failures will give your team more confidence to flex risk-taking muscles, which will prepare them for seizing more significant opportunities down the road. Review your successes and your failures to take advantage of the learning prospects of both positive and negative outcomes.

Put the pieces back together. Striving for small, visible changes helps to reestablish order when your operating environment experiences disruption or fracture. Give your team permission to put the puzzle back together slowly, starting with something small that you can easily make sense of. The beauty of the small win is that each little victory acts as the fuel to uncover the next easily solved task. As you continue to build on each small success, suddenly, the whole picture will come into focus.

Adjust your frame. In the past, you may have held strategy sessions annually or perhaps twice each year. With a shift to small, shorten the time between strategy conversations. Review what's working and what isn't more often, perhaps on a 30-day or 60-day schedule. By keeping tabs on your organization's progress more frequently the momentum you've built on your small wins will carry forward and your team will be ready to move on the next opportunity.

It's not necessary to take big ideas off the table indefinitely. However, if you or your team are struggling with how to restart mission-critical work, this concept of small wins should help build momentum since you'll start seeing immediate results. The energy and optimism that grows with each small success stacks up, and, in the process, you'll be banking confidence for future grand gestures.

Look for your next small win by applying these criteria:

- Projects should take a short time, ideally less than an hour or a day.
- Tasks shouldn't be "make or break," focus on things where failure won't cause harm.
- Resolve to tackle a 'small win' project once, twice, or three times each week.

For more on solving small, see these resources:

- "Why Small Wins Matter" by Daniel Goleman
- "To Solve Big Problems Look for Small Wins," by Bill Taylor for *Harvard Business Review*
- "How to make your small wins work for you," by Rob Smith for *Ted.com*

The Nonprofit Risk Management Center welcomes your comments and questions about how striving for small realizes big opportunities, at 703.777.3504 or info@nonprofitrisk.org.