



# Building and Nurturing Relationships

## Organizational Leadership Briefs for RDO Executive Directors

This brief is part of the seven-part series *On the Road to Success: Organizational Leadership Briefs for Executive Directors*.

These briefs cover a wide range of issues important to RDO senior leadership, including:

- Creating Relevance in Your Region
- Building and Nurturing Relationships
- Developing Revenue Strategies
- Doing More with Less
- Executive Director Qualifications
- Financial Reporting
- Preparing for Effective Board Meetings

The full set is available online at: [www.nado.org/leadershipbriefs](http://www.nado.org/leadershipbriefs)

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To maximize success in today's climate and to create a sustainable organization, regional development organizations need to focus on three key areas:

- ▶ **Relationships**
- ▶ Relevance
- ▶ Revenue

### RELATIONSHIPS

Building and nurturing strong relationships is absolutely paramount for regional development organizations to achieve success and meet their goals. Solid relationships are the difference between good organizations and great organizations. It is not just what you know—it is who you know and what they think of you and your organization. This includes both internal and external relationships.

#### Internal Relationships

There are some pre-requisites for building solid relationships, particularly those internal to an organization. If you are a director or manager, the key internal relationship is the one you have with your staff.

An employer-employee relationship can be rewarding or frustrating, depending on the foundation established for that relationship. The following are a few suggestions for building solid relationships with your staff. As a leader you should be:

- **Fair**  
As simple as this may sound, it is imperative to treat the people within your organization fairly. If you are unfair in dealing with people within your organization, you will lose their support, confidence, and trust in you as a leader.
- **Consistent**  
Treating your staff consistently is incredibly important—yet it is incredibly difficult to do. Inconsistencies in how you treat your (cont'd)

staff are easily recognizable and often magnified by the person that feels slighted, which can have a major impact on other relationships throughout the organization.

➤ **Accountable**

Accountability within an organization is essential. As the director or manager, you need to make sure your staff is held accountable for their performance and outputs. If you do not, the relationship you have with that staff person and others in the office will be affected. Accountability means recognizing and rewarding accomplishments and addressing and disciplining shortcomings.

➤ **Supportive**

To reinforce your relationship with your staff, you need to support your staff. Provide them ongoing training and direction. Make sure you “have their back” when things go awry—don’t throw them under the bus.

Listen, Listen, Listen. Make sure you hear what they are saying and respond with guidance, encouragement, and correction.

Supporting your staff in difficult times is the best way to build trust.

➤ **Enabling**

Enabling your staff to grow is a great way to strengthen the employer-employee relationship. Enable them to lead, to make decisions, and to develop ideas and projects.

You hired your staff for what they can do and they are likely professionals in their fields. They want to feel like they are part of something and contributing to the success of the organization.

When enabling, give them the support they need to succeed and don’t set them up for failure.

Most managers say they want to get more out of their staff, yet they fail to give them opportunities to contribute in a meaningful way. Enabling your staff will build a solid

employer-employee relationship that will help you build a strong, sustainable organization.

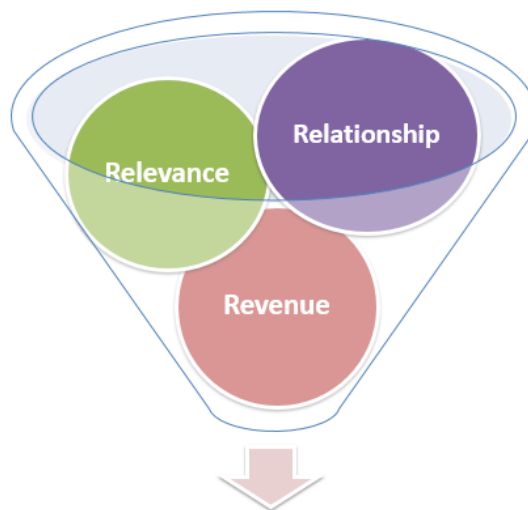
**External Relationships**

Managing external relationships with constituents, funders, customers, and others requires effort. External relationships don’t just happen and they must be intentional and genuine.

For most of your external relationships there must be some value in the relationship to invest in the effort. The value may not be mutually beneficial, but that should not minimize the importance of the relationship. You never know from what relationship additional opportunities will arise.

Word of mouth advertising is still one of the most effective ways to grow your organization. Most people will only promote you and your organization if there is an established relationship and there has been value in that relationship. This value may be:

- For a funder—delivering project results on time and within budget
- For a legislator—addressing a constituent’s concern
- For a community—based on an impact you created for the community
- For a colleague— someone who has seen you excel



**Sustainability**

Build relationships with:

- State and federal agencies. If they know you and your region they are often more sympathetic to your needs.
- State and federal legislators.
- Your community’s elected leaders and professional staff.
- Partner organizations that will make collaboration easier when the need arises.
- Peers and colleagues. This can create great learning opportunities through the sharing of best practices, tips, and techniques. This also overcomes the notion that you are competing against them.

Building and maintaining relationships for an organization is a full-time job because investing in relationships pays long-term dividends. Be willing to foster relationships with others that don't provide immediate benefits.

If relationship-building and maintenance is not a high priority for you as a leader and an organization, you are falling well short of the full potential you have.

Here are a few suggestions for developing solid relationships:

- Relationships must be built on trust
- Relationships must be transparent with no hidden agenda
- Relationships are supported by your reputation, positively or negatively
- Relationships take work. Relationship development and maintenance does not occur naturally or accidentally and it must be intentional.

#### THE 7 R's of RELATIONSHIPS

- **Reaffirm:** Constantly build new and reaffirming existing relationships.
- **Responsibility:** Do what you say, when you say, and with a high-quality product.
- **Respect:** Partners don't all have to agree all the time, but you must rise above indifferences to work together.
- **Reputation:** "Bad apples" may exist in your state, and you and your colleagues must work to prevent them from spoiling the entire "bushel." Aggressively work to manage public perception.

- **Reality of Term Limits:** The reality is that term limits impacts all of us. Turnover in elected officials and leadership changes make your environment very fluid. Therefore you must constantly educate agency leadership and legislators on who you are, what you do, and why you do it.
- **Run:** Go to agencies and legislators - *now*. Don't wait for them to come to you because the reality is they won't.
- **Resource:** During an era of tight budgets and limited resources, many of your states are facing financial challenges. State agencies are struggling with tight budgets and limited resources. Use this as an opportunity to become an extension or delivery agent for state agencies.