



CCT Nonprofit Leadership Pulse Report

*Priorities, Challenges, and Opportunities Shaping
the Greater Boston Nonprofit Sector*



September 2026

Community Consulting Teams (CCT Boston)

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Executive Summary



88%

FUNDRAISING is top challenge and biggest weakness



62%

Leaders are still OPTIMISTIC about the future



23%

Increase in Operating Strength with ENGAGED BOARDS

The 2026 CCT Greater Boston Nonprofit Leadership Pulse Survey gathered insights from 120 nonprofit leaders representing **organizations across a wide range of mission areas, sizes, and stages of growth.**

Funding and Capacity Are Top Challenges

Overall, the survey depicts a nonprofit sector that is **resilient, optimistic, and deeply committed to its mission**, but one that continues to **face increased funding pressures and capacity constraints**. An increasing demand for services is also adding pressure to nonprofits in 2026.

Challenged but Optimistic

While leaders frequently describe the current nonprofit environment as **challenging, uncertain, competitive, and stressful**, a majority (62%) remain optimistic in their ability to successfully deliver on their mission ongoing into the future.

Infrastructure Drives Confidence

The 2026 Survey confirmed that **organizational strength, not size or sector, is the big differentiating factor in their optimism**. Strong marketing, financial, and operational systems are top drivers of leadership optimism.

Greater Boston nonprofit organizations are highly effective at delivering mission-driven work but often lack the systems and framework necessary to sustain and scale that work. Organizations that **plan for intentional growth and proactively invest in capacity** are better positioned to navigate uncertainty and expand their impact.

Board Engagement is a Strategic Asset

A major theme this year is that nonprofits with **stronger board engagement are much more likely to have effective operating infrastructure** (23% stronger) and as a result be more optimistic about the future. Board engagement should be viewed as an organizational asset rather than just a governance requirement.

Overall, despite the challenges highlighted throughout this report, the **majority of Greater Boston nonprofit leaders were optimistic** when asked about their outlook for the future.



LOOKING AHEAD

This report is intended to support nonprofit leaders, boards, funders, capacity builders and community partners as we work together to strengthen organizations and advance collective impact across Massachusetts.

About the Survey

The 2026 Greater Boston Nonprofit Leadership Pulse Survey was conducted by Community Consulting Teams (CCT Boston) to better understand the challenges, opportunities, priorities, and outlooks shaping the nonprofit sector.

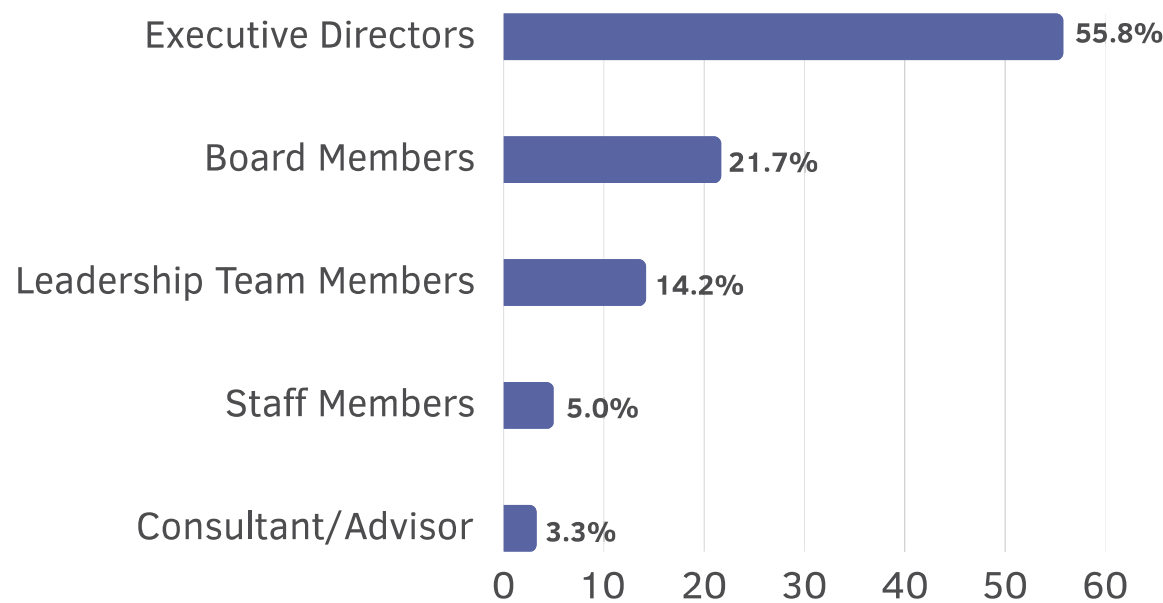
A total of **120 nonprofit leaders** participated in the survey during April and May, representing organizations of varying sizes, missions, and sectors across Greater Boston and surrounding communities.

The survey explored organizational priorities, fundraising challenges, operational capacity, governance, leadership, community partnerships, and future outlook.

Respondents represented a diverse cross-section of nonprofit organizations varying in size, mission focus, leadership structure, and stage of organizational development.

Respondents by Role

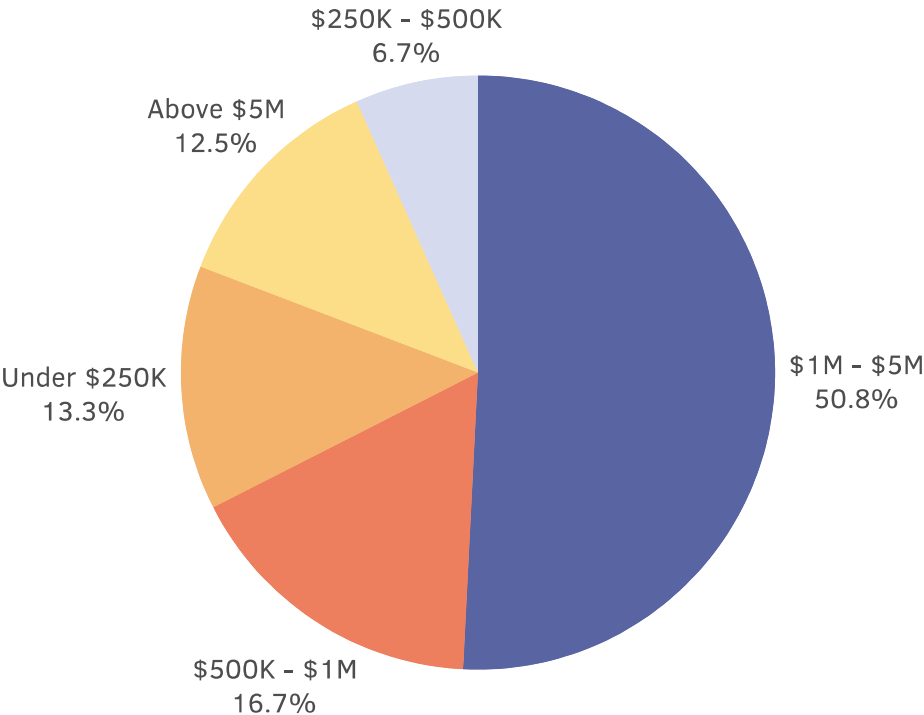
More than 84% of respondents held executive, board, or senior leadership positions within their organizations.





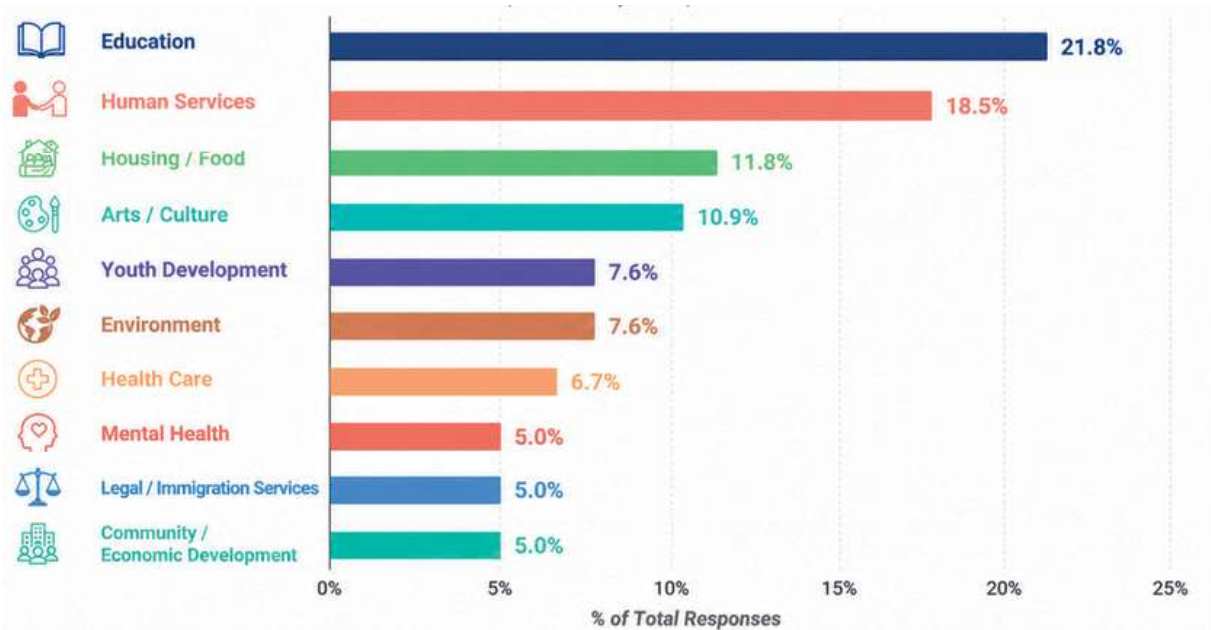
Respondents by Budget Size

Mid-sized nonprofits represented the largest segment of survey respondents, providing valuable insight into the opportunities and challenges facing organizations in this important growth stage.



Respondents by Sector

Respondents reflect the diversity of the nonprofit sector, representing organizations working across education, human services, arts, housing, health, environmental, and community-focused missions.



Key Finding #1:

Nonprofits Face Challenging Environment But Remain Confident About the Future

Nonprofit leaders across Greater Boston describe today's environment as increasingly complex and demanding. Organizations are navigating funding uncertainty, workforce challenges, rising service demand, economic pressures, and growing expectations from funders, boards, and stakeholders.

When survey participants were asked to describe today's nonprofit environment, the most common responses included words such as challenging, uncertain, competitive, and stressful. These responses reflect the realities of operating in a sector that is being asked to do more with limited resources.

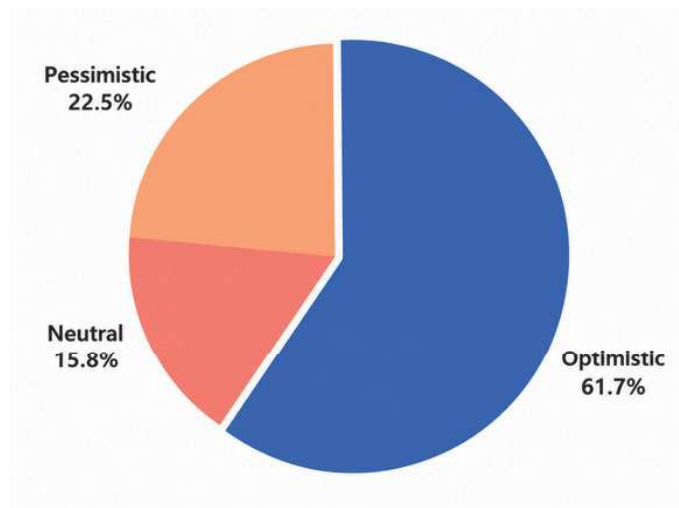
How Leaders Describe Today's Environment



Nonprofit Outlook for Next 3 Years

The Majority of Nonprofit Leaders are Optimistic

Nearly two-thirds (61.7%) of nonprofit leaders reported feeling somewhat or very optimistic about the future of their organizations.



Difference of Leadership Viewpoint

Optimistic leaders

- Competitive
- Unstable
- Dynamic
- Complex
- Crowded

Pessimistic leaders

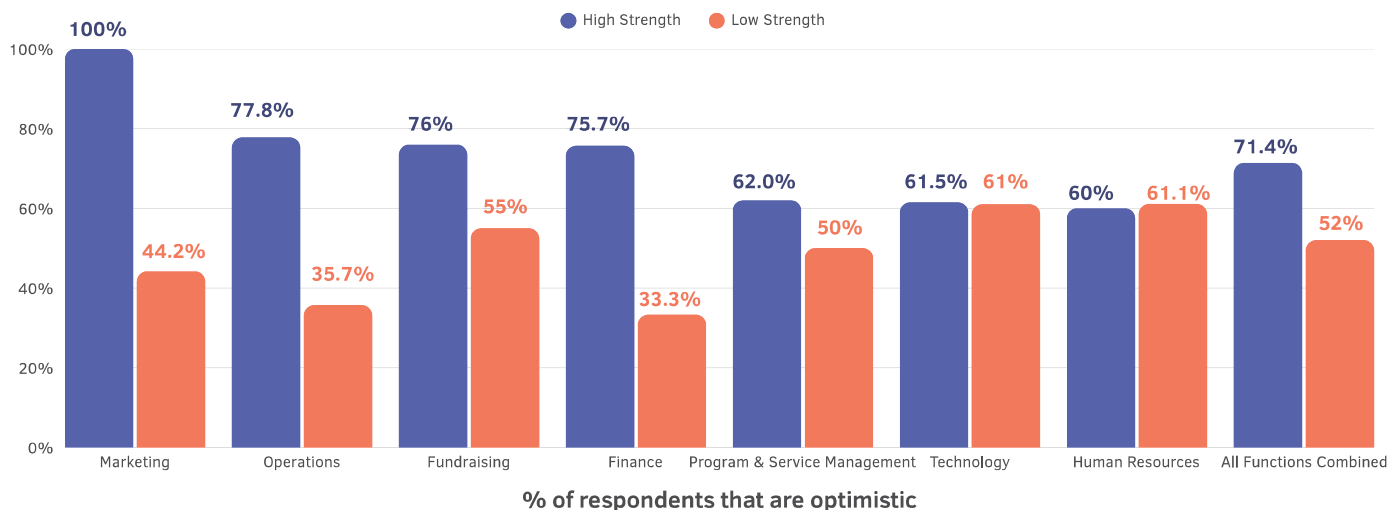
- Tired
- Stressed
- Exhausting
- Stretched
- Distressed

Optimistic leaders view market complexities as competitive and dynamic variables to navigate, whereas pessimistic leaders view the same conditions as exhausting.

Optimism With High Strength vs Low Strength Functions

Top functional strengths are associated with much higher optimism

Organizations reporting high strength functional capacity were 37% more optimistic than those reporting low strength functional capacity.



High strength in Marketing, Operations, Fundraising and Finance is associated with nearly 2X higher optimism, while strength in HR and Technology does not result in higher optimism. Organizations reporting high strength functional capacity were 37% more optimistic than those reporting low strength functional capacity.



CCT Insight: What This Means

Nonprofit leaders' confidence about the future is driven less by sector, size or specific mission, and more by their organizational capabilities that enable them to sustain, grow, and adapt.

Optimistic leaders are resilient, resourceful and intentional, and invest in the underlying infrastructure and capacity needed to deliver the mission.

The environment is challenging but you are not alone. The Greater Boston (and Massachusetts) community has a deep commitment to social good and nonprofits, and offers many resources, many of which are no cost, that are focused on building capacity and supporting the inspiring work nonprofit leaders do every day. No-cost legal support, pro bono consulting, and networks of professional advisors/volunteers (in addition to board members) can all provide their expertise and experience on specific issues/challenges.

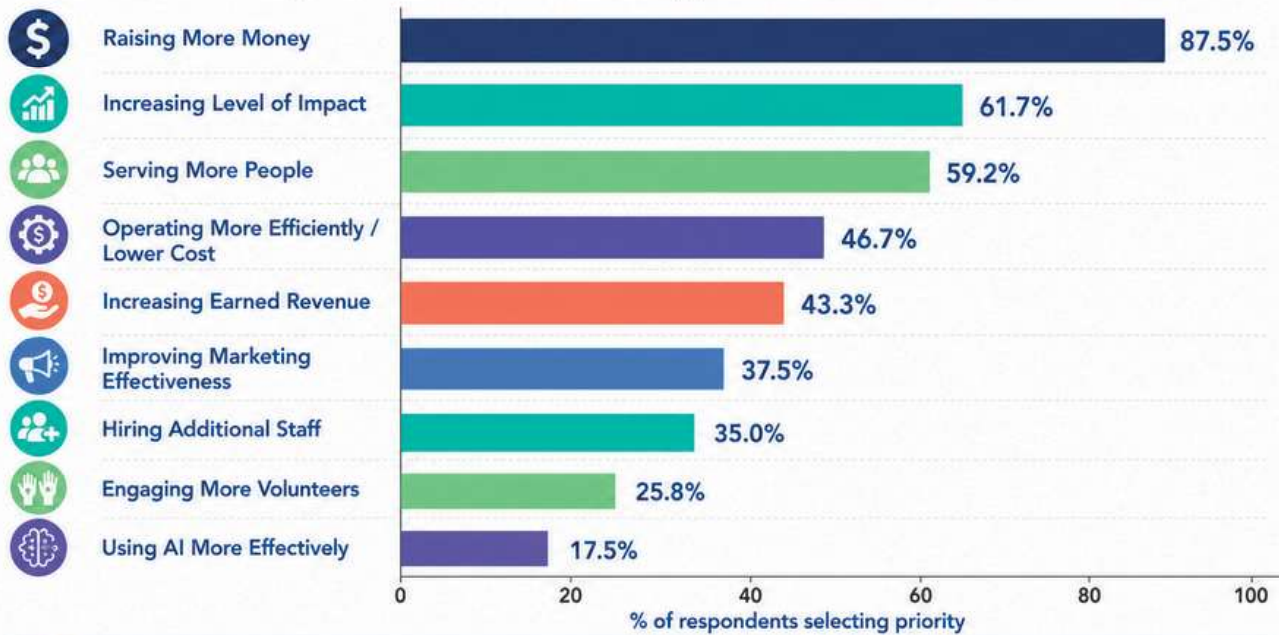


Key Finding #2:

Financial Sustainability Remains the Biggest Priority, but Many Lack the Capacity to Achieve It

Top Priorities for Nonprofit Leaders

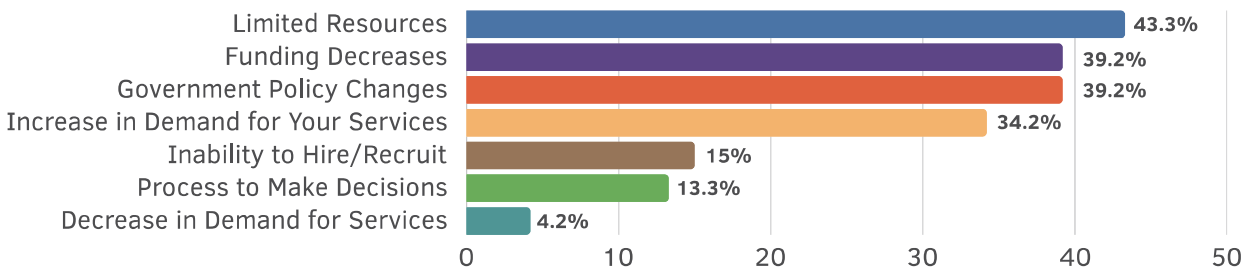
Revenue generation emerged as the sector's most important priority, with leaders focused on both fundraising (88%) and earned revenue (43%) opportunities.



Raising more money (88%) and increasing impact (62%) remain the top priorities for nonprofit leaders.

Top Organizational Challenges

Resources, funding and increasing demand are the top challenges reported by leaders.

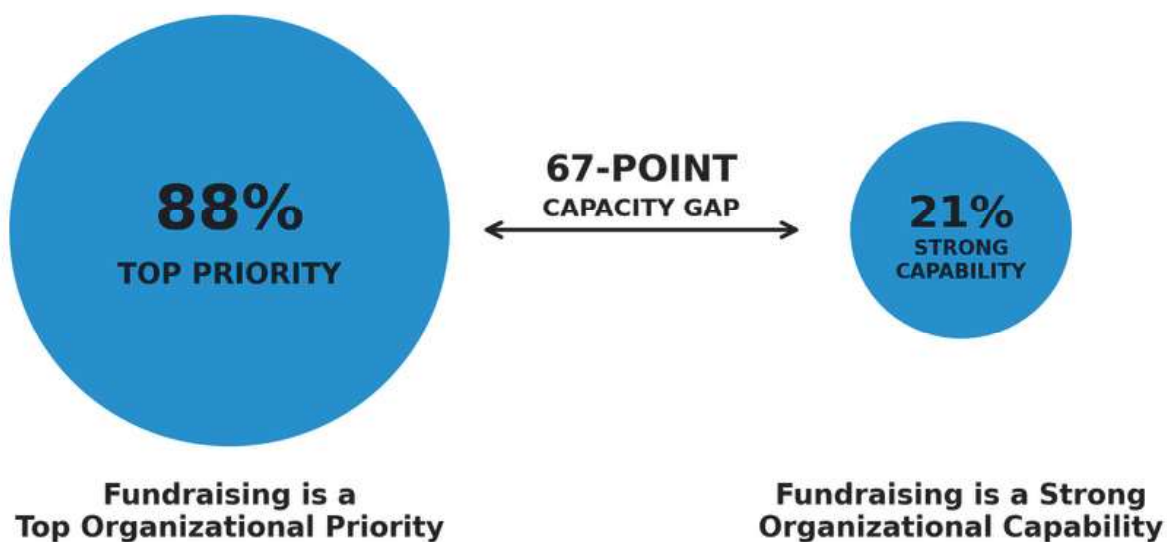


Hiring and retaining staff was NOT ranked as a top challenge, which suggests limited resources were driven by funding not availability.

Fundraising Priority vs Capability

Significant Capacity Gap for Nonprofits

Nonprofit leaders reported a significant 67-percentage-point gap between **priority** of raising money and having a **strong capability** of raising money.





CCT Insight: What This Means

The challenge facing many nonprofits is not that they don't recognize the importance of fundraising, but rather building the systems, processes, communications, board engagement, donor stewardship, and organizational capabilities needed to support sustainable revenue growth.

Organizations that view fundraising as an organization-wide capability rather than a standalone activity may be better positioned to achieve long-term financial sustainability. In addition, the board, leadership, staff and ideally people served should all be advocates for the organization, importance of mission and impact of its work.

Fundraising capacity is also more than people, systems, and tools. Underneath it sits something easier to overlook: clarity about what you do and why it matters. When an organization can describe that plainly, internally and externally, stronger messaging tends to follow on its own.

Clarity, in part, is knowing when you're doing too much: the instinct to add more programs and services can at times blur who you are and make you harder to fund. Often the strongest move is to focus on the few things you do best. Funders respond to focus, not to doing everything at once.

What Funders Want to See

Outputs → Outcomes → Organizational Strength → Sustainable Impact

Funders invest in organizations that demonstrate results—and have the strength and strategy to sustain that impact over time.



The Bottom Line

Funders invest in organizations that combine strong results with strong systems.



Show your story. Share your data. Prove your impact. Sustain your mission.



Clear Goals
A focused mission and measurable goals that guide your work.



Measurable Results
Evidence of progress and outcomes that matter.



Strong Organization
The systems, leadership and financial strength to deliver and adapt.



Community Connection
Deep relationships and responsiveness to the people you serve.



Learning & Improvement
Use data and feedback to improve and drive better results.



Lasting Impact
Creating meaningful change that endures beyond funding.

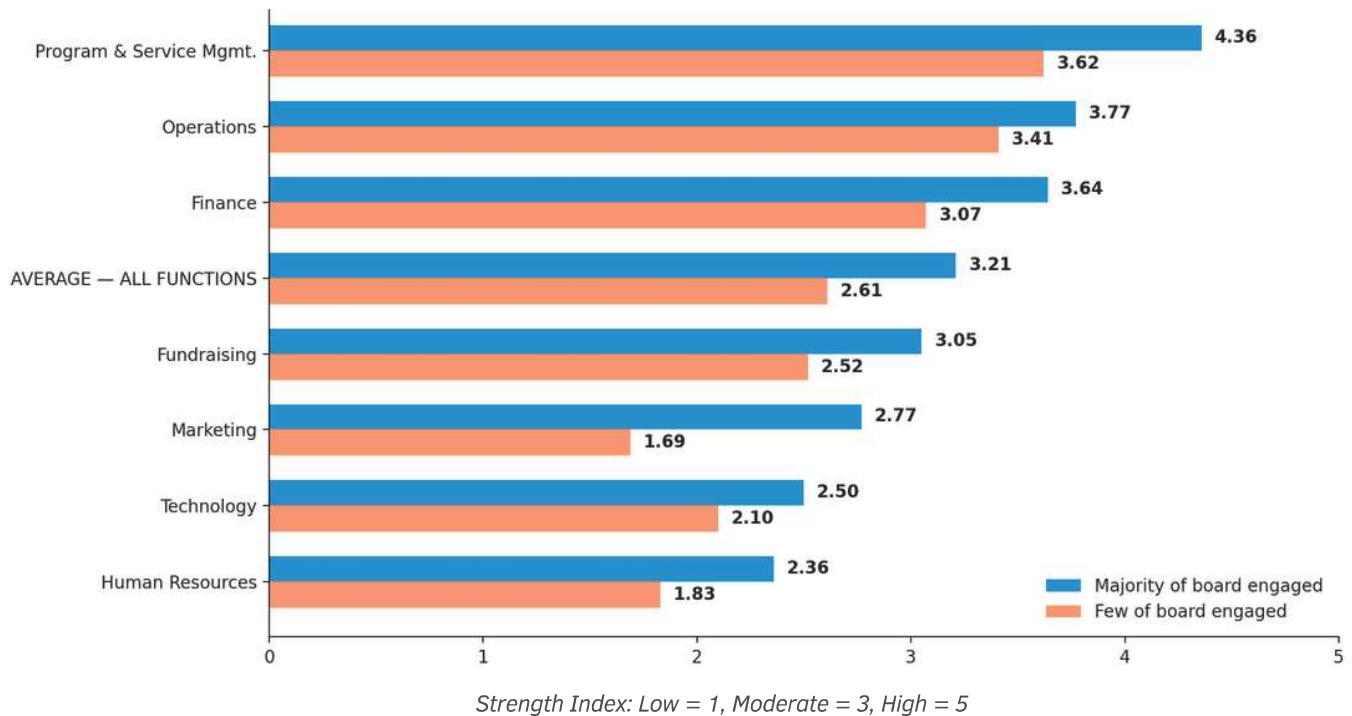
Sources: Center for Effective Philanthropy – State of Nonprofits 2026; Grantmakers for Effective Organizations – 2025 National Study of Philanthropic Practice; Giving USA 2026; Boston Foundation, MassINC & Massachusetts Nonprofit Network – One Year In: Massachusetts Nonprofits Charting a Way Forward (2026); CCT 2026 Leadership Survey and Analysis.

Key Finding #3:

Board Engagement is a Driver of Organizational Strength and Optimism

Board engagement is a multiplier rather than simply another organizational characteristic. Organizations with highly engaged boards had a 23% advantage (3.21 vs 2.61) in functional strength across multiple dimensions with marketing, program management and finance showing the biggest differences.

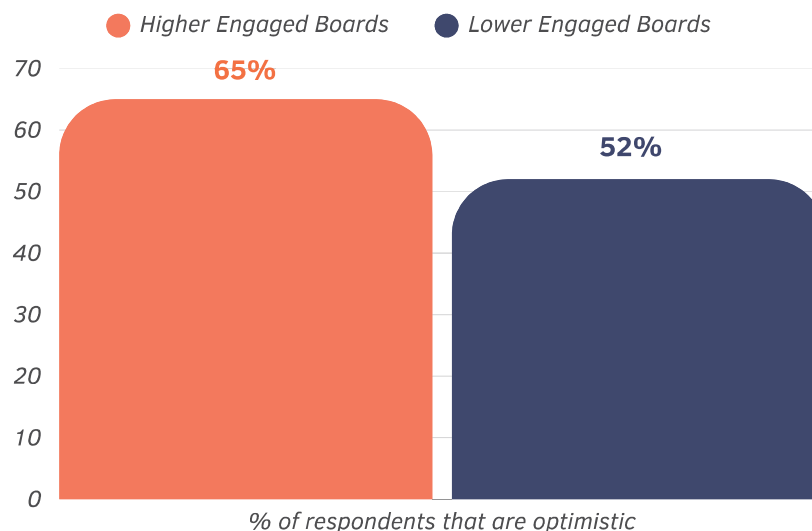
Functional Strength (1-5) by Level of Board Engagement



Optimism by Board Engagement

Engaged Boards Connected to Higher Optimism

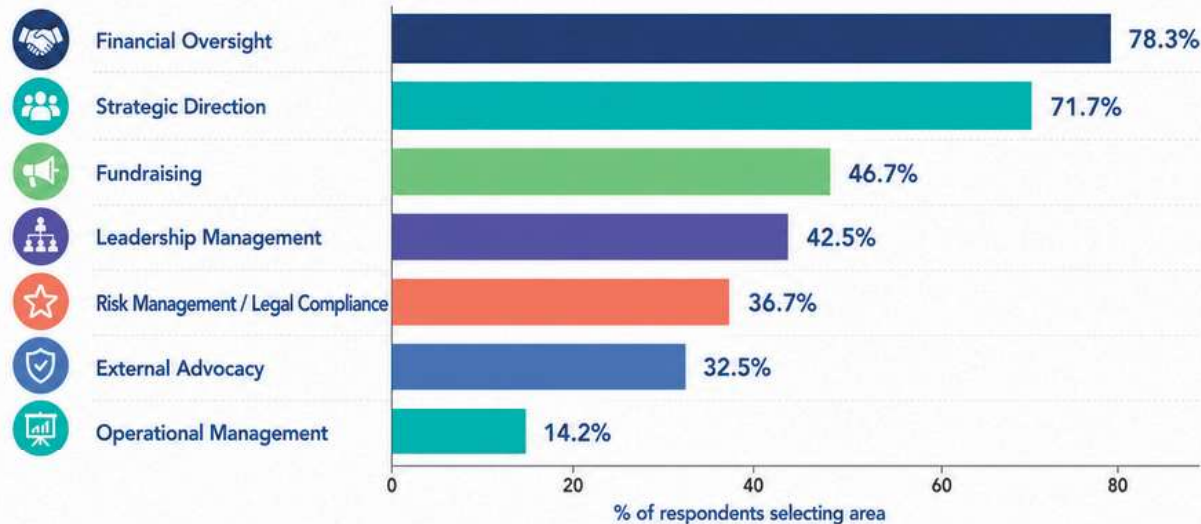
Nonprofits with engaged boards reported 25% higher optimism for the future.



Areas of Significant Board Contributions

Effective Boards Contribute More Than Governance

Leaders reported that key board contributions beyond oversight include strategic direction (72%), fundraising (47%) and leadership management (43%).



Boards add the most value in financial oversight (78%) and strategic direction (72%), demonstrating their critical role in both stewardship and long-term impact.



CCT Insight: What This Means

Highly engaged boards can help organizations access expertise, expand networks, strengthen fundraising efforts, and navigate complex challenges. In many cases, boards serve as a bridge between nonprofit leadership and the broader community.

This is especially important for organizations facing fundraising challenges, staffing limitations, or growth-related pressures.

Below are just a few engagement examples...

- Create joint leadership/board task forces focused on specific strategic issues, with timelines and deliverables - each board member should be on at least 1 task force
- Request board members to repost your social media posts to their networks each week - this simple tactic can greatly multiply the impact of your message, and it creates added accountability and engagement
- Enlist board members to identify/introduce 3 specific potential new funders/donors every quarter, assign board members specific “give/get” \$\$ targets and assign existing major donors to each board member to serve as the “board steward” for that donor

For organizations seeking to increase impact, improve sustainability, and strengthen long-term resilience, board engagement represents one of the most valuable and underutilized sources of organizational capacity and expertise.

Key Finding #4:

The Capacity Gap and Lack of Infrastructure

Organizations Are Strongest with Programs that Deliver Mission Services and Weakest in Proactively Building Capacity

Program and Service Management was the only function reported as a high strength by over half of the respondents.



Organizations report the greatest confidence in areas directly connected to mission delivery while expressing considerably less confidence in the systems and infrastructure that support long-term sustainability and growth.



CCT Insight: What This Means

Nonprofits excel at delivering mission-driven work. The challenge is building the infrastructure required to sustain and scale that impact. Organizations that invest in fundraising, technology, marketing, human resources, and operational systems may be better positioned for long-term success.

Technology supports efficiency. Marketing drives awareness. Human resources supports talent recruitment and retention. Fundraising fuels growth. Together, these functions create the infrastructure that allows organizations to scale their impact.

Capacity-building isn't separate from mission delivery – it's what allows mission delivery to continue and grow over time.

Not Bigger or Better Funded; Just Better Built

The strongest organizations treat capacity-building as a key part of the work, not a distraction. Leaders should consider 3 related and complementary strategies and approaches to gain advantage.

1) The Timing Advantage

Do not simply react to challenges. Leaders should build capacity ahead of need, continually strengthening leadership, systems, and operations before pressure forces the issue and before it turns into a crisis.

2) The Network Advantage

Don't try to do it all or do it alone. Instead, effective leaders know their priorities and limits and reach outward for help, guidance, and partnership rather than trying to solve every issue on their own. See more under Key Finding #6 (page #20).

3) The Impact Advantage

Build the ability to see and show whether their work is paying off, tracking not just their outputs, but the outcomes those outputs produce, and the longer-term impact they're working toward. See more under Key Finding #5 (page #19).

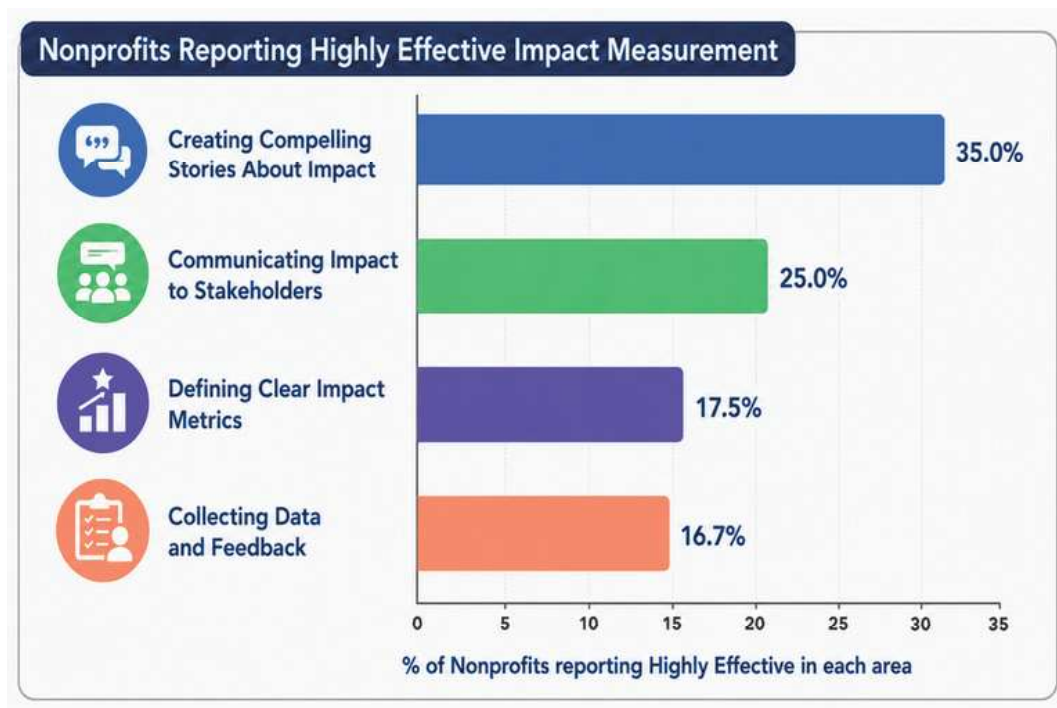
Key Finding #5:

Most Nonprofits Are Not Highly Effective at Communicating Impact

Better definition and collection of metrics and data remain an important opportunity for nonprofits

Survey responses reveal that only 35% of nonprofit leaders are highly effective at crafting compelling stories about their impact. In addition, less than 25% of respondents reported being highly effective with the underlying systems that make those stories credible—defining meaningful outcome metrics, collecting reliable data, and consistently measuring results.

As funders, boards, and community partners increasingly expect evidence of results, investing in impact measurement systems will help organizations strengthen fundraising, improve strategic decision-making, and communicate outcomes with greater credibility.

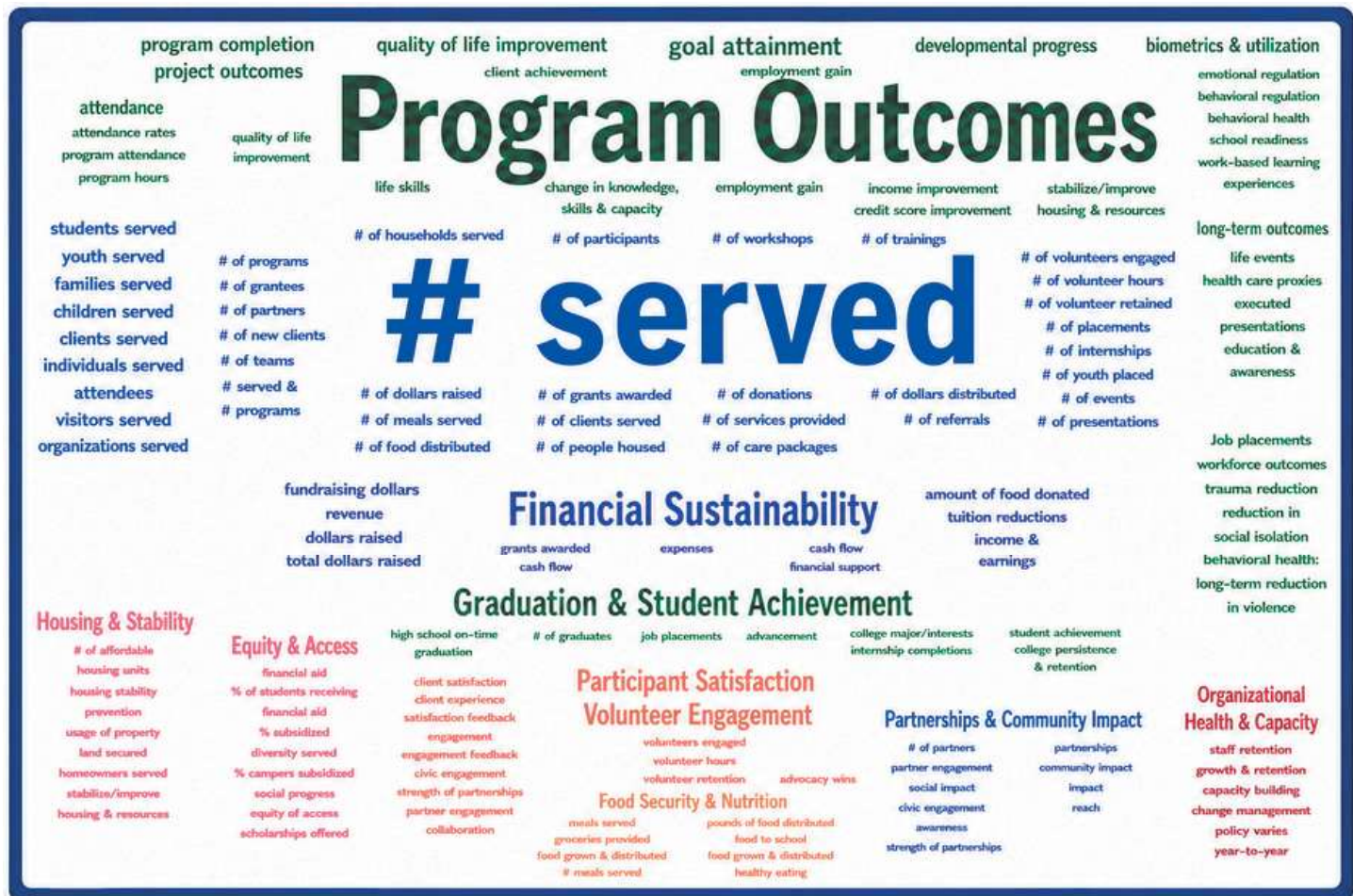


Respondents rated themselves 2X stronger at creating stories of impact vs collecting the data related to impact.

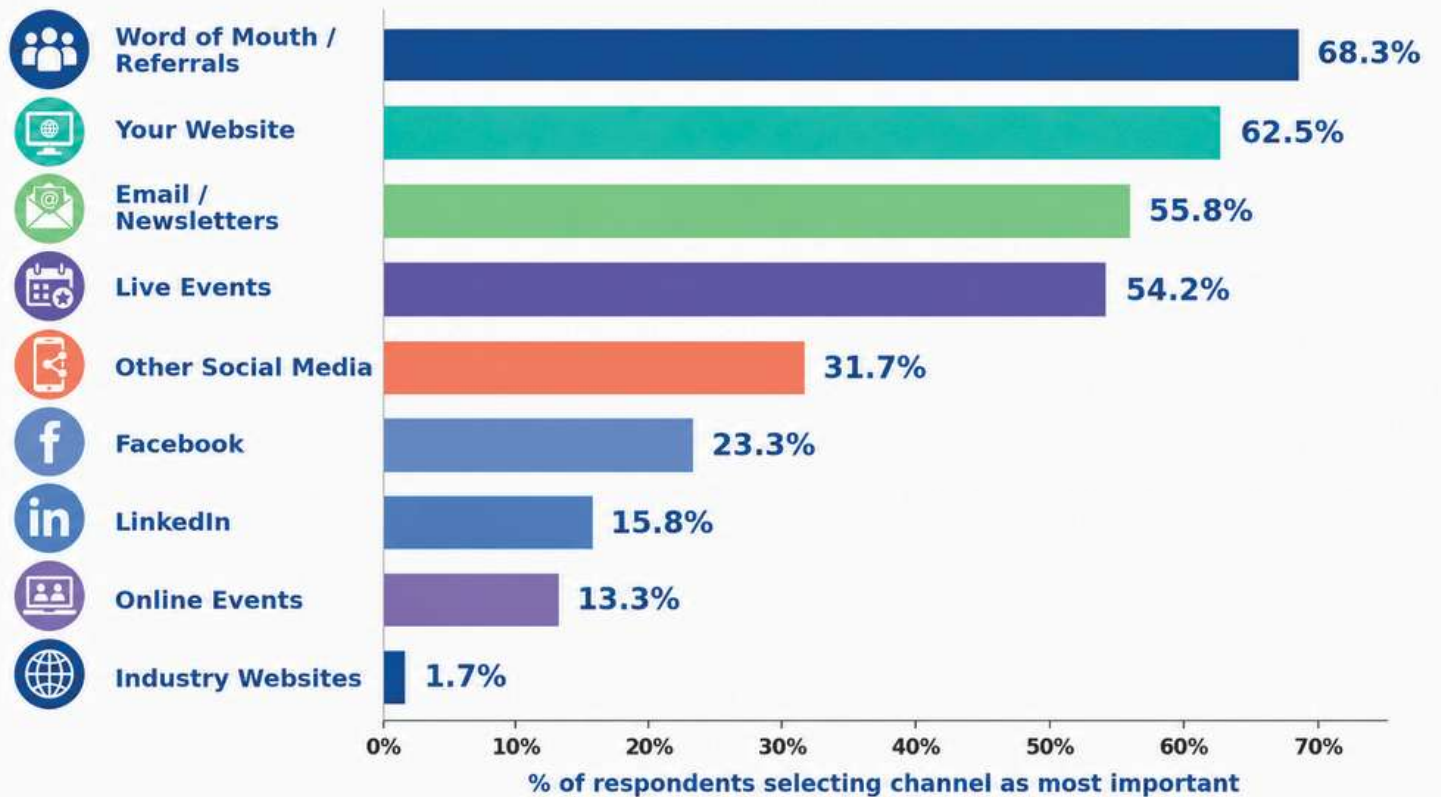
What Leaders Identified as Their Most Important Impact Metrics

Short-term “outputs” were frequently reported as the most important. Overall, the majority of impact metrics reported by leaders fell into three primary categories.

- Outputs - immediate countable products of your work (# served)
- Outcomes - longer-term, more meaningful and lasting change
- Sustainability - financial capacity to continue delivering impact



What Are the Most Important Marketing Channels?





CCT Insight: What This Means

Increasingly, demonstrating impact isn't just good practice; it's what funders, partners, and stakeholders expect before they commit. That expectation has widened. Corporate partners, in particular, increasingly want measurement built into their corporate social responsibility (CSR) and skills-based volunteering programs: it's no longer enough to report that employees gave time; they want to see the change that time produced and feel part of it.

Legislators and grant-making organizations apply the same lens: evidence of outcomes, not just activity, is what earns continued support.

Measurement Doesn't Have to Be Complicated

Nonprofits measure a wide range of things, and at first the variety can make impact measurement feel complicated. But most of what organizations should track falls into two buckets of timeframes, and seeing that structure may make it far less daunting.

Leading “short-term” indicators are the early signals that tell you the engine is working; they're mostly outputs, the immediate, countable products of your work. They answer *how many, how often, how much*: people served, sessions attended, meals distributed, volunteer hours logged, returning participants. Others speak to operational effectiveness and efficiency, and these often do double duty, guiding internal decisions while demonstrating stewardship to funders: how many people you reach for every dollar raised, or how much of your capacity is being used. Most organizations are already generating these numbers, often without tracking them on purpose.

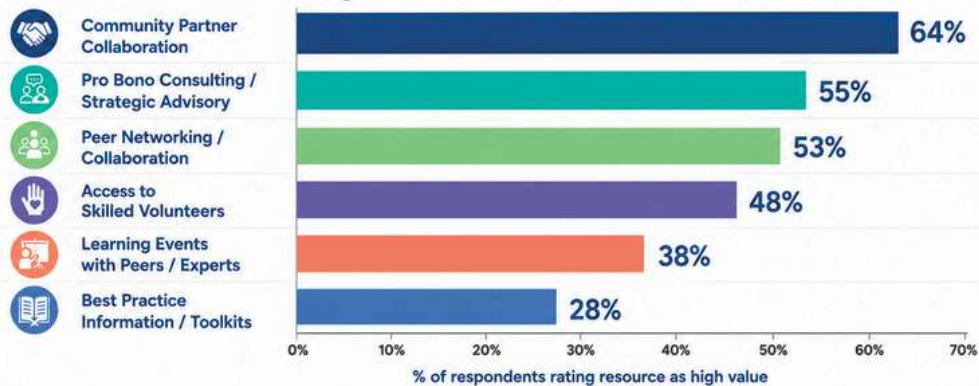
Lagging “long-term” indicators are the changes that show up later—your *outcomes* and, over a longer horizon, your *impact*. Outcomes are the short- to medium-term shifts your outputs produce: gains in knowledge, changes in behavior, improved skills, greater stability. A workshop held is an output; participants leaving able to do something they couldn't before is an outcome. Impact is the broader, long-term change those outcomes contribute to, such as healthier communities or stronger local economies, and it's the hardest to measure, often the combined work of many organizations.

Organizations that can both measure impact and communicate it effectively, with passion, will be better positioned to secure funding, strengthen stakeholder trust, and expand their influence.

Key Finding #6:

External Collaboration and Relationships Highly Valued by Nonprofit Leaders

External Resources Rated as High Value



Most nonprofit leaders rated collaboration with community partners, peers, and advisors as the highest value.



CCT Insight: What This Means

Strong Organizations Build Networks, Not Just Capacity

For effective nonprofit leaders, organizational success is not viewed as an individual effort. It is viewed as a collaborative effort involving a broader network of external supporters, partners, and experts.

As organizations face increasing complexity, leaders should think about two ways to leverage outside resources that strengthen their own operations, extend their reach and help them grow their long-term impact.

1) External Guidance and Expertise

First, leaders can use the resources around them to build internal strength. No leader has every skill the work demands, and respondents consistently valued the people and organizations that help fill those gaps. A leader stuck on a thorny governance problem doesn't have to solve it alone—a peer who's navigated it before, or a pro bono consultant, can shorten the path considerably.

Here, the enhanced capability ends up inside the organization.

2) Complementary Resources and Services

Second, leaders can work across organizational lines. Sometimes that means a formal partnership; sometimes it means recognizing that another organization is simply better positioned to meet a particular need, and connecting the people you serve to them. For example, a youth program that doesn't offer mental-health services can route a family to an organization that does, rather than stretching to build something outside its expertise.

Here, the enhanced capability lives outside the organization, and the strength is knowing when to reach for it instead of building it yourself.

What Leaders Can Do Next

Five Strategies Nonprofit Leaders Can Use to Strengthen Their Organizations

Despite operating in an environment they describe as challenging, uncertain, and stressful, nonprofit leaders remain remarkably optimistic about the future.

The findings in this report highlight both the challenges facing the nonprofit sector and the opportunities available to organizations willing to invest in long-term capacity.

1

Treat Fundraising as an Organizational Capability

Successful fundraising is rarely the responsibility of a single individual. It depends on leadership and organizational alignment, board engagement, donor stewardship, impact communication, targeted appeals, systems and strategic planning.

In addition to communicating impact and engaging the board, discussed earlier in this report, key foundational elements that drive scalable success include

- Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems (reporting, pipeline, tracking)
- Diversification of Revenue Streams (sources, concentration, earned/contributed)
- Communication Infrastructure (systematic outreach, segmentation, messaging)
- Culture of Gratitude and Relationship Stewardship (outreach without an “ask”)

Ultimately, long-term fundraising success relies on deep, meaningful relationships with your donor community and financial supporters. These “organizational relationships” should involve multiple people and multiple layers across your teams, and showcase people you serve.

Organizations that view fundraising as an organization-wide priority and capability rather than a standalone function will be better positioned to achieve sustainable growth.

What Leaders Can Do Next

2

Invest in Foundational Capacity, Not Just Programs

Organizations may be highly effective at delivering services but lack the infrastructure necessary to sustain and scale future growth.

Leaders should evaluate key technology, organizational and strategy areas to start

- Technology Infrastructure/Tools (centralize and modernize)
 - common view, reporting, tracking and communications
- Human Capital (recruit and retain the best)
 - Competitive pay and work/life balance
 - Establish a “good job” culture - half full vs half empty mindset
 - Volunteers - proactively manage program - strong leverage to help growth
- Strategy (systematic decisions)
 - Partnerships (what gaps can be filled)
 - Prioritize, Pilot, Standardize (test and learn)

Capacity-building should not be viewed as a distraction from mission delivery. It is what makes mission delivery possible.

What Leaders Can Do Next

3

Strengthen Board Engagement

The survey consistently demonstrated a connection between board engagement and organizational strength, and as a result, a more optimistic outlook for future success.

Boards contribute far more than governance and oversight. They can expand networks, strengthen fundraising efforts, advocate for the organization, and provide valuable strategic perspective.

As a foundation, confirm mission, impact measurement and strategy alignment across leadership, board, and staff.

In addition to the example ways to engage the board in this Report under Key Finding #3 (page #13), nonprofits should ensure diversity of experience, expertise, tenure and perspectives on the board by adding new and complementary members with different professional and personal backgrounds. New additions and the right mixture will often energize board engagement and contribution.

Board members should be and are typically more than willing to participate in staff and/or program events/roundtables, and their participation energizes both the board members and the stakeholders - board members should be your organization's best advocates!

What Leaders Can Do Next

4

Build Capacity Ahead of Expansion

Growth without capacity creates strain.

Expanding programs, serving more people, or increasing revenue can add complexity faster than an organization's infrastructure can absorb it. Sustainable growth requires the systems, people, processes, and technology to support it.

Leaders should identify where growth will create pressure and strengthen those areas before they become bottlenecks. Priorities may include:

- Technology and data systems
- Clear, repeatable operating processes
- Appropriate staffing and leadership capacity
- Financial planning and reporting
- Defined roles, responsibilities, and decision-making

The goal is not simply to get bigger—it is to build an organization capable of sustaining greater impact.

What Leaders Can Do Next

5

Measure What Matters

Move from counting activity to demonstrating change.

Funders, donors, boards, and community partners increasingly want to understand not only what an organization does, but what changes because of its work.

Strong organizations connect three levels of measurement:

OUTPUTS → OUTCOMES → IMPACT

Outputs show the scale of the work: people served, meals delivered, students participating, volunteer hours, programs completed.

Outcomes show what changed: improved skills, graduation, employment, increased stability, better health, or greater quality of life.

Impact connects those outcomes to the broader, longer-term difference the organization seeks to make.

Organizations do not need dozens of measures. Leaders should identify a small set of meaningful indicators, track them consistently, and combine the data with compelling stories that bring the results to life. Organizations that can clearly demonstrate both the reach and results of their work are better positioned to attract funding, strengthen stakeholder confidence, make better decisions, and expand their impact.

About CCT Boston

For over 35 years, Community Consulting Teams of Boston (CCT) has been amplifying the impact of local nonprofits by providing pro bono strategic consulting performed by teams of experienced professionals.

CCT has successfully worked with hundreds of Greater Boston nonprofit boards/leadership teams across a wide variety of sectors and areas of need, including but not limited to growth/expansion, strategic planning, fundraising capacity, organizational development, mission and impact measurement, board optimization, operational efficiency, financial sustainability and modeling, customer experience assessment, marketing/branding, technology planning, partnership structures, and more.

The Greater Boston Nonprofit Leadership Pulse Survey reflects CCT Boston's commitment to understanding the evolving needs of the nonprofit sector and sharing insights that help organizations make more informed strategic decisions.

Acknowledgments

Community Consulting Teams (CCT Boston) extends its sincere appreciation to the nonprofit leaders who generously shared their time, perspectives, and experiences through this survey.

Their participation made this report possible and contributed to a broader understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing the nonprofit sector today.

By sharing their insights, respondents have helped create a resource that can inform conversations, strengthen organizations, and support the continued growth and impact of nonprofits throughout Greater Boston and beyond.

A special thank-you also goes to CCT partners and longtime nonprofit supporters including The Boston Foundation, Community Action Partners (CAP), Interim Executive Solutions (IES), Social Innovation Forum (SIF), SOAR, and Social Venture Partners (SVP).



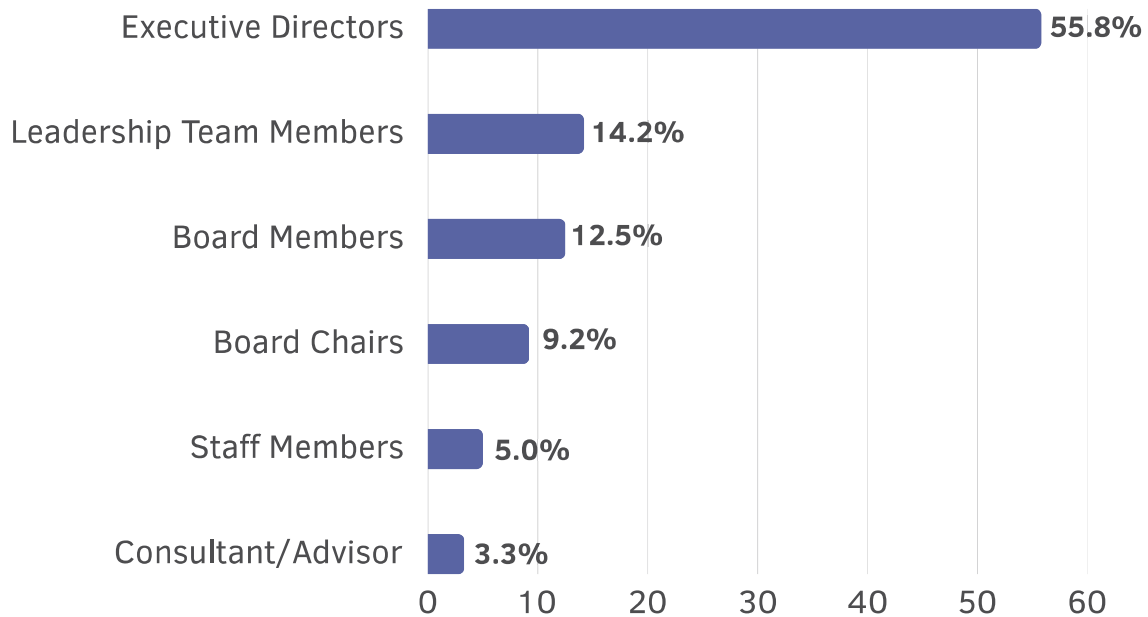
Survey Detail by Question

Appendix



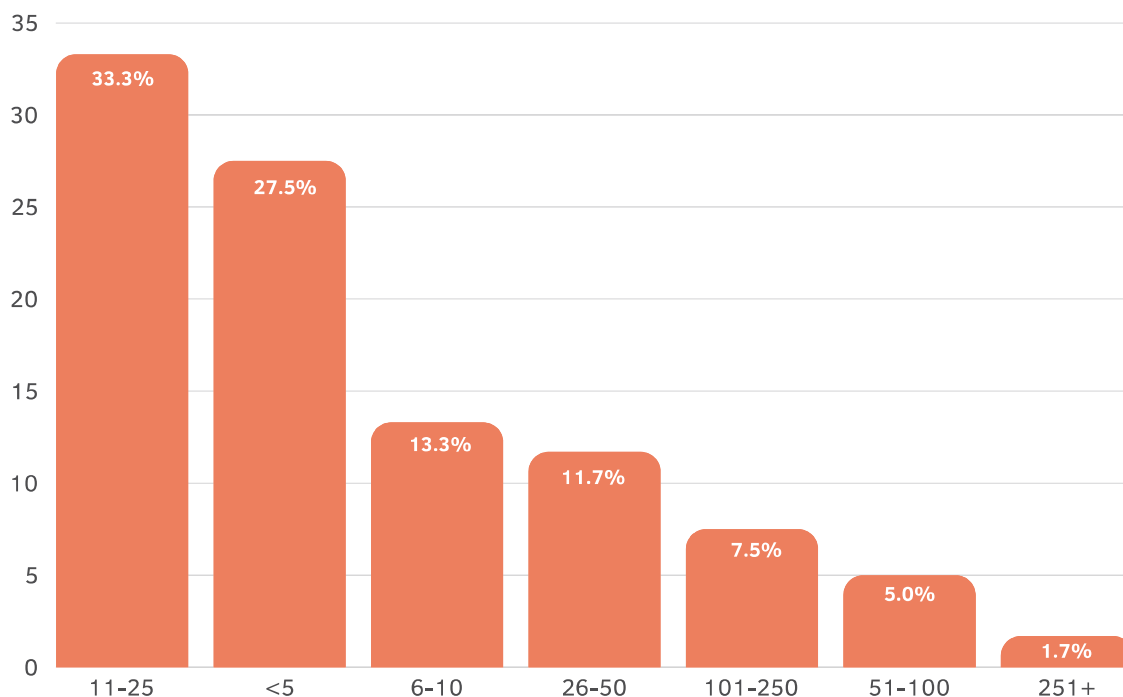
Question 1. (n=120)

What is your role at your nonprofit organization?



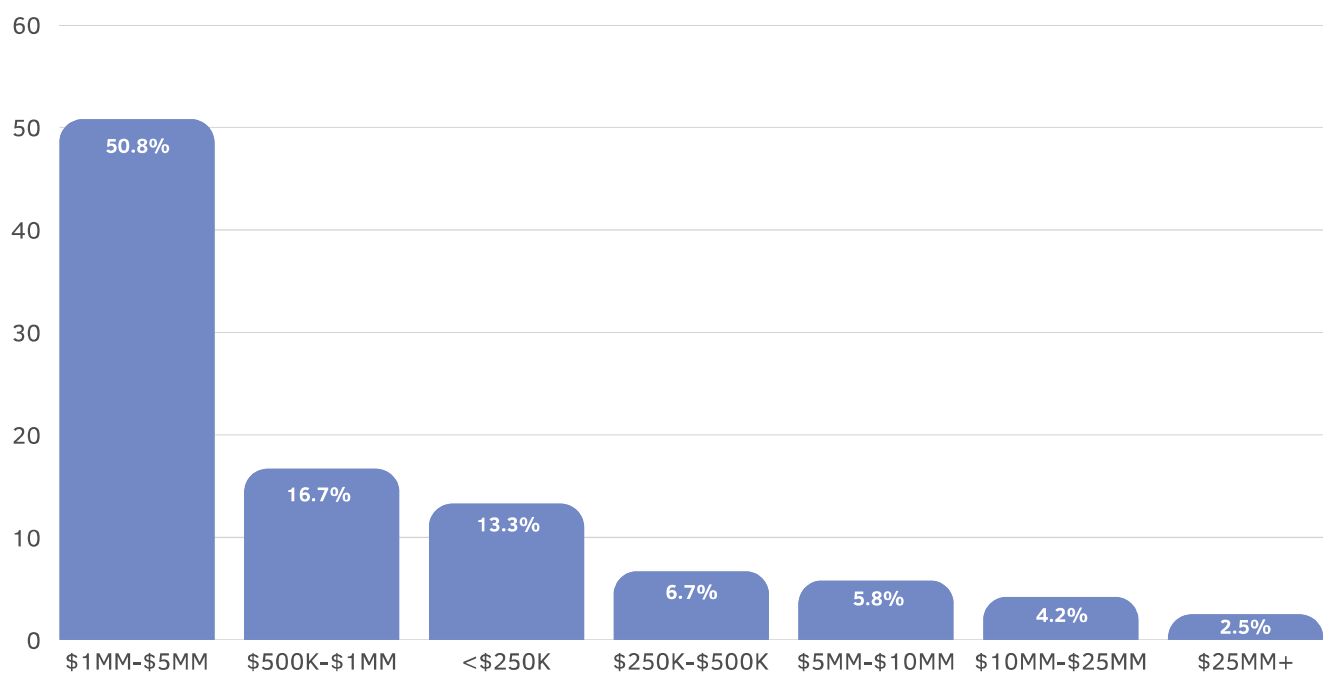
Question 2. (n=120)

How many people work in your organization?

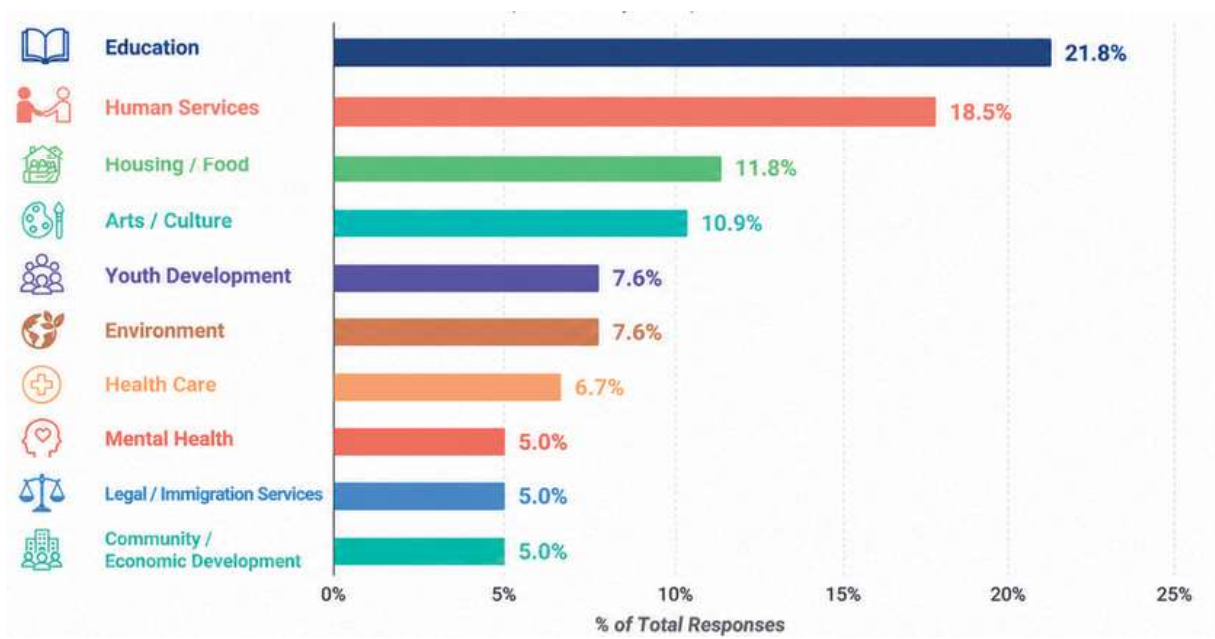




Question 3. (n=120)
What is your current annual operating budget?



Question 4. (n=120)
What is the primary social segment your nonprofit is focused on?





Question 5. (n=120)

How many years has your nonprofit been operating?



Question 6. (n=120)

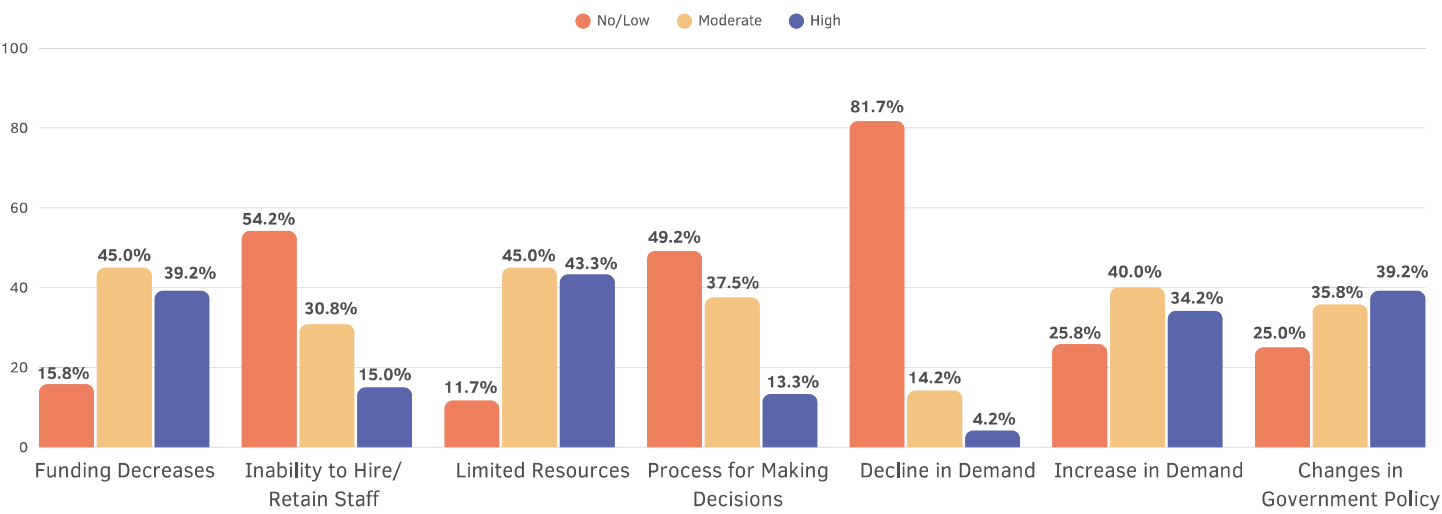
What is the first word that comes to mind when you think about today's nonprofit environment?





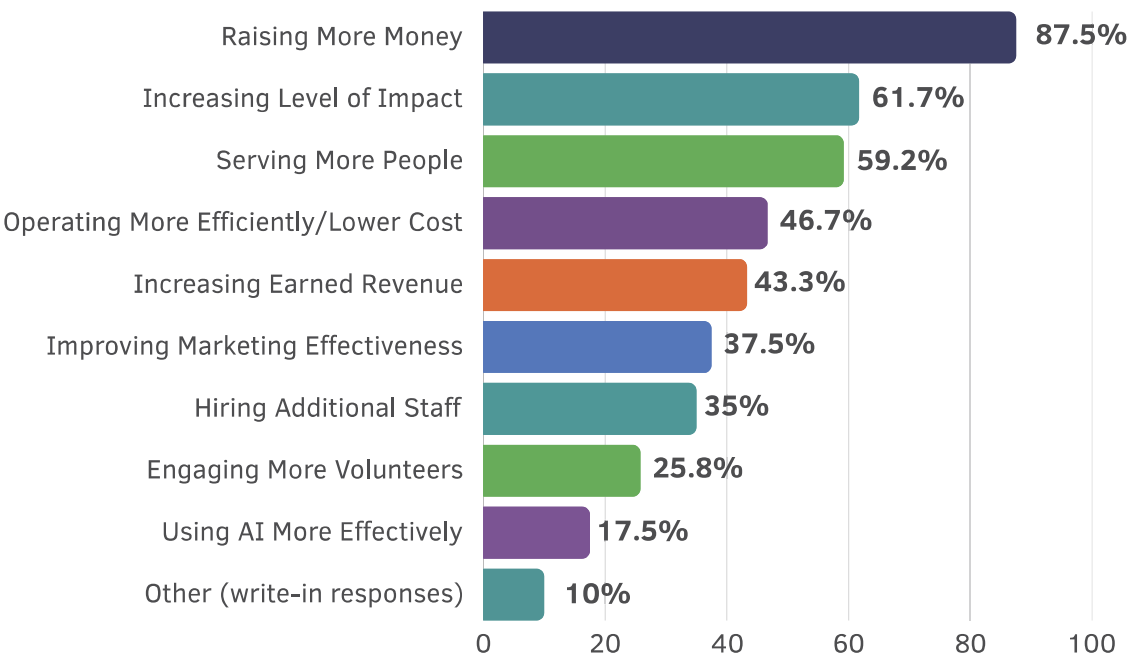
Question 7. (n=120)

Please rate how the following issues currently impact your organization.



Question 8. (n=120)

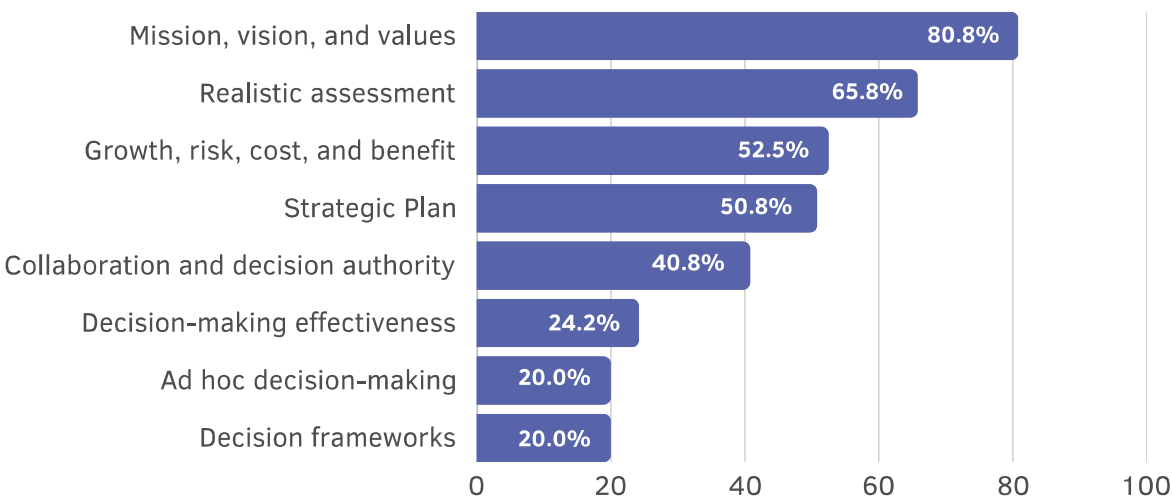
Indicate which of the below are the most critical priorities for your organization this year. (Check all that apply)





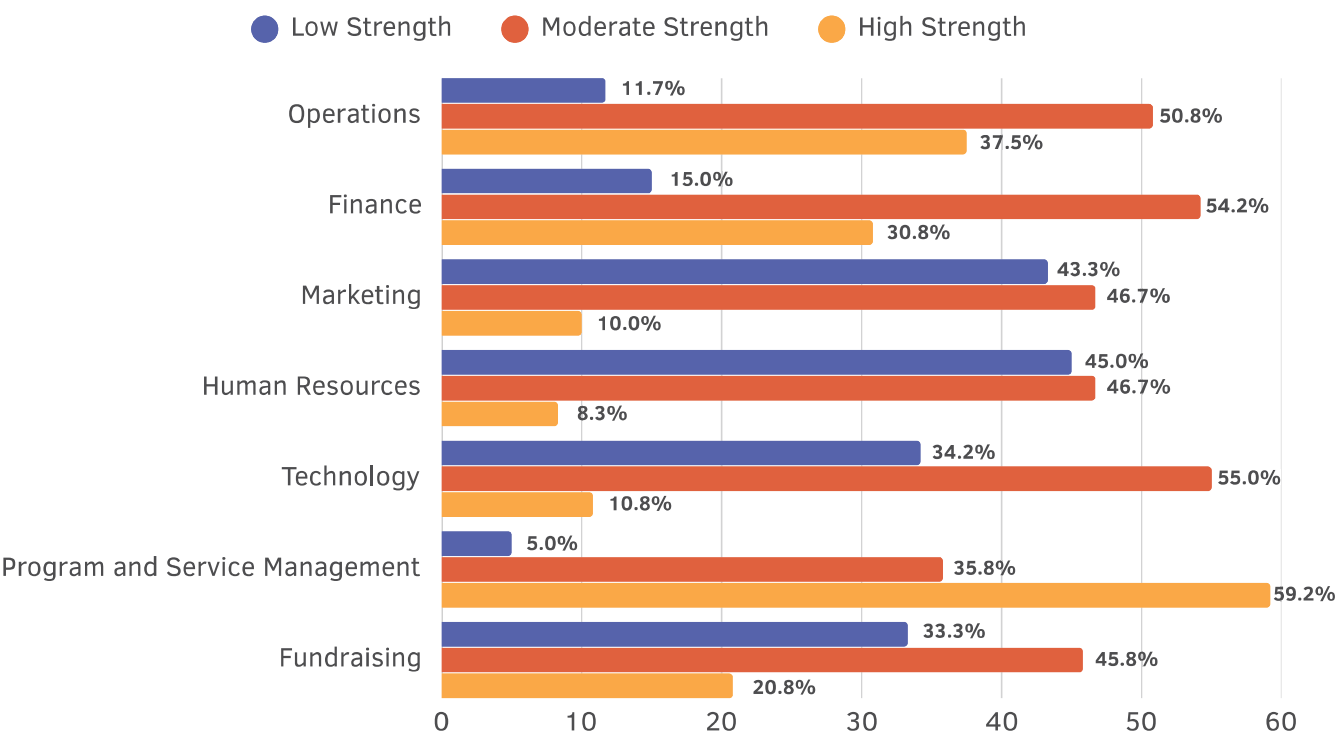
Question 9. (n=120)

Please indicate which statements describe how your organization makes decisions. (Check all that apply)



Question 10. (n=120)

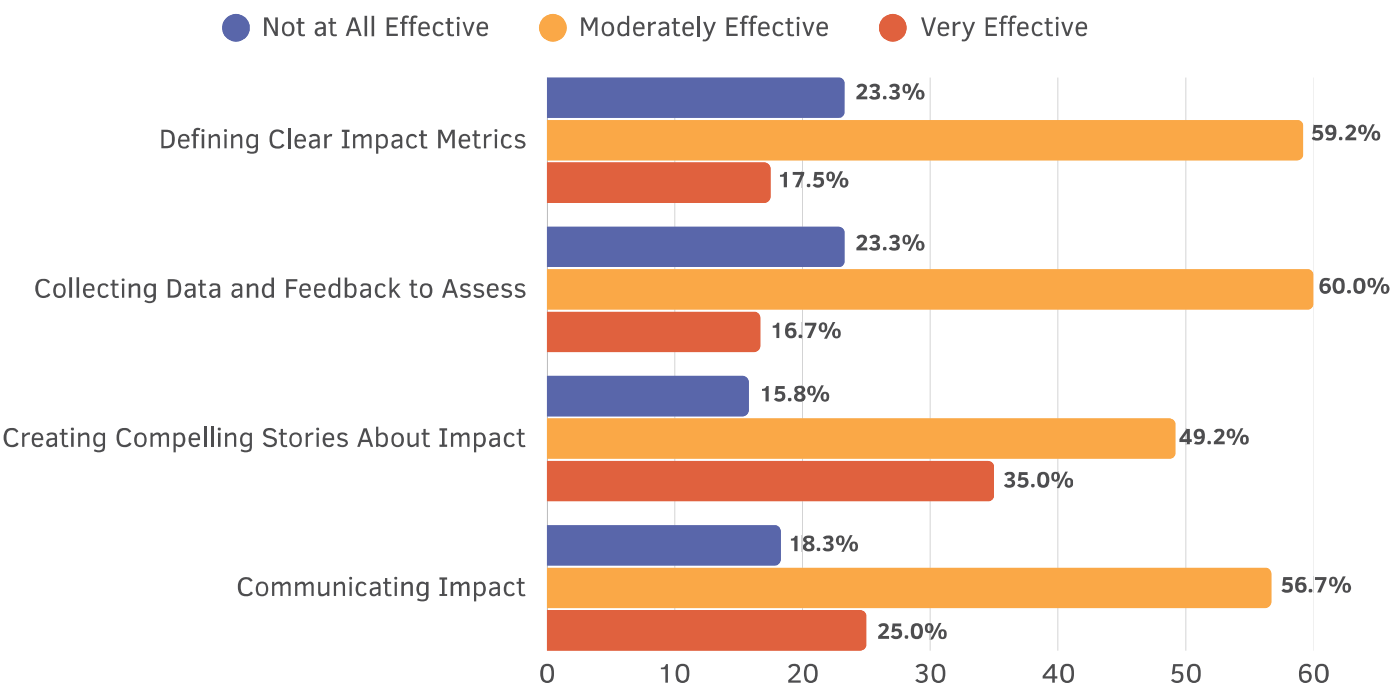
How would you rate your organization's strength in the following functional areas?





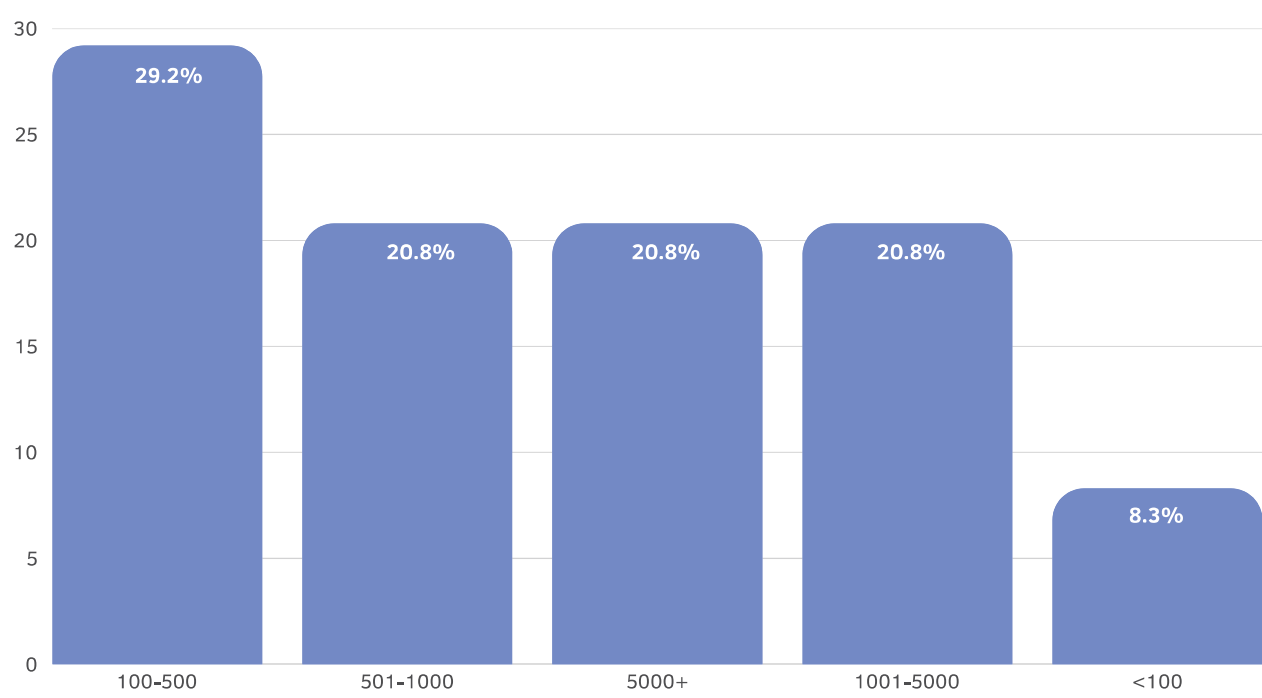
Question 11. (n=120)

How effective is your organization in the following impact measurement-related areas?



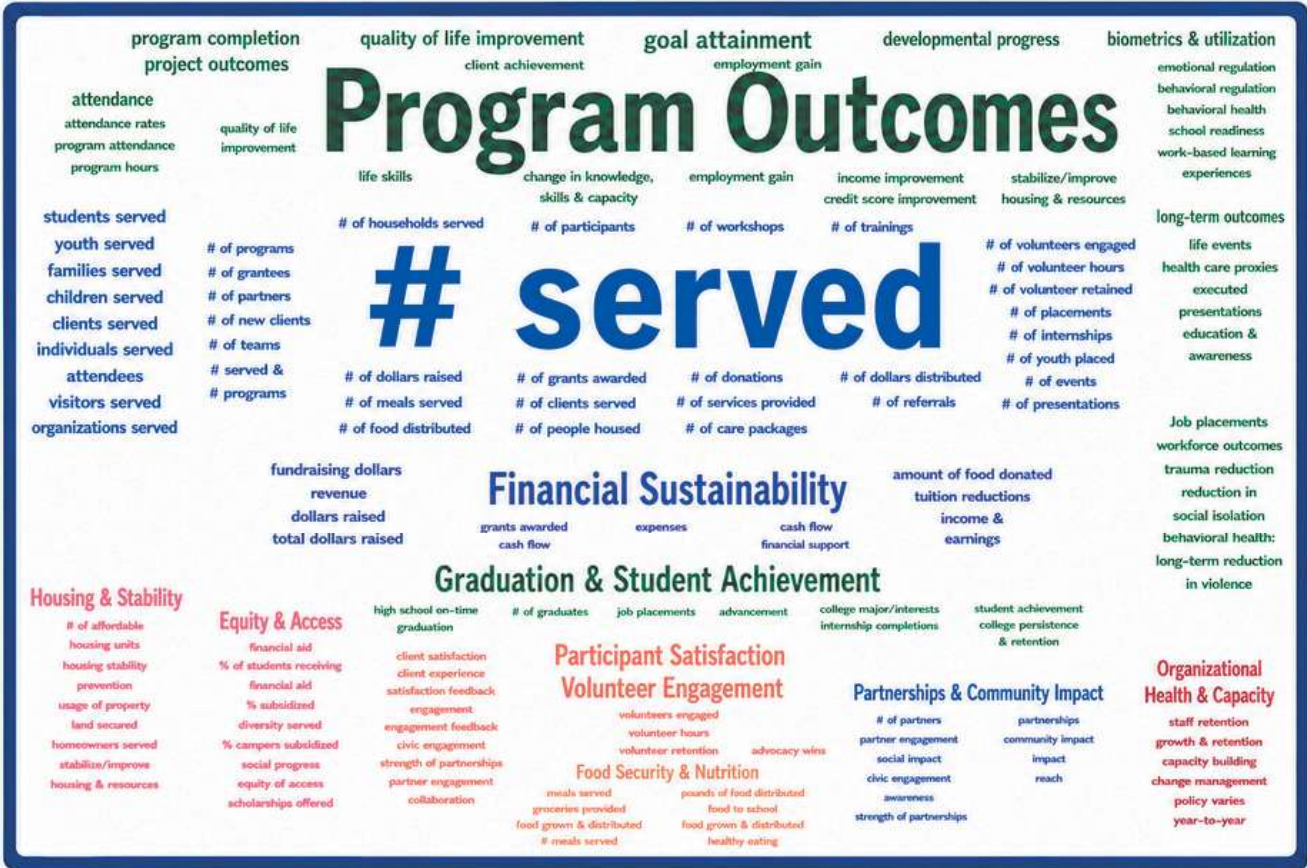
Question 12. (n=120)

Please indicate approximately how many people your nonprofit serves or supports per year.

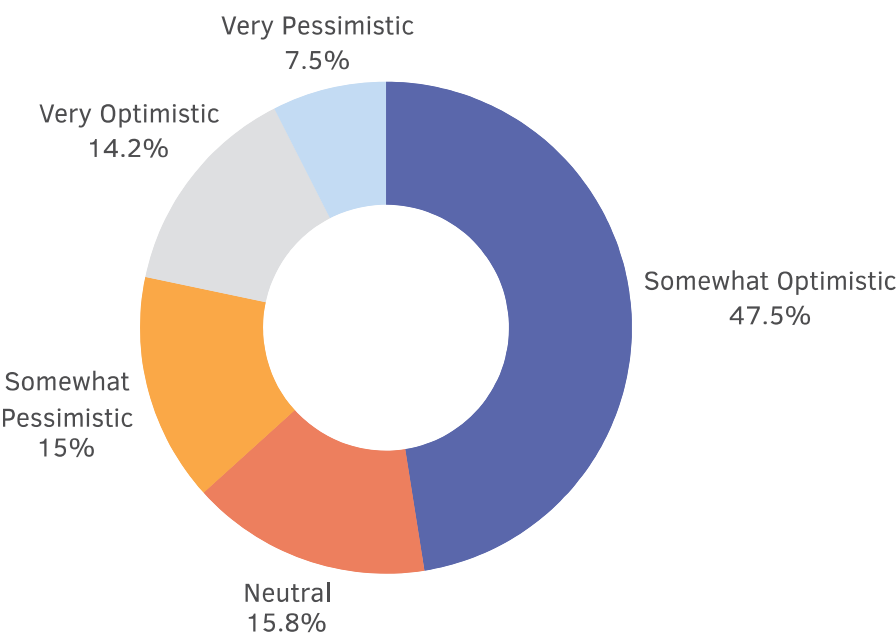




Question 13. (n=120)
What are the two most important impact metrics your organization measures and reports?



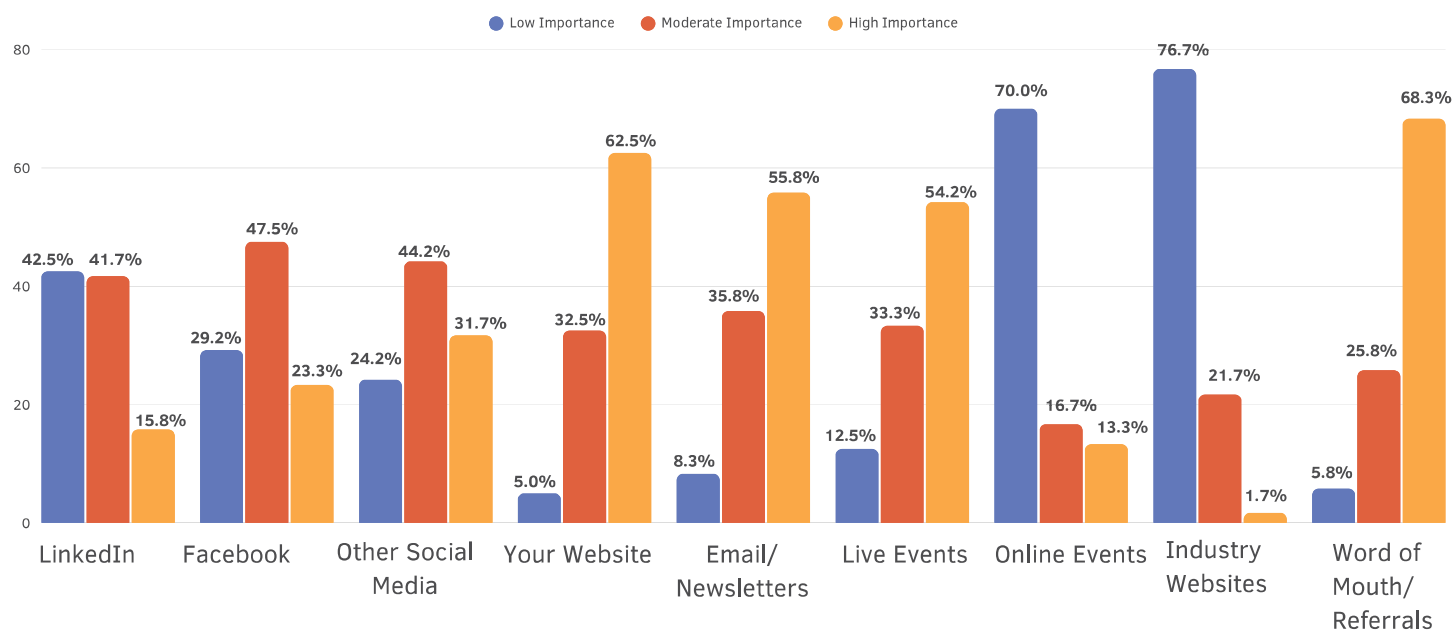
Question 14. (n=120)
What is your outlook for the next three years?





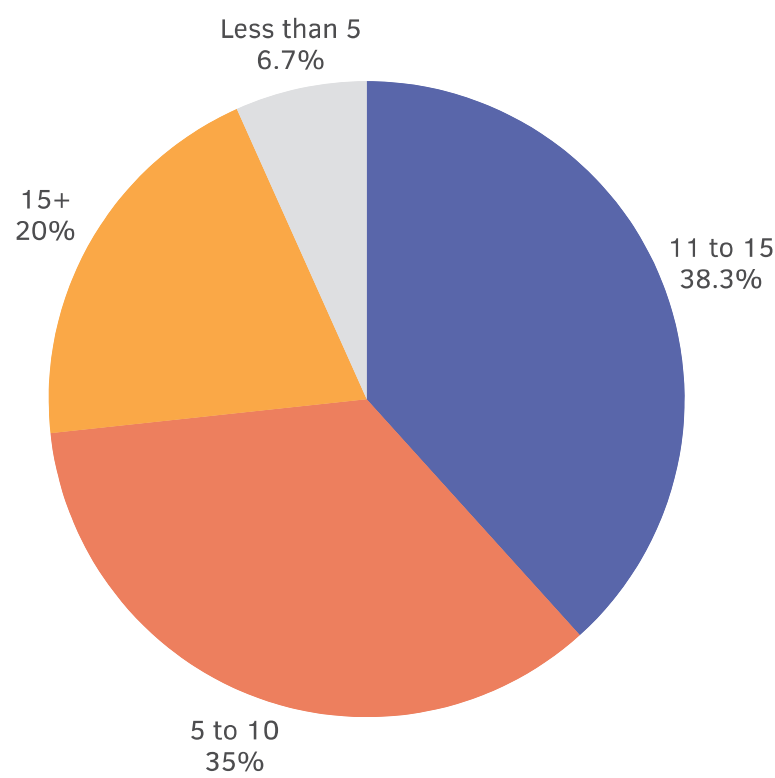
Question 15. (n=120)

Indicate the level of importance of the following channels and programs for promoting your organization.



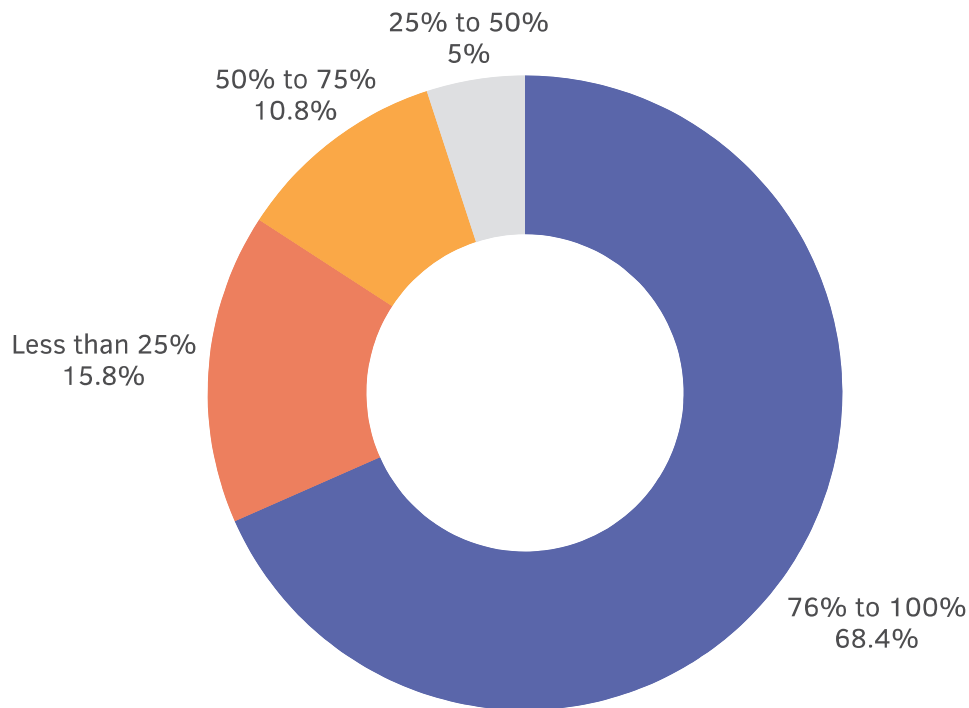
Question 16. (n=120)

How large is your board of directors?



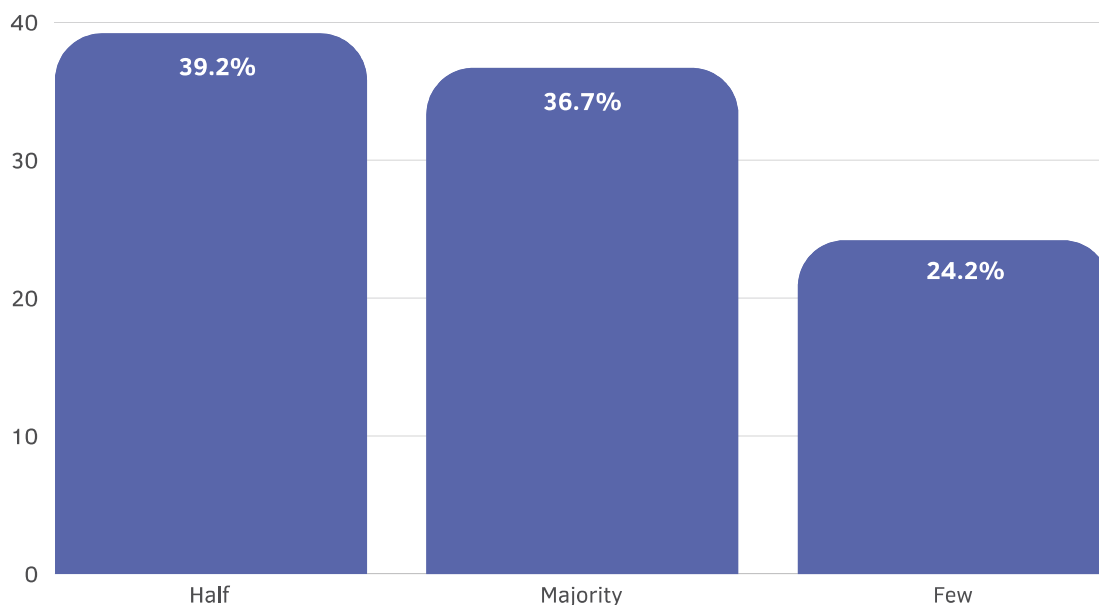
Question 17. (n=120)

What percentage of your board members are external to the organization?



Question 18. (n=120)

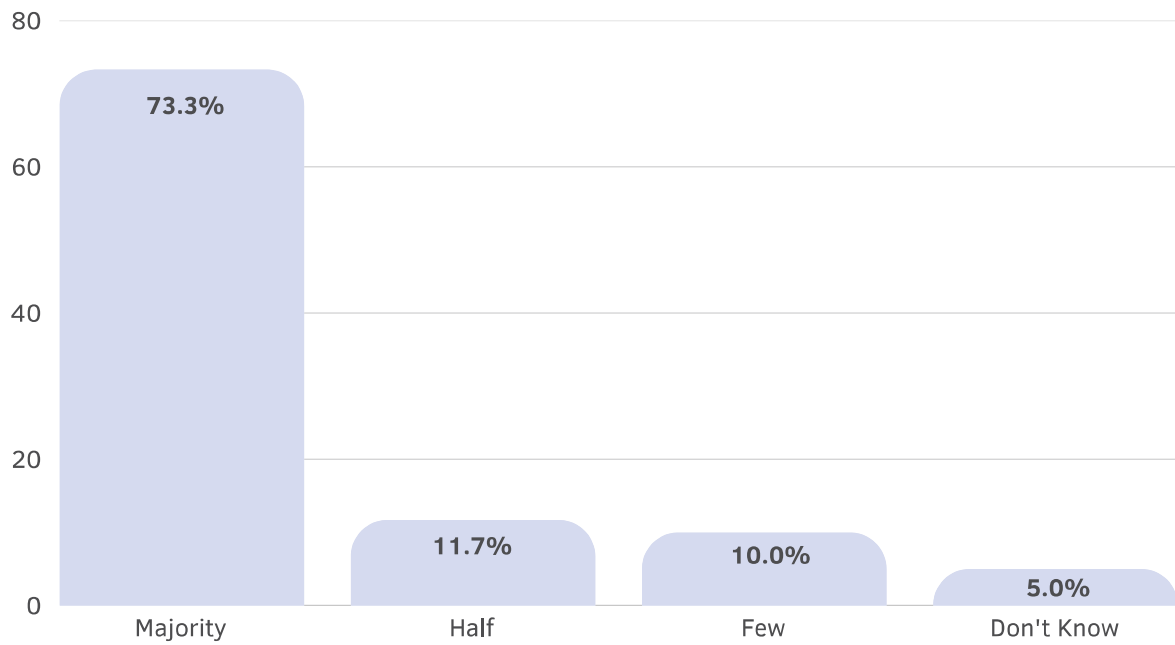
What best describes the portion of your board members that are highly engaged?





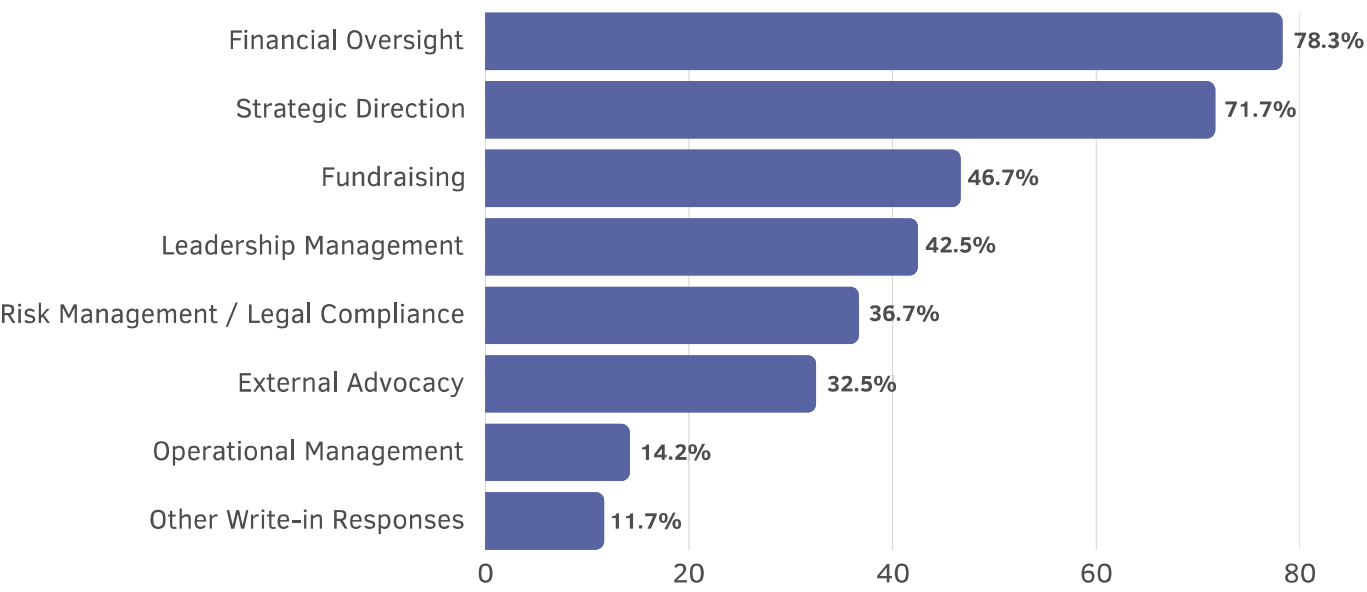
Question 19. (n=120)

What best describes the portion of your board members who donate financially to your organization?



Question 20. (n=120)

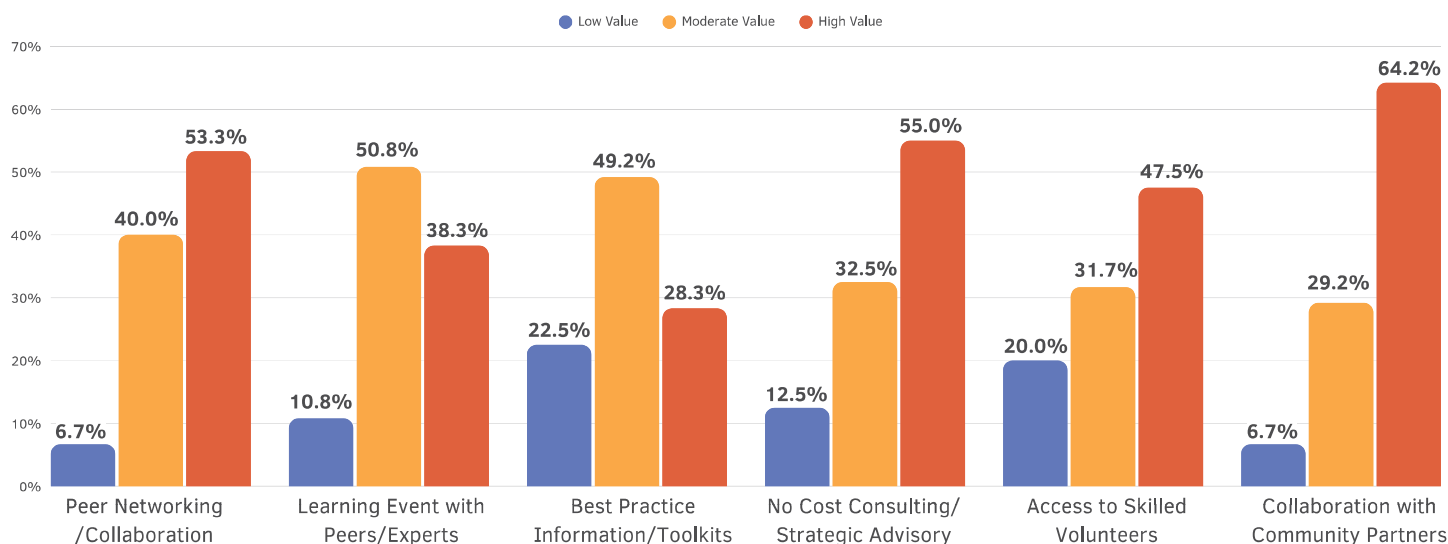
Please indicate the areas in which your Board of Directors currently makes significant contributions. (Check all that apply)





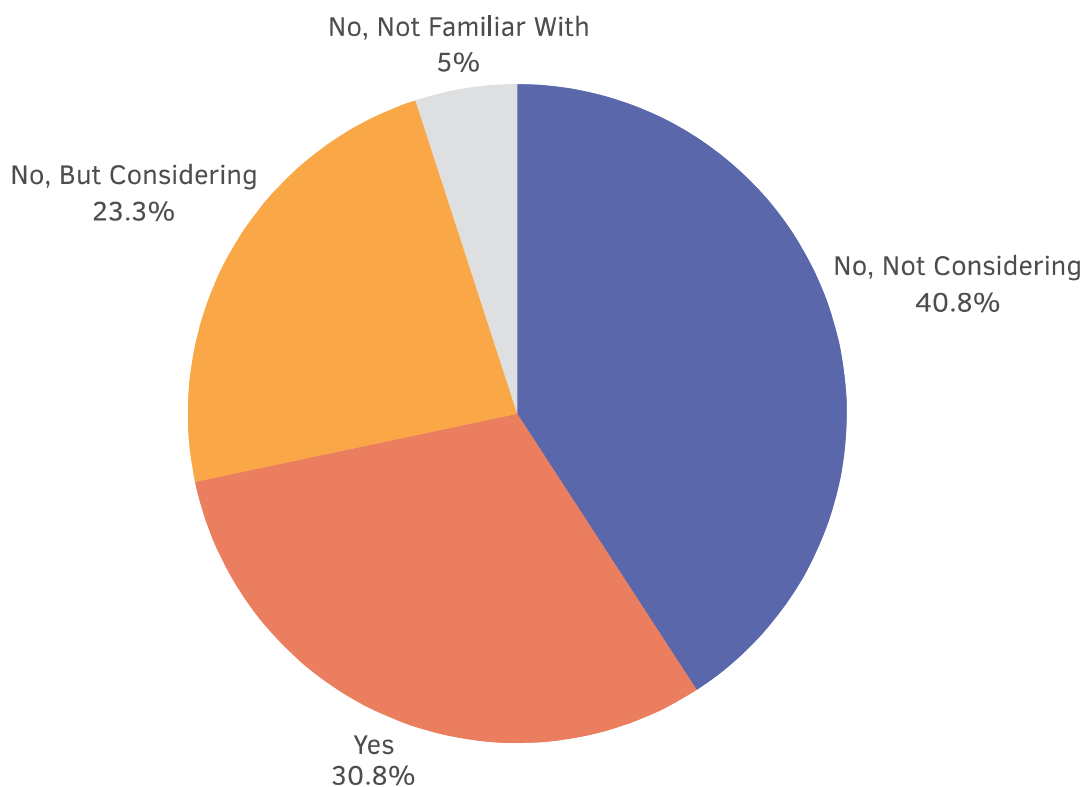
Question 21. (n=120)

How valuable is each of the following types of external support and resources in strengthening your organization?



Question 22. (n=120)

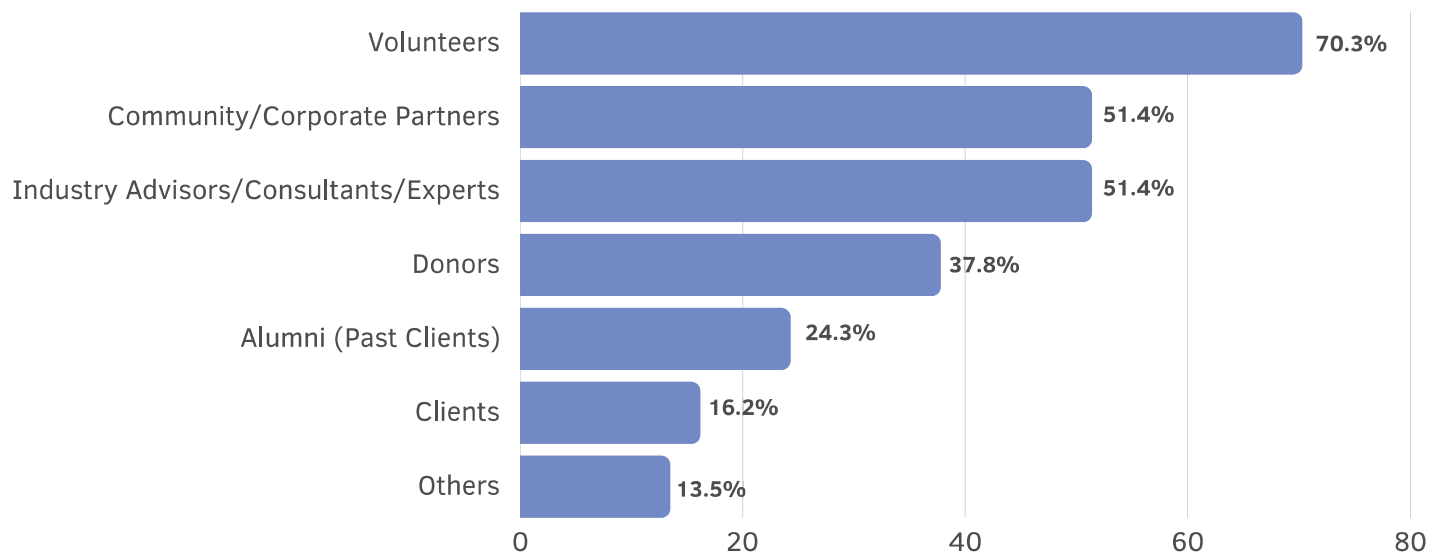
In addition to a Board of Directors, do you have an Advisory Board?





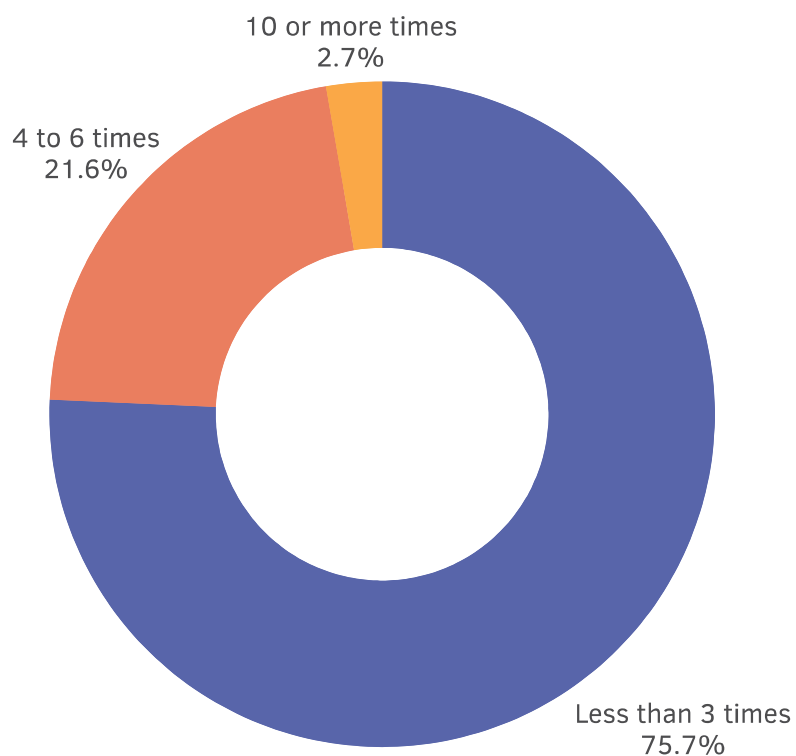
Question 23. (n=37)

Who serves on the Advisory Board? (Check all that apply)



Question 24. (n=37)

How often does the Advisory Board meet per year?



Question 25. (n=37)

***Indicate the primary areas of focus for the Advisory Board.
(Check all that apply)***

