

Leading an NPO

with Head, Heart, and a Balanced Perspective



by Che Petersen

Whether you are a branch manager or the director of an organization, leading a non-profit that cares for the most vulnerable requires both head and heart - it calls for strategy and compassion. As Maya Angelou so wisely observed, “People will never forget how you made them feel,” and this is especially true in people-centred work. Too often, leaders are encouraged to stay detached and make decisions without personal involvement, such as closing branches that are not self-sustaining or cutting projects that do not attract attention. I’ve learned that this doesn’t work when your work is about people and

your mission is built on human dignity. You can’t lead or develop others if you don’t genuinely care about them. It’s not enough to care about the mission - you have to care about the people who make that mission happen. True leadership means balancing kindness with clear thinking and keeping perspective.

Heart alone is not enough. Running a non-profit involves real constraints - regulation, compliance, budgets, resources, and daily operational challenges all require clear thinking. Decisions driven only by emotion can blur judgment and harm the very people we aim to help. Leaders need to make sound, data-informed decisions, supported by strong systems and a reliable technology platform that enables transparency, accountability, and effective use of resources. Every decision should strengthen the organization and its ability to deliver on its mission.

Perspective is just as important. Leaders exist to serve the people who deliver the work and the mission - not the other way around. Non-profit leadership isn’t about control - it’s about stewardship. An organization is not a place to control resources, play favourites, or hide information. Losing perspective can lead to unfairness, mistrust, and putting personal power above the mission. Keeping perspective means that every decision, every policy, and every resource should focus on helping the people and communities the organization exists to serve.

**“Management is doing things right;
leadership is doing the right things.”**

Peter Drucker

The key is balance: think clearly, act with heart, and keep perspective. Use data and planning to guide decisions, but lead with empathy and honesty. Protect resources, be accountable, and stay transparent. Most importantly, never forget the humanity of the people you serve and the teams that carry the work forward. When head, heart, and perspective work together, a non-profit doesn’t just survive - it thrives, bringing hope, nourishment, and dignity to the communities that need it most.

