

Directions

Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators, Spring 2026

**ZERO-WASTE
OPERATIONS**

**BUILDING
A BOARD**

**MANAGING
VOLUNTEERS**

**LEADING
THROUGH
CHANGE**



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The *Directions* journal contains news and trends in the nature & environmental learning center profession, as well as relevant resources and stories of innovative leadership.

If you are part of the nature center profession and wish to receive more resources like *Directions*, see [ANCA membership levels](#).

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Cover photo: Fire pink blooms at Glen Helen Nature Preserve in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

About ANCA

The Association of Nature Center Administrators is a private nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and supporting best leadership and management practices for nature and environmental learning centers. Serving more than 750 members, ANCA is the leader in the profession.

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Don't want to read on a screen? Print this issue — and then pass it onto other nature center staff!

Reflecting on ANCA's Strategic Plan and What Comes Next

Jen Levy, ANCA Executive Director

AS WE ENTER the final year of ANCA's current strategic plan, ANCA 2025, I've been thinking a lot about what it means to "finish" a plan.

Strategic plans aren't static documents. They're a set of shared priorities shaped by our members, tested in real time, and adjusted as the world around us changes. Over the past several years, that world has certainly not stood still. ANCA members are navigating increasing complexity, including climate change, staffing challenges, funding pressures, and evolving community expectations.

Our plan required annual review and reflection to stay relevant. Just as important, it required thoughtful decisions about how to use our limited time, energy, and resources most effectively.

WHAT WE'VE ACCOMPLISHED

At its core, this strategic plan was about strengthening leadership across the nature center field while also expanding ANCA's own organizational capacity.

We have **sustained and strengthened ANCA's organizational capacity and financial stability**. We've made progress in diversifying our funding through corporate partnerships and individual giving. Our Annual Fund continues to grow, and we've become better at telling the story of why this work matters.

We've also invested in our systems, our policies, and our team. As a small, remote staff, clarity and communication matter. Strengthening that foundation helps us better serve our members. It may not be the most visible work, but it is some of the most important.

We **maintained and advanced best practices in diversity, equity, and inclusion**. Virtual programming has allowed us to reach more people more consistently and in ways that fit the realities of work schedules and budgets. But access is not just about format, it's also about how we show up as a community.

We've been more intentional about creating spaces that are welcoming, participatory, and grounded in shared learning. From facilitation practices to affinity

spaces, we continue working to build a community where people feel comfortable contributing, asking questions, and learning in public. This work is ongoing, but it is foundational to who we want to be as an organization.

We also took time early in the plan to **define and adopt ANCA's core values** and have worked to stay grounded in them. Values only matter if they guide how we work, how we make decisions, and how we show up for our members.

Our core values have helped us stay steady through periods of growth, change, and challenge. They shape our approach to leadership development, partnerships, staff culture, and member engagement. Rather than treating them as statements on paper, we've worked to make them part of our daily practice.

We have remained **a leading source of professional development and relevant resources for the field**. ANCA CONNECTS has become a cornerstone of that work. What started as a response to a particular moment — the onset of the pandemic — has grown into an ongoing space where leaders come together to tackle real challenges. Participation has grown significantly over the past few years, but more importantly, the depth of engagement has grown. These are not passive webinars. They are working sessions, honest conversations, and opportunities for leaders to learn from one another.

We've also expanded opportunities specifically for top-level leaders. Programs like Executive Leaders CONNECTS recognize a simple truth: leadership can be isolating, and having a trusted peer network is essential. This year, we also took a big step adding a Virtual Summit to our programs. We heard clearly from members that access was a barrier for many, and we needed to respond.

We have also worked to **refine and strengthen ANCA's voice in advocacy and civic engagement**. We prioritized the issues most relevant to our members and looked for ways to better elevate the work of nature and environmental learning centers across the country.

We've learned a great deal throughout this plan.

- Capacity-building work is harder to measure, but it is deeply impactful. When we support a leader, we are not just helping one person, we are influencing an organization and, ultimately, the communities it serves.
- Peer learning remains one of the most powerful tools for change. The collective wisdom in this network is tremendous. Often, our role is simply to create the space for that knowledge to be shared.
- Accessibility is not optional; it is essential. Offering virtual options is not a temporary solution, it is a long-term commitment to meeting people where they are.
- And leaders need space: space to reflect, to ask hard questions, and to work through challenges with others who understand the complexity of their role.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

We have made meaningful progress, but there is still more work to do. We need to continue finding the balance between expanding programs and maintaining focus as a small team. Growth matters, but so does sustainability.

We need to deepen engagement and move beyond one-time participation toward longer-term connection and learning. We need to keep advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in ways that are practical, relevant, and embedded in everyday work. We need to continue clarifying how we show up, what we stand for, and where we can have the greatest impact. And we need to strengthen our financial resilience to continue this work over the long term.

We are beginning to think about our next strategic plan. Like this one, it will be shaped by our members and grounded in the realities of the field. The challenges are not getting simpler. But neither is the strength of this network.

We are looking forward to what comes next. 🌱

Below: ANCA members in a session at the 2025 ANCA Annual Summit.



ANCA's Current Strategic Plan

Originally implemented in 2018, our current strategic plan — ANCA 2025 — has articulated the long-term direction of the organization. Our guiding priorities are included in our Vision of Success:

1. ANCA will sustain and expand organizational capacity and financial stability to meet its current and future objectives.
2. ANCA will maintain and promote best practices for diversity, equity, and inclusiveness within our membership and the profession.
3. ANCA will continue to recognize and promote its core values while responding & adapting to trends within the dynamic profession.
4. ANCA will be the leading source for professional development tools and relevant resources for leaders and aspiring leaders in the nature and environmental learning center field.
5. ANCA will explore, refine, and amplify its voice in advocacy and civic engagement on issues relevant to our mission and community.

From the ANCA Team: Updates on ANCA Operations

ANCA's [Core Values](#) hold that we are a welcoming community and that we value learning and sharing. With these values in mind, we want to share operational updates to keep you informed about what's happening behind the scenes at ANCA and how we're working to support our mission. We hope this glimpse into our work helps you feel more connected — and maybe even gives you ideas for your own operations.

ANCA Partners with National Audubon Society

Earlier this year, ANCA formalized a new partnership with the National Audubon Society. Through this collaboration, all 32 National Audubon Centers have joined ANCA as Organization Members, strengthening our peer network and connecting their leaders and staff with the broader ANCA community.

Audubon centers serve as important community-based hubs for conservation and education. They protect natural spaces, provide educational programs, and create opportunities for community members to connect around a shared commitment to birds and the natural world.

Through ANCA membership, Audubon Center leaders will gain access to a trusted peer network of nature center professionals, exclusive resources and member communications, mentorship opportunities, and members-only programs and events.

We also recognize the expertise Audubon leaders bring to the broader field, particularly in cultivating community engagement and advancing conservation goals. We look forward to the strengthened collaboration and collective impact this partnership will support.

New ANCA Membership Benefit: Discount on Lawrence Hall of Science's Learning Platform

ANCA is offering a new membership benefit.

This year, the Lawrence Hall of Science (home of the BEETLES project, Reflecting on Practice, and much more) is expanding their professional learning services in an exciting pilot program. They have launched a membership-based, virtual professional learning platform to broaden access to professional learning across the STEM learning field.

ANCA members can now receive a 10% membership discount on the Lawrence's learning platform. A pilot-year Organization Membership gets access to a variety of virtual, synchronous opportunities for all of your staff.

This is an excellent opportunity for ANCA member organizations to offer continuing professional development to their staff at all levels.

[See the Lawrence's Learning Platform here.](#)

ANCA Joins 1% for the Planet as an Official Environmental Partner

ANCA has officially joined 1% for the Planet as a recognized environmental partner.

1% for the Planet is a global movement whose member businesses pledge to donate at least 1% of their annual sales directly to approved environmental nonprofits. Since its founding in 2002, 1% for the Planet has certified over \$846 million in donations to environmental causes. The network consists of more than 6,000 business members and thousands of environmental partners in more than 110 countries.

Environmental partners must be referred by an

existing 1% for the Planet member business — and in ANCA's case, that referral came from Digital Pollen Collective, a firm that brings strategic leadership and modern marketing solutions to nonprofits. ANCA is grateful for Digital Pollen Collective's support and confidence in our mission.

Businesses interested in joining 1% for the Planet and directing a portion of their annual sales to ANCA are encouraged to learn more at onepercentfortheplanet.org.

2026 ANCA Virtual Summit: Impact Report

In January we hosted the 2026 ANCA Virtual Summit, expanding access to high-quality professional development for staff at nature centers and related environmental organizations. The Summit gave professionals across the country the chance to build skills, exchange ideas, and strengthen the work happening in their organizations and communities.

This was the first event of its kind — we designed the Summit in direct response to member feedback calling for professional development that is both accessible and affordable.

While in-person programs remain a cornerstone of ANCA's offerings, some members have limited capacity and funding to travel

for professional development each year. The Virtual Summit created a flexible way for professionals to participate without stepping away from their essential work.

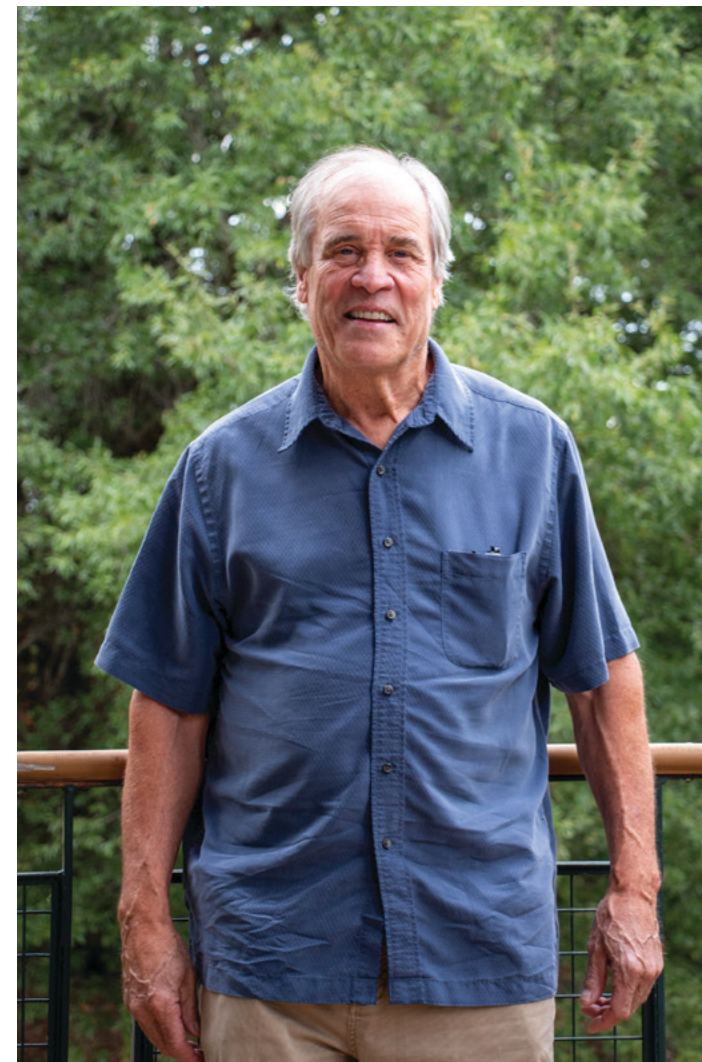
In attendance were 177 professionals who represented 121 organizations across North America. We surveyed Summit participants following the event, and found that:

- 83% of participants say that the Summit strengthened their organization's capacity to fulfill its mission.
- 83% of Summit participants gained new knowledge or skills that they will apply in their work.

This impact will make a major difference at the 121 organizations that attended the Summit. These organizations collectively:

- Serve over 9 million visitors annually, offering outdoor recreation and social connection.
- Provide programs for over 897,000 K-12 students annually, engaging them in environmental education and promoting connection to nature.
- Protect over 94,000 acres of land, supporting healthy landscapes.

Together, these outcomes demonstrate how the Summit contributes to healthier communities and a more sustainable future. 🌱



Planned Giving with ANCA

"I'm making a planned gift to ANCA because of what ANCA meant to my career and life. I attended the first ANCA Summit in 1995 when I was a newly minted nature center director and really felt that I had 'found my people.' This experience and many others confirmed how helpful and important ANCA was to me professionally and personally with many lifelong friends resulting. Giving a planned gift is a small way that I can thank ANCA for all that they did for me and thousands of other environmental leaders."

— Tim Sandsmark, ANCA Donor

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What Might We Stop Doing?

Jen Levy, ANCA Executive Director

During ANCA's 2026 Winter Strategic Planning Retreat, we asked ourselves a simple question: Is there anything we should stop doing?

For organizations like ANCA, growth is often measured by what we add, including new programs, new services, and new initiatives. But sustainability, effectiveness, and long-term impact depend just as much on what we choose to simplify or stop doing. Without intentionally creating space, even the most mission-driven organizations risk becoming overextended and unable to respond to emerging needs.

With that in mind, the ANCA board and staff engaged in a structured conversation that included these questions:

- What are we doing out of habit rather than clear impact?
- Where does the effort required feel out of proportion to the benefit?
- What work may have served ANCA well in the past but feels less essential now?
- What might we stop, pause, or simplify to make room for more important work?
- If we don't stop or change anything, what does that mean for our capacity going forward?

These questions were not about criticism; they were about clarity. Before beginning, we took care to create the right conditions for an honest and productive discussion. Staff needed to feel comfortable speaking openly with the board, and everyone needed to understand that ideas raised in this space were not immediate decisions but inputs for future reflection. Establishing that psychological safety allowed for more candid insights and reduced the natural hesitation that can arise when questioning existing work.

We framed the conversation in three categories: what we might stop entirely, what we might pause, and what we might simplify or redesign. This distinction proved important. Not all work that feels burdensome needs to disappear; sometimes it needs to evolve. In other cases, a temporary pause can cre-

ate the space needed to reassess value and alignment.

This was not ANCA's first experience with this kind of reflection. We had a recent precedent that demonstrated the value of stepping back and reevaluating long-standing practices. After hosting two years of a Virtual Summit during the COVID pandemic, we used our 2022 Winter Retreat to rethink our in-person Summit. That process led to adapting the schedule to include more networking opportunities and to one of our most significant changes: eliminating the Summit Auction.

For many organizations, auctions are a familiar and often expected fundraising tool. For ANCA, however, the conversation revealed that while the auction had historically generated revenue, it also required substantial time, energy, and logistical coordination. More importantly, it did not align as strongly with our goal of fostering meaningful relationships within our community. By letting go of the auction, we redirected our efforts toward more relationship-centered fundraising strategies and approaches that better reflected our values and created deeper, more sustainable engagement.

That experience reinforced a key lesson: stopping something is not a loss when it creates room for something better aligned with mission and impact.

As our 2026 discussion unfolded, another insight became clear. While we identified areas for potential change, we lacked a consistent framework for holistically evaluating our programs and services. Decisions about what to continue, modify, or discontinue require more than instinct; they require shared criteria that balance mission alignment, financial sustainability, and organizational capacity.

In response, we identified the need to develop a tool that could guide these evaluations more systematically. This led us to prioritize creating a Money/Mission/Management Matrix for future decision-making.

This matrix is intended to help us assess each program or activity across three critical dimensions:

- **Mission:** How strongly does this work advance ANCA's core purpose?
- **Money:** What are the true costs and financial contributions associated with this work?
- **Management:** What level of staff time, expertise, and organizational capacity does it require?

By looking at our work through these three lenses simultaneously, we will move beyond anecdotal impressions and toward more transparent, data-informed decision-making. Some programs may score highly in mission impact but require unsustainable levels of staff effort. Others may be financially beneficial but less central to our purpose. Still others may sit comfortably in the middle but present opportunities for simplification or redesign.

The goal of this matrix is not to reduce complex work to a simple formula, but to create a shared language for discussion. It allows board and staff to engage in more objective, constructive conversations about trade-offs, priorities, and ANCA's future direction.

Underlying all of this is a broader mindset shift: the recognition that capacity is finite. Every hour spent, every dollar allocated, and every initiative maintained represents a choice. If we continue to add without subtracting, we risk overloading our systems and people, ultimately undermining the very impact we seek to achieve.

Asking "What might we stop doing?" is therefore not an exercise in reduction for its own sake. It is an act of stewardship. It reflects a commitment to focus, to intentionality, and to aligning our resources with what matters most.

For ANCA, this conversation is ongoing. The retreat marked an important starting point, but the real work lies ahead in gathering data, applying an evaluation framework, and making thoughtful and sometimes difficult decisions. Not every answer will be obvious, and not every change will be easy. But by continuing to ask these questions, we position ourselves to remain responsive, effective, and true to our mission.

In the end, what we choose to stop doing may be just as important as what we choose to begin. 🌱



CONFLUENCE 2026 ANCA Annual Summit August 24-28

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Are We Modeling the World We Say We Want?

Zero Waste as Institutional Climate Leadership at the Environmental Nature Center

Bo Glover, President & CEO, and Lori Whalen, Vice President
Environmental Nature Center in Newport Beach, California

Nature centers across the country spend their days teaching communities about sustainability, conservation, and climate change. We interpret ecosystems, explain environmental science, and encourage people to live more responsibly on the planet. But eventually every environmental organization must confront a difficult question: Are we modeling the world we say we want?

At the Environmental Nature Center (ENC) in Newport Beach, California, that question forced us to look closely at our own operations — what we purchased, what we consumed, and ultimately what we were throwing away. What began as an effort to reduce trash evolved into something deeper: an organizational commitment to reduce consumption, align operations with our mission, and model climate-conscious behavior for the communities we serve.

Today the ENC is proud to be TRUE (Total Resource Use and Efficiency) Platinum Zero Waste certified by Green Business Certification Inc. (GBCI), a recognition of our organization's commitment to sustainable waste management practices. Through these efforts, the ENC now diverts more than 97% of its waste from the landfill, prioritizing waste reduction, resource conservation, and public health benefits.

While we are proud of that achievement, the certification itself was never the ultimate goal; the real objective was cultural change within our organization and within the community that looks to us for environmental leadership.

HOW THE ENC STARTED ITS ZERO-WASTE JOURNEY

The ENC serves tens of thousands of visitors each year, and as our programs expanded so did the amount of waste leaving our facility.

“We began looking closely at what we were sending to landfills,” says Bo Glover, ENC President & CEO. “As an organization dedicated to protecting nature, we had to ask ourselves whether our operational practices were truly aligned with the message we were teaching.”

Like many organizations, our early efforts focused on what appeared to

be environmentally responsible alternatives. We replaced Styrofoam with compostable plates, utensils, and cups, assuming we were making the right choice. Over time we discovered that our region lacked industrial composting facilities capable of processing those materials, meaning the compostable products we had switched to were still ending up in the landfill.

That realization led us to a different conclusion: the real solution was not better disposable products, but fewer disposable products altogether. We began transitioning toward durable, reusable service

ware — cups, plates, utensils, and cloth napkins that could be washed and used again and again.

“That realization forced us to rethink our assumptions,” Glover says. “It pushed us to look more carefully at the full lifecycle of the materials we were using.”

Another important influence came from the ENC's earlier work pursuing LEED Platinum certification for our buildings. That experience demonstrated the value of established third-party programs that identify sustainable strategies and provide guidance on achieving best practices.

“Going through the LEED process was transformative,” Glover explains. “It introduced strategies we hadn't considered and helped guide us toward better decisions.”

When we later discovered the TRUE Zero Waste certification program, we saw an opportunity to apply that same kind of structured thinking to our operational systems. For Lori Whalen, who has worked at the ENC for more than two decades, the shift reflected a long evolution in thinking.

“Over time there was a cumulative change in our outlook and procedures,” Whalen says. “Eventually it became completely clear that operating conventionally was inconsistent with our mission.”

SEEING THE PROBLEM CLEARLY

One of the most powerful moments in the process occurred during the waste audit required as part of the TRUE Zero Waste certification process. Staff collected weeks of accumulated trash and sorted the materials across the parking lot to better understand what the organization was discarding. The visual impact of seeing that volume of waste in one place was profound.

“It was shocking,” Whalen says. “One of the things we found was an enormous number of disposable latex gloves. We used them every time we handled certain animals during programs, and we were also using them for cleaning and food preparation.”

The solution was simple but impactful: switching to reusable rubber gloves that could be sterilized and reused repeatedly.

“That one change alone dramatically reduced our waste,” Glover says.

The audit also revealed a broader lesson about the scale of everyday habits.

“When you throw something away one item at a time, it doesn't seem significant,” Glover explains. “But when you see weeks of accumulated waste laid out in front of you, the scale becomes undeniable.”

The experience reframed how the organization thought about daily operational choices and encouraged a much deeper evaluation of consumption patterns.

ZERO-WASTE IS ABOUT CARBON

Zero-waste is often misunderstood as a recycling initiative, but in reality, it is a climate strategy. The majority of a product's carbon footprint occurs long before it reaches a trash can — during extraction, manufacturing, and transportation. By reducing consumption and designing operations around reuse, composting, and durable systems, organizations reduce greenhouse gas emissions at their source.

As Whalen puts it, “Zero-waste is not primarily about trash. It's about carbon.” At its core, zero-waste is about reducing consumption and redesigning systems around reuse rather than disposal. If we are serious about climate education, we must also be serious about consumption.

Nature centers frequently teach about climate change, but the connection between everyday consumption and global environmental systems can feel abstract.

“One of our responsibilities is helping people make that connection,” Glover says. “Climate change can feel distant, but waste is something people can see — plastic washing up on beaches or piling up in landfills. Starting with what people can see makes it easier to connect behavior with larger environmental impacts.”

Reducing consumption therefore becomes part of environmental education itself.

“If we don't adopt more sustainable ways of living,” Whalen says, “we won't have the ecosystems we're trying to protect.”



Left: The authors sort through the ENC's trash as part of the TRUE Zero Waste certification waste audit.

MODELING THE BEHAVIOR WE TEACH

Nature centers occupy a unique position in their communities. Visitors come not only to learn about nature but also to experience what environmentally responsible living looks like in practice. Operational decisions therefore become educational tools.

“What message do we send if we teach sustainability but don’t model it ourselves?” Whalen asks.

At the ENC this philosophy extends beyond staff operations to visitors as well. Guests are expected to follow our zero-waste policies, including restrictions on single-use plastics.

“There was a point when we realized we couldn’t just suggest these practices — we had to require them,” Glover says. “If we allow behaviors that contradict our mission, we undermine the example we’re trying to set.”

Occasionally that stance creates friction, but those situations are rare and the overall response has been overwhelmingly positive.

“One misconception is that people will be upset by sustainability requirements,” Glover says. “In reality, most people appreciate the opportunity to participate in something positive.”

Whalen recently saw this firsthand when she brought reusable zero-waste materials to a local Native Plant Society meeting.

“People were incredibly grateful,” she says.

“They were excited to have the chance not to create trash.”

The ENC also had the opportunity to model this approach directly for our professional peers when we hosted the 2025 ANCA Annual Summit. Over the course of several days — through multiple lunches, dinners, and evening gatherings — not a single disposable plate, utensil, cup, or napkin was used. More than 140 leaders in our profession experienced firsthand how large gatherings can operate entirely with reusable systems, demonstrating that zero-waste operations are not theoretical — they are entirely achievable.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

The purpose of a zero-waste policy extends beyond the boundaries of a single facility. Operational decisions influence not only staff and visitors but also vendors, caterers, and suppliers. When organizations set clear expectations about packaging, materials, and purchasing practices, those expectations ripple outward through the local business community.

Caterers adjust how they prepare and transport food. Vendors reconsider how products are packaged. Suppliers begin offering reusable or lower-waste alternatives. In this way, a single organization’s operational standards can influence an entire network of businesses.

Some of the most visible ripple effects at the ENC occur in our Nature Preschool program, where students are not allowed to bring single-use plastics or disposable water bottles to school. At the beginning of each year teachers remind parents about the policy, but the most effective messengers often turn out to be the children themselves.

“It’s the kids calling their parents out,” Glover says. “They’re the ones insisting on reusable containers.”

Change often begins through modeling everyday choices. When people see alternatives demonstrated in real settings, it becomes easier for them to adopt those practices themselves.

ADVICE TO THE FIELD

For organizations considering zero-waste initiatives, Glover’s advice is simple: start. Begin by taking an honest look at your operations and conducting a waste audit. Examining what you purchase and what you throw away is often the first step toward meaningful change.

Third-party certification programs such as TRUE Zero Waste can be incredibly valuable because they provide structure and external accountability. They also introduce organizations to best practices they might not have been aware of.

Beyond certification, small operational shifts can also

Left: At the entrance of the ENC, a sign explains the organization’s Zero Waste Policy.



make a meaningful difference. Printing on both sides of paper when printing is necessary, reducing disposable purchasing, and collecting batteries or electronic waste for proper recycling are all simple steps that can begin shifting organizational habits. The key is committing to continuous improvement.

“This is an ongoing process,” Whalen says. “Even after certification we’re constantly looking for ways to do better as technologies evolve and better practices emerge.”

BEYOND SUSTAINABILITY

For the ENC, zero-waste is not the final destination but part of a broader shift toward regenerative thinking. Sustainability often focuses on reducing harm — using fewer resources and producing less waste — while regenerative approaches go further by asking how our systems can actively restore ecological balance and strengthen our relationship with the natural world.

As Potawatomi botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in Braiding Sweetgrass, “All flourishing is mutual.” The health of human communities and natural ecosystems are inseparable, and the goal is not simply to minimize our impact but to build relationships of reciprocity with the Earth.

Nature centers are uniquely positioned to model this shift. We are not only educators but also living laboratories of environmental practice.

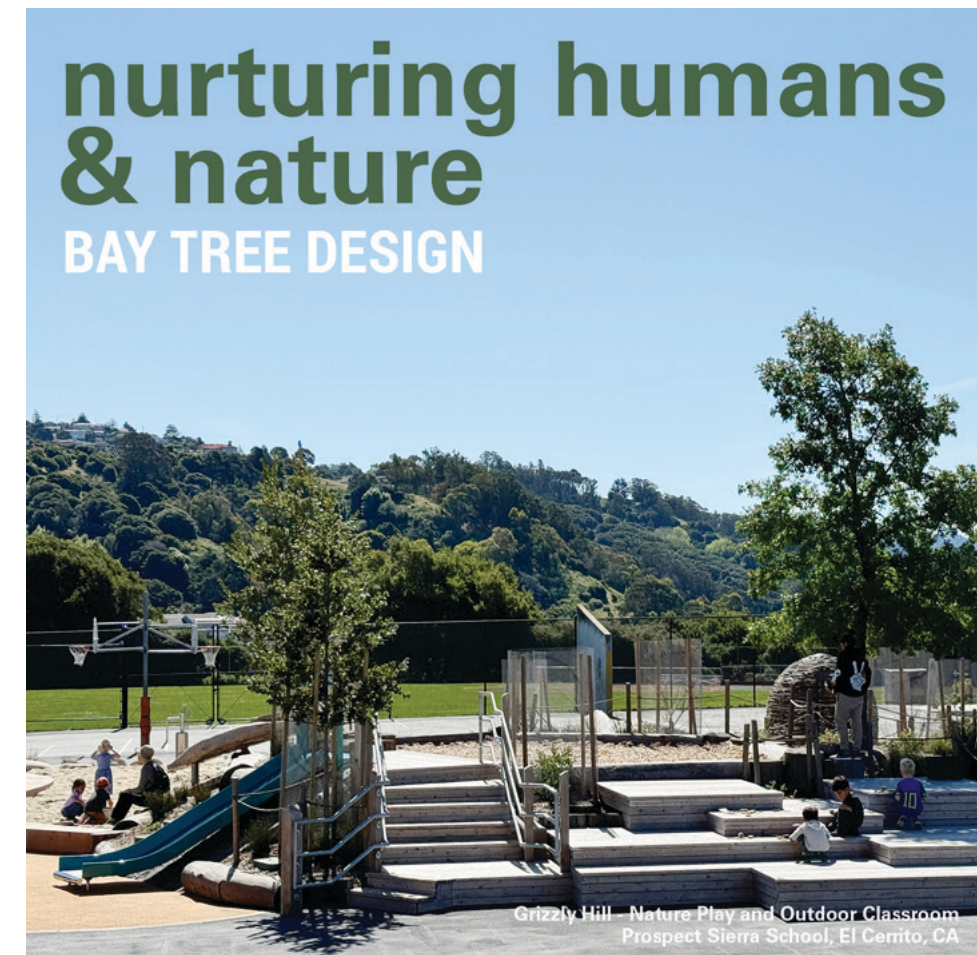
“Our communities look to us for leadership,” Glover says. “If we want people to live more sustainably, we have to show them what that looks like.”

The environmental challenges facing our planet — from climate change to plastic pollution — are

no longer distant concerns. They are unfolding realities shaping the world our communities will inherit. Nature centers therefore have a choice: we can continue teaching about sustainability while operating within the same systems of consumption that created these challenges, or we can align our operations with our values and model the future we are asking others to create.

If the nature center community embraces that responsibility, the ripple effects could extend far beyond our campuses — shaping how communities think about consumption, climate responsibility, and our relationship with the living world.

Advertisements



Volunteers: Your Most Valuable Asset

Leanne Welch, Manager
Gumbo Limbo Nature Center in Boca Raton, Florida

VOLUNTEERS ARE THE LIFE BLOOD AND BACKBONE OF MANY NATURE CENTERS. At Gumbo Limbo Nature Center, our volunteers come from all walks of life, and range in age from 16 to 92. Currently we have 185 active volunteers, working an average of 1,500 hours each month. We are a mid-size, urban nature center on 20 acres in Boca Raton, Florida, and host over 250,000 visitors each year.

Our volunteers perform all our front-facing and some of our behind-the-scenes activities. This includes greeting our visitors at the front desk, acting as docents at our aquariums and exhibits, assisting with field trips, public programs, special events, and tours, and assisting with the care of our many animals.

Like many nature centers, we simply couldn't have nearly the impact we do without our volunteers. So, how do we continue to successfully recruit, train, reward, manage, and keep these generous unpaid employees? How can we keep attracting the next generation to volunteer? And what can we do to make sure our older volunteers feel comfortable and can keep coming in?

RECRUITMENT

With every new volunteer, I like to ask them how they heard about us. There is no one right answer! We've heard everything from word of mouth to social media. Last summer, nearly every high school volunteer found out about us because someone told them about our Instagram page announcement. We have rack cards in the nature center, our newsletter mentions volunteer opportunities, we make sure that every public program includes a quick plug about our volunteer program, and the volunteer information is [front and center on our website](#).

All interested individuals are referred to our volunteer coordinator for an interview. Gumbo Limbo is very fortunate to have a full-time dedicated volunteer coordinator, as supervising nearly 200 unpaid employees is definitely a full-time job!

Only about 30% of individuals expressing an interest take the next step to complete an application and self-schedule an interview. During an interview, we are looking for their motivation; we ask a lot of our volunteers, so we want to make sure they know what they are getting into. We like to set expectations from that very first interaction – we are looking for a long-term relationship with our volunteers. Ideally a volunteer will work at least one 4-hour shift a week for a minimum of six months (and hopefully much longer). We are looking for someone who is motivated to give back, and someone who is excited to be a part of our team.

BACKGROUND CHECKS

After an interview, successful candidates will be moved on to the next phase of the process, a level 2 background check in the Volunteer and Employee Criminal History System administered by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. This can be expensive and results can take a couple of weeks, but as any one of our volunteers could be in a situation where they are alone with a child or vulnerable person, it is important that we do a thorough job to eliminate potential risks. Gumbo Limbo is a government facility, and part of the City of Boca Raton. The City's HR coordinator is the only one who sees the results of the background check and makes the determination regarding eligibility. For your nature center, it may be someone else.

ORIENTATION AND ONBOARDING

Successful applicants are then scheduled for one of our monthly orientation sessions. About 80% of the candidates we interview make it to an orientation. We try to vary when these are held, offering a Saturday morning session one month, and a weeknight evening session on another month for example. The goal is to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to attend a session. Orientation is about 3 hours and includes an overview of Gumbo Limbo, details of policies and



A volunteer leads a tour at Gumbo Limbo Nature Center.

procedures, and a tour of the property and aquariums.

Nearly 80% of candidates who complete orientation decide to continue as volunteers. For a new volunteer's first 50 hours, they are considered to be Level 1 or "in training" and are usually paired with an experienced volunteer or mentor. Our newest volunteers can work at the Welcome Desk, as an Aquarium Guide, as a Field trip/ Camp Assistant, or assist our educational programs and special events

After completing 50 hours, volunteers are excited to remove their badge flag that says, "in training" and to be able to sign up for Level 2 tasks. These volunteers can now be trained to work alone as a Classroom Aide, or a Program Presenter, as well as assist with our evening Sea Turtle Walks and Hatchling Releases.

Once a volunteer completes 75 or more hours, they are considered level 3 and may qualify to give tours, participate in animal care and serve as mentors to new volunteers. Many of these tasks have additional training and even exams. Our level 3 volunteers are well-

versed in just about every job at Gumbo Limbo, and we depend on them each and every day.

SCHEDULING

We utilize [Volgistics](#) as software for our volunteer program. This allows our volunteers to self-schedule for assignments that they are eligible for. This requires regular maintenance for our volunteer coordinator to be able to update skills and eligibility for each volunteer. We set our needs and our volunteers fill the vacancies as their schedules allow. We can add special events and training to the schedule and also send e-mails to volunteers through this system.

Flexible scheduling works well for us and is consistently one of the main reasons that volunteers list when we ask "Why volunteer at Gumbo Limbo and not somewhere else?" While many of our volunteers like to be consistent and might be found at the same aquarium every Tuesday morning, just as many prefer to check the schedule for openings and fill in

based on their interests and availability each week.

This software also has a touchscreen option that our volunteers can use as a timeclock to punch in and out for each shift. The reporting feature makes calculating volunteer service hours easy for end of month reporting or validating service hours for scholarships and college applications.



Volunteers welcome visitors at Gumbo Limbo's front desk.

AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

We work hard to make sure our volunteers know how much we value them. Our staff members make sure that volunteers feel welcomed from their very first day by simply saying hi and welcoming them. We have a bulletin board and keep it updated with important info about our animals and exhibits. There is a recognition board showing volunteer birthdays and years of service milestones that gets updated every month. Our volunteer coordinator even takes the time to write and mail personalized birthday cards for our volunteers – this is so appreciated by everyone.

The City purchases popsicles and electrolyte sports drinks to make sure everyone stays hydrated and cool in the hot Florida summers. And we all take turns personally providing snacks in the breakroom – either store bought or homemade.

We have regular recognition such as a *Volunteer Of The Month* program as well as quarterly socials and activities such as beach clean ups, snorkeling, kayaking, and a summer ice cream party. Not everyone participates in every social, but we see lots of smiles all around and our volunteers are excited to meet some new colleagues and make new connections.

Once a year, we host our annual awards and recognition ceremony where we provide dinner, and shower our volunteers with love, giveaways, and awards such as Service with a Smile, Conservation Hero, Animal Care Champion, Rookie of the Year, Future Leader, and Volunteer of the Year honors. We try to have all paid staff attend and assist at the awards ceremony.

LOOKING AHEAD

At the end of the day, volunteers are an integral part of any visitor's experience. Many of our visitor reviews mention our knowledgeable and friendly volunteers. We have made it a priority to make sure we can hold onto those volunteers. However, we have found that just over 50% of our volunteers stay longer than a year. If you have been doing the math, you might have realized that of every 100 inquiries, only about 19 people complete the onboarding process and join us as a volunteer, and then only 10 of those will continue volunteering into the next year. These are tough statistics, and we are working hard to change that.

We have recently created a Volunteer Advisory Committee, staffed with some of our long-term volunteers, to help brainstorm solutions to this dilemma. We have responded to hotter and drier summers by creating shorter shifts and more frequent breaks for volunteers at the outdoor exhibits. We have also created a mentor program to give our newer volunteers a "go to" person while they are learning the ropes. We have also gotten much more intentional in our communication, so our volunteers know exactly how valued they are.

TREASURED TIME

Our volunteers are simply our most valuable asset. Many of our employees were once volunteers themselves, and our volunteers are some of our biggest advocates. In an average year, our volunteers give us nearly 20,000 hours of their time. This is the equivalent of almost 10 full-time employees and represents salary savings between \$400,000 and \$600,000 each year! We consider ourselves incredibly fortunate to have so many individuals so invested in our nature center that they are willing to give us their most precious resource: their free time.

Every nature center is different, but if you found some helpful information in here and would like more details, please send us an e-mail at GumboVolunteer@bocaraton-fl.gov

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PROUD TO SUPPORT



Building a Powerhouse Board

Five Positive Reinforcement Practices That Elevate Nonprofit Governance

Paul Acosta, Executive Director
Sibley Nature Center in Midland, Texas

A high-performing nonprofit board doesn't happen by accident. It's built intentionally, through culture, clarity, and consistent reinforcement of the behaviors that drive mission impact. While many boards focus on compliance and oversight, the most effective ones go further: they cultivate an environment where directors feel valued, motivated, and empowered to contribute their best.

When used as a strategic leadership approach, positive reinforcement strengthens engagement, accountability, and collaboration. If board members experience affirmation for meaningful contributions, they naturally lean in more deeply. The result is a powerhouse board, one that is aligned, energized, and mission-driven.

The following are proven methods we use at Sibley for building that kind of board culture.

1. CELEBRATE WINS: LARGE AND SMALL

Boards often move quickly from one agenda item to the next, leaving little room to acknowledge progress. Yet recognition fuels momentum. Practical ways to reinforce success:

- Begin each meeting with "mission moments." Highlight a recent achievement, donor story, program milestone or open each meeting with a "field moment." Share a recent wildlife sighting, habitat restoration milestone, or school group experience.
- Spotlight individual contributions. Acknowledge directors who secured a partnership, provided expertise, or advanced a strategic goal.
- Share impact metrics regularly. When board members see the results of their governance, they stay motivated.

Celebration builds pride, and pride builds commitment.

2. PROVIDE CLEAR ROLES/RESPONSIBILITIES AND PURPOSE

Board members thrive when they understand exactly how they can contribute.

Positive reinforcement strategies:

- Role clarity: Provide written expectations and revisit them annually.
- Strength-based assignments: Match directors to committees or tasks that align with their expertise.
- Purpose-driven agendas: Tie every agenda item to strategic priorities so directors see the value of their engagement.

Clarity reduces frustration and increases confidence, two essential ingredients for strong participation.

3. FOSTER A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Boards that learn together grow together.

Ways to reinforce learning:

- Offer trainings (e.g., fundraising basics, financial literacy).
- Encourage peer mentoring between experienced and new directors.
- Share articles, webinars, and sector insights to keep the board informed and inspired.

When learning is celebrated, board members feel supported rather than judged.

4. ENCOURAGE OPEN DIALOGUE

Positive reinforcement thrives in an environment where people feel safe to speak up.

Build this environment by:

- Thanking directors for asking tough questions.
- Acknowledging diverse viewpoints as strengths.
- Using facilitation techniques that ensure all voices are heard.

Boards that feel safe are more innovative, more honest, and more effective.

5. RECOGNIZE AND REINFORCE ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability doesn't have to feel punitive. When framed positively, it becomes a shared commitment to excellence.

Support accountability by:

- Setting clear goals and timelines.
- Checking in regularly and celebrating progress.
- Recognizing follow-through publicly.

This shifts accountability from obligation to pride.

CONCLUSION: POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT BUILDS POWERHOUSE BOARDS

A powerhouse board isn't defined by the résumés of its members, it's defined by the culture they create together. When nonprofit leaders intentionally reinforce positive behaviors, celebrate contributions, and cultivate an environment of trust and learning, the board becomes more than a governing body. It becomes a strategic engine for mission success.

A thriving nature center depends on a board of directors that is energized, aligned, and

deeply committed to protecting the natural world. When board members feel valued and connected to the mission, they become powerful ambassadors for conservation, education, and community engagement.

Positive reinforcement is not a soft skill, it's a leadership strategy. And when applied consistently, it transforms good boards into exceptional ones.

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Leading Your Team Through Change

Jerome Gabriel, Ed. D., Facility Supervisor
Four Rivers Environmental Education Center in Channahon, Illinois

Combining two models of leadership to understand what your staff needs from you.

While Benjamin Franklin said that nothing is certain except death and taxes, the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus is credited with teaching us, even earlier, that the only constant is change.

As leaders, our teams will inevitably change. You may have a longtime staff member retire, and hire someone new, or a reorganization happens, and you're now faced with an entirely new team. Change happens, especially within groups working together, and how you lead through that change can be crucial to success in the future.

The effect of change doesn't happen in a vacuum. We don't just wake up one day and decide, now that things have changed, the world is right again, and we can move on with our goals. No, change has an impact on people, and as a team goes through change, there are some concrete steps that you can see if you know what to look for.

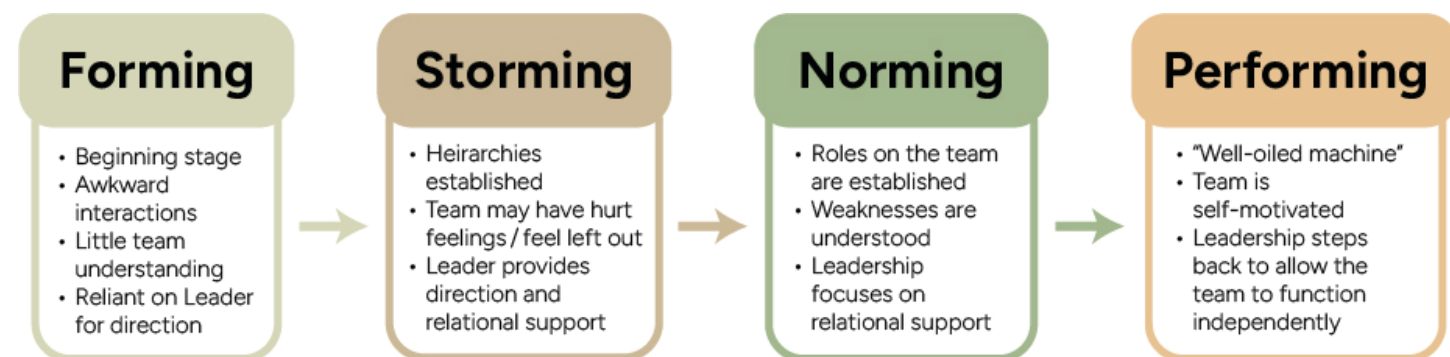
STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Sixty years ago, Bruce Tuckman introduced the world to his model of group development (1965). He argued that, given enough time spent together, a group of people will go through four recognizable stages.

I learned about this model early in my outdoor leadership career, and spent years on week-long backpacking and canoeing trips watching these stages unfold right in front of me. Seeing these stages happen so often, I was able to pinpoint when groups would flip to the next stage (and even when they'd sometimes regress). Watching a group move from burning water together while cooking to nearly gourmet campfire meals was always a welcome sight.

Moving into a supervisory role, I continued to see these changes, but at a slower rate. The days in the nature center weren't nearly as intense as the days out on the trail, so the development came along more slowly. What could happen in days paddling down a river and sleeping under the stars would take weeks or months sitting at desks. But, and most importantly, it still happened. Knowing what to look for and identifying the changes in your team is an important first step in knowing how to lead them well.

Figure 1. The four stages of group development.



Forming

The first stage that Tuckman identified was the forming stage. This is the beginning, the first steps of a new team. Like a baby's first steps, they can be awkward. Team members don't necessarily know how to interact with one another. They don't know each other's strengths and weaknesses, or how they work best. The team here is heavily reliant on the leader for direction and will often look to that person. The leader's role here is simple: give direction. Being friendly and welcoming is great, but a new team (even if it's just one member) needs structure.

As they spend more time together and work alongside one another, they'll start to enter the second stage. How will you recognize that transition? Don't worry... you'll know.

Storming

The storming stage can be the most challenging for a leader. At this stage, group members will begin to create internal hierarchies. As they learn about each other's skills and abilities, these "pecking orders" will begin to take shape. They may be social (most outgoing to least), or they might be technical (most highly skilled to least).

During these sometimes turbulent times, members of the group may feel left out or their abilities downplayed by other members. As a leader, seeing this change is important, as this team will still need direction to keep them on track, but now they will need some relational support too. Having one-on-one check-ins, some team bonding activities, or shared projects with everyone having a role can help the team navigate this stage.

Norming

Take a deep breath. You made it. The dust has settled, and your team has now accepted (or is near to) their roles and respects each member's skills and abilities. Most importantly, they are now learning to leverage those skills to shore up weaknesses the team might have. As they learn to work together more efficiently, they will develop more of their own direction and need less from you.

In this stage, there may still linger some hurt feelings or other emotions from navigating the storm. So, while you may be lessening the direction you're giving, you still are providing the relational support the team needs to fully develop those bonds.

Performing

Ah...the well-oiled machine. Your team can now accomplish anything. Give yourself a pat on the back for your great leadership. They work well together, solve problems, and no longer need you.

Wait...what? Yes, that's right. As the team develops into the final stage, they now have a strong relational bond and provide much of their own direction. You are still part of the equation, but the team can function independently, too.

If the storming stage is the most challenging for a leader, the performing stage is a close second. Here, you need to take a step back and allow the team to accomplish things without your direct intervention. Choosing to remain as involved as you were in the early stages can lead the team to feel micromanaged or undervalued.



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These stages, while generally linear, can see some back-and-forth movement when situations change. A storming team that is presented with an emergency? Back to forming and being reliant on a leader for direction. A performing team given an overly challenging project that might be beyond their scope? Probably going to lead back to some storming. Regardless, recognizing the stages is essential for a leader, as your approach to the team needs to differ at each stage.

LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE STAGES

The model of these stages is helpful to understand group dynamics, but what does the leadership really look like at each stage? There are hundreds of leadership models and theories out there to choose from, which do you use?

While not all leadership experts might agree with me, I choose to believe the best approach is responding to the situation you are presented with, rather than choosing a particular model. Luckily, just a few years after Tuckman produced his model, Kenneth Blanchard and Paul Hersey (1970) defined Situational Leadership as an approach we can take.

SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP

At its core, Situational Leadership is pretty simple. Your leadership consists of two factors: the amount of direction you give and the amount of relational support you provide.

Some situations call for a leader to provide a lot of direction and little relational support, such as a medical emergency. Other times, a leader may need to provide a lot of relational support but very little direction, such as consoling a team member who has lost a loved one. In between, a leader will find a need to balance one, another, or both. In all situations, it's the same leader, but the behavior differs greatly.

To make the discussion a little simpler, Blanchard and Hersey named each of the variations of this leadership. High directional and low relational leadership is referred to as Directing. As you maintain a lot of directional leadership and increase the relational support you provide, you're now Coaching. If you continue to provide a lot of relational support, but back off on the direction, you're now Supporting. And finally, if you reduce your interactions in both directions, now you're Delegating. (See Figure 2.)

In any circumstance, this is a good approach to know. Look at your team. What do they need right now? A lot of direction or a lot of relational support? Both? None? It is a good tool to step back and use before jumping into your next meeting. But, I believe, where this idea really shines is when your team is going through change.

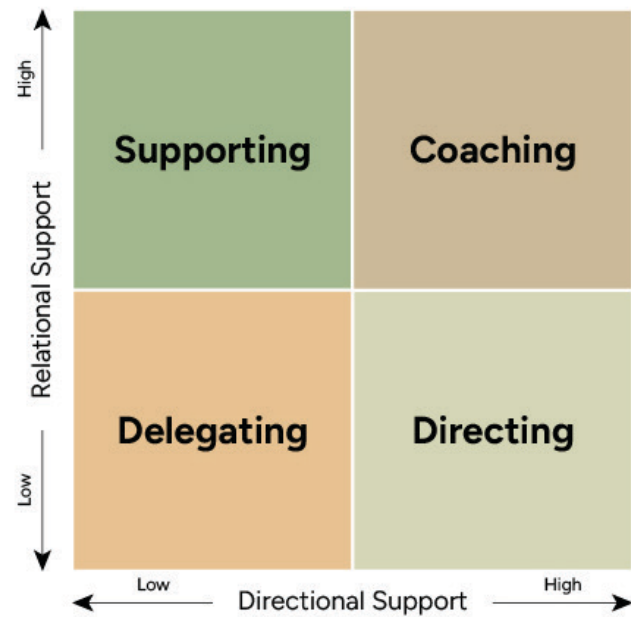


Figure 2. Situational Leadership.

COMBINING IT ALL

Imagine losing your most seasoned naturalist to retirement. All that institutional knowledge and easy understanding of how things have always been done is now being replaced by a new and eager face. The team looks different, lacks some skills, but has gained some new ones. Now, where do you go from here? This new team is starting at the beginning, and as the leader, you can too. Combining these two models gives us a roadmap for navigating the change together.

The eager new naturalist jumps in headfirst, but quickly finds themself struggling. Provide

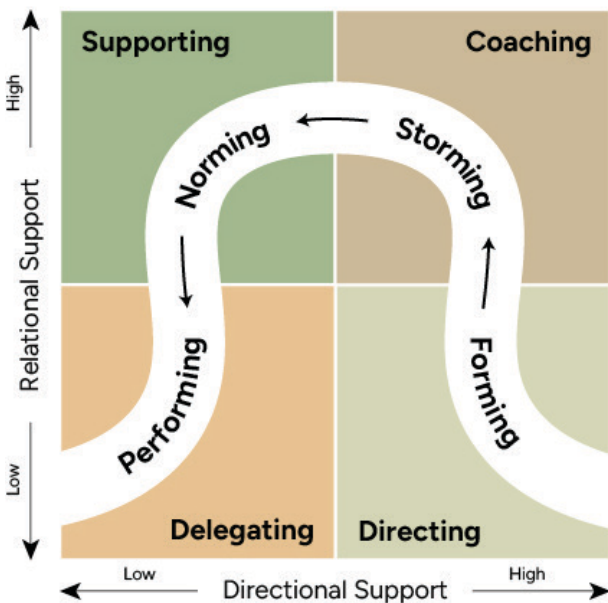


Figure 3. Combining the two models.

them with some direction, assign a program, and assign a mentor to help them. You don't need to develop a strong relationship with the new staff member or help them build relationships with the team at this point. Instead, they really need to understand the day-to-day tasks and get a handle on their new responsibilities.

As the team spends time together, everyone becomes aware of the new skills your new team member brings, but it also becomes more apparent what they have lost. The new staff member may feel they aren't meeting others' expectations, or perhaps feel disconnected from a team that has worked together for many years.

Here, your leadership needs to move to coaching and help build those relationships while still recognizing that a lot of direction is needed for this new staff member and the reformed team. While teambuilding activities might get an eyeroll from some, they are effective in creating shared experiences. If leading these types of activities isn't your thing, plan a team hike, paddle, or other activity not associated with the day-to-day job to allow a focus on relationships over work.

After a time, the new team member is proficient in the role and produces well alongside other members of the team. While this is a good time to back off your direction (no one likes to be micromanaged forever), this new staff member and the team still will need a push every now and then. A supporting role means taking some time to meet with your team members one-on-one. How are they feeling about the transition? What new ideas have a fresh perspective offered? What can you do to help support them? Take time to listen and not to offer your thoughts. This can give you a roadmap to understand what the team needs and where they are really at in their development.

Finally, after a few months (or years – there's no timeframe on this process), the team works well. They recognize each other's strengths, provide support to bolster each other's weaknesses, and develop some new programming ideas you never would have considered. This is the hardest part, you step back and simply direct. You allow them to take on bigger challenges and encourage them to come to you with questions. You'll ask about the resources needed or other support, but you are willing to let them both succeed and fail on their own.

Just remember, as nice as it is to think of this process as linear, people change, situations change, and each time, your leadership should change with it. An unexpected leave of absence might send the team back to storming and require more coaching. Or a team starting to understand its roles may be presented with an easy program opportunity, where you'll completely step back and just direct. It's an incredibly hard balancing act to know when to step in and when to step back. And, just like the skills your new naturalist is learning, you're working to develop your skills too.

MOVING FORWARD

No leadership theory is perfect, and some may find certain theories more effective than others. The combination of these two models has been my go-to from guiding in the Rockies, to teaching in the classroom, and now into the nature center administration. Even if

this leadership approach doesn't fit you, I hope that it opens up a new perspective in thinking about how to lead your staff. Consider yourself, your staff, and also the situation. What does each need right now, and what can you do to guide things toward the best outcome? 🌱

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