AMPO NONPROFIT SOLUTIONS
NONPROFIT SECTOR RESEARCH

Executive Brief

Four critical challenges inhibiting nonprofit capacity, and why the solutions organizations reach for keep falling short.

57+
RESEARCH CONVERSATIONS

26
STATES REPRESENTED

566
PAGES OF TRANSCRIPTS

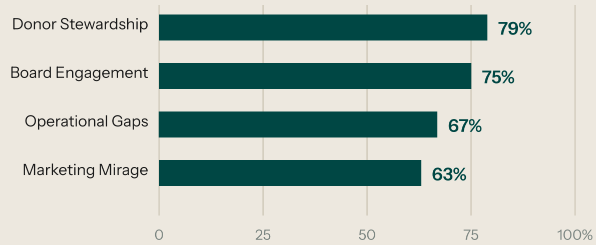
Amy Pokela Founder, AMPO Nonprofit Solutions · 2026

OVERVIEW

The same four patterns, named across the sector

Across 57+ research conversations in 26 states, nonprofits described interconnected challenges around board engagement, strategic clarity, operational infrastructure, and donor relationships. Most significantly, the research reveals a translation problem: leaders know they need help but struggle to name root causes, gravitating toward familiar solutions while deeper issues remain unaddressed.

SHARE OF STAKEHOLDERS WHO SURFACED EACH CHALLENGE



FINDING 01

63%

The Marketing Mirage

Organizations fixate on better storytelling while avoiding harder conversations about strategic fundamentals. Marketing feels safe; strategy does not.

"Marketing for what? To whom? With what call to action? Most cannot answer those questions."

THE REALITY Marketing is a proxy for missing strategy. Goal-setting and metrics come first.

FINDING 02

75%

Board Engagement Crisis

Independently, three in four participants named the 75/25 pattern: a quarter of the board carries the work while the rest require constant pushing.

"The same 25% carrying the whole board, year after year."

THE REALITY The root cause is infrastructure, not people. The problem is structural.

THE FINDINGS, CONTINUED

Beneath revenue and donors, the same missing systems

FINDING 03

67%

Operational Gaps

Organizations frame the problem as revenue when the real barriers are operational: missing financial controls, HR systems, and documented procedures.

“How can you execute a fundraising strategy when you cannot reliably process a gift?”

THE REALITY Revenue problems are symptoms. Infrastructure must come before growth.

FINDING 04

79%

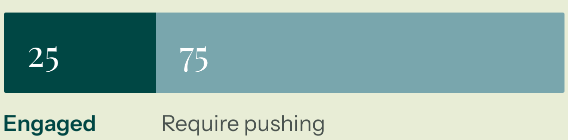
Donor Stewardship Failure

Donors want to give, often more than they do, but transactional approaches push them away. Organizations chase acquisition and neglect retention.

“Donors tell me they feel like ATMs. That is it until the next ask.”

THE REALITY Cultivation must precede the ask. Donors want relationship, not recognition.

THE 75/25 PATTERN



VALIDATED NATIONALLY

Donor retention sits at **42.9%**, and only **13.8%** of new donors ever give a second time. Board giving in campaigns has fallen from roughly **40% to 8%**.

What this means for nonprofit leaders

Leaders know they need help but struggle to name root causes. Effective interventions share four disciplines.

01

Start where they are

Meet felt needs to build trust, then reveal root needs in strategy and systems. Do not correct the diagnosis immediately.

02

Match their timeline

Deliver quick wins while building sustainable infrastructure. EDs operate in 30-day survival mode, not 3-year cycles.

03

Translate, do not educate

Frame services in outcomes they understand, more money, engaged boards, retained donors, not jargon like capacity building.

04

Show tangible ROI

Demonstrate value in their metrics: dollars raised, donor retention, volunteer hours, staff satisfaction.

THE CORE INSIGHT

Organizations are not refusing to address root problems. They genuinely do not see them.

Most leaders came up through program work. The frameworks that would help them see root causes are not yet in their toolkit. Effective capacity building meets organizations where they are, then builds the capability to see and solve problems independently.

REQUEST THE FULL RESEARCH REPORT

Amy Pokela
Founder, AMPO, LLC
 · amponow.com