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## Book Review: The Intrepid Nonprofit: Strategies for Success in Turbulent Times

*The Intrepid Nonprofit: Strategies for Success in Turbulent Times*, by Tim Plumptre. Friesen Press, Victoria, B.C., 2019; 330 pp; ISBN 9781525505423

It's become a truism that we are living and working in a time of extraordinary turbulence. The corollary is that leaders of organizations in such times face stiffer challenges. It's never been easy to run a non-profit. But this is a time when technology, politics, media, and markets are spinning the heads of many non-profit leaders. To describe the situation, Tim Plumptre, author of this new "playbook" for non-profit leaders, has chosen the very Canadian analogy of running the rapids: "I see many organizations being pulled into much faster and riskier waters, confronting a range of difficult issues," among them financial survival, harnessing disruptive technologies, finding and keeping the right people, and coping with lacklustre boards of directors. To survive, Plumptre suggests that leaders need to demonstrate a certain "intrepidity," which will help them map their course through turbulent waters. His book intends to be a guide to successfully steering the organizational canoe.

Plumptre himself has played many leadership roles in the non-profit sector, as a CEO, a board chair, a consultant, a funder, and as the founder of a non-profit, the Institute on Governance. Through a long career, he has also established a network of contacts in the non-profit sector, many of whom he interviewed for this guide (full disclosure: I was one of his interviewees). So, this guide is based not only on his research but also on a good deal of hard-won leadership experience, his and others'. The guide also includes good recent data and references to useful current resources. This makes it a topical and valuable reference for today's non-profit leaders.

One of the most valuable aspects of the book is Plumptre's focus on governance. This is not surprising given his long track record of interest in the subject. But it is surprisingly rare in books on non-profit leadership strategies to see so much thoughtful dissection of the meaning of governance and of the interaction between governors and operational leaders. When we speak of a non-profit leader, we think first of the paid professional executive director or CEO. But we should also consider the board, particularly the board chair. In a sector where many board members are not paid (especially in charities), the decisions and actions of volunteer boards are sometimes not taken seriously enough, since, as Plumptre notes, they don't have "skin in the game" in the form of shares.

We may not fully appreciate the impact of a high-performing non-profit board. But we have all seen the impact of a poorly performing board: staff departures, weak financial oversight, or lack of strategic direction. In one of the longest chapters in this book, on the "challenge of imperfect governance," Plumptre stresses the importance of educating and supporting the performance of leadership functions by volunteer boards. This is a point that can't be emphasized enough. And it makes this a playbook worth reading, on this point alone.

It seems that the audience for *The Intrepid Nonprofit* will likely primarily be found among those

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two key and experienced players: the staff leader and the board leader. But those not currently in such positions, but who aspire to either job, could also profitably read this book. Plumptre walks us through the challenges facing any non-profit: revenue-raising, investment in human and technological capital, the need for strategy, the value of outcomes measurement, and the importance of solid financial management. This is a high-level playbook. He touches on each topic without going into great detail. But in almost all areas he suggests questions to ask (to your staff team or board colleagues) and he provides topical and accessible references and resources for further information and reflection. If you are considering a board or staff retreat to discuss your business plan, or to think about how to refine your results or outcomes measurement, or to reflect on how to improve your governance practices, just to take three examples of many, this would be a useful guide to assign as pre-reading or to use in pre-planning.

Much of this has also been discussed by the authors of other leadership or management books: mission, strategy, execution, results, and oversight are all basic to organizational success. But going farther, Plumptre also addresses the survival strategies that leaders today could consider in the face of the greater disruption or turbulence that they face. Plumptre calls these strategies “working sideways.” Back to the analogy of the canoe in the rapids: sometimes survival, or successful riding of the waves, is assured not by going on in the same straight line but by moving in a different direction. He doesn’t mean simply switching course or mission; specifically, he is talking about collaborative or networked operating strategies.

The most extreme form of collaborative strategy is a formal merger, and this is a strategy that you hear donors or funders suggesting when they think that there are too many non-profits working in the same area. I am not convinced that simply occupying the same competitive space is a bad thing for non-profits. It’s true that there aren’t the same mechanisms as in the business sector for eliminating organizations performing less well. But mergers aren’t panaceas. Occasionally a merger between complementary organizations can result in one plus one being more than two. However, Plumptre rightly warns about the pitfalls of merger strategies, particularly because organizational culture can sabotage any organizational restructuring attempt.

Other leadership strategies that Plumptre describes as “sideways” involve entering into collaborative or network arrangements. Non-profits can participate in collective impact work for example, and we have seen some notable examples in Canada, especially with Vibrant Communities in cities across the country. Collective action and shared leadership are on display in areas such as community or neighbourhood revitalization, community benefits planning, social housing, and family and child services planning. There is certainly rising interest in network approaches in turbulent times when it is more difficult to have impact if you go it alone. In 2018, after this book was finished, the Ontario Nonprofit Network and *The Philanthropist* collaborated on a [five-part series](#) on the role of networks in the non-profit sector, which features excellent discussion and examples of networking in action. In his own discussion, Plumptre focuses on the need for a modified mode of leadership, quite different from conventional management. He sets out the differences between conventional and network leadership philosophies in a useful table on page 178 that makes clear how distinct these philosophies and skills are, and therefore how mindful leaders must be in considering them. But, as he also notes, “the emergence of the web and a net-savvy generation of young persons for whom networking is a way of life has turned a lot of conventional management thinking on its side . . . contemporary executives and board members may feel a need to rethink long-held ideas about

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how to organize work” (p.191). They may ask themselves if “working sideways” (by merging, partnering, or networking) might prove more effective than a more traditional or vertical approach.

I have some minor caveats about *The Intrepid Nonprofit*. I regret the fact that there are relatively few Canadian case studies. Three-quarters of the references and resources listed are drawn from US rather than Canadian literature on governance and non-profit management. This may say something about the dearth of Canadian literature. Plumptre has tried to compensate by interviewing 57 Canadian leaders and experts. But I feel that this guide doesn't tell enough stories about some of the innovative leadership models in the Canadian non-profit sector, particularly among social entrepreneurs and innovators. Another caveat is that Plumptre doesn't adequately address the public policy roles of non-profits. He is not specific about the types of non-profit organizations that he is addressing: there are important differences in the skills and requirements of those leaders who lead advocacy or policy development organizations that he does not address. The importance of active leadership in public policy dialogue and development in Canada today has never been greater. In turbulent times, leaders must use more public policy skills to create the kind of impact that their missions require. The rising generation of younger leaders is more active in policy debates on social media and networks – they need encouragement and mentoring around this aspect of their roles.

But in summary, Plumptre offers an accessible, clearly-written, and thoughtful “playbook” to today's non-profit staff and board leaders. It's a tough job. As Plumptre says, quoting Dominic Barton, “effective leadership will be demanding and difficult; it will depend increasingly on character, requiring resilience, judgment, patience, persistence, and an ability to absorb blows”(p. 115). We can be grateful for the offer of a compass such as this to navigate the turbulent rapids we face.