TO DO, OR NOT TO DO, THAT IS THE QUESTION

Using the MacMillan Matrix as a decision tree in your program planning

By Trina Isakson

Strategic planning and program planning involves more than deciding which new priorities and projects to take on. These processes also require groups to decide what to **stop** doing.

In *Necessary Endings*, Dr. Henry Cloud uses the analogy of a rose bush to describe the importance of stopping some of the things we do. In order for a budding rose bush to lead to large, lush, beautiful roses, many buds need to be pruned. Pruning is hard. It requires cutting buds that could, in theory, grow into the lovely roses we seek. However, if all buds are left to blossom, they will drain nutrients from the few successful roses a bush is able to produce.

The same is true for our community organizations. If all programs are given basic levels of support, hoping they all will thrive, the likely scenario is one in which programs fight for necessary resources and no program truly flourishes. In order for our organizations to succeed at fulfilling our missions, we must choose our priorities carefully.

What are our options?

1. **Maintain and grow**: Programs that are successful and are a mission fit should be given resources to flourish.

2. **Collaborate**: Some programs will do better when we work with other allied organizations to deliver them.

3. **Stop**! Some programs should be wound down, or given to other organizations that are a better fit with the project.

According to the MacMillan Matrix, a tool developed by Ian MacMillan at the Wharton School of Business, there are four criteria used to determine which path to follow: mission and ability fit, program attractiveness, saturation, and competitive advantage.

Mission and ability fit: Whether or not the program helps the organization further its mission, and is within the scope of abilities of the organization and the people involved.

Attractiveness: Whether the program is attractive to volunteers, donors, funders, media, and other important resources.

Coverage: Whether there are many other organizations doing similar work, or if there are few to just you.

Competitive advantage: Whether your organization's program can be offered 'better' than other organizations' due to your organization's brand, supporter loyalty, skills, the quality of program you are able to offer, or other factors.

About the author

Trina Isakson is founder and principal thinker at 27 Shift (27shift.com) and leads research and strategy projects that challenge assumptions of how people contribute positively to society. She also teaches a variety of university courses on sustainable development and nonprofit leadership and management.

Trina is a sought out thought leader in volunteer and employee engagement, community-university engagement, inter-generational dynamics, women and leadership, introverts, and innovations in nonprofit sector governance and leadership.

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MacMillan Matrix as a decision tree

Here I present the MacMillan Matrix as a flow chart AKA decision tree. As you move from left to right, the tree leads you to a decision about how to treat the priority, project, or program in question.

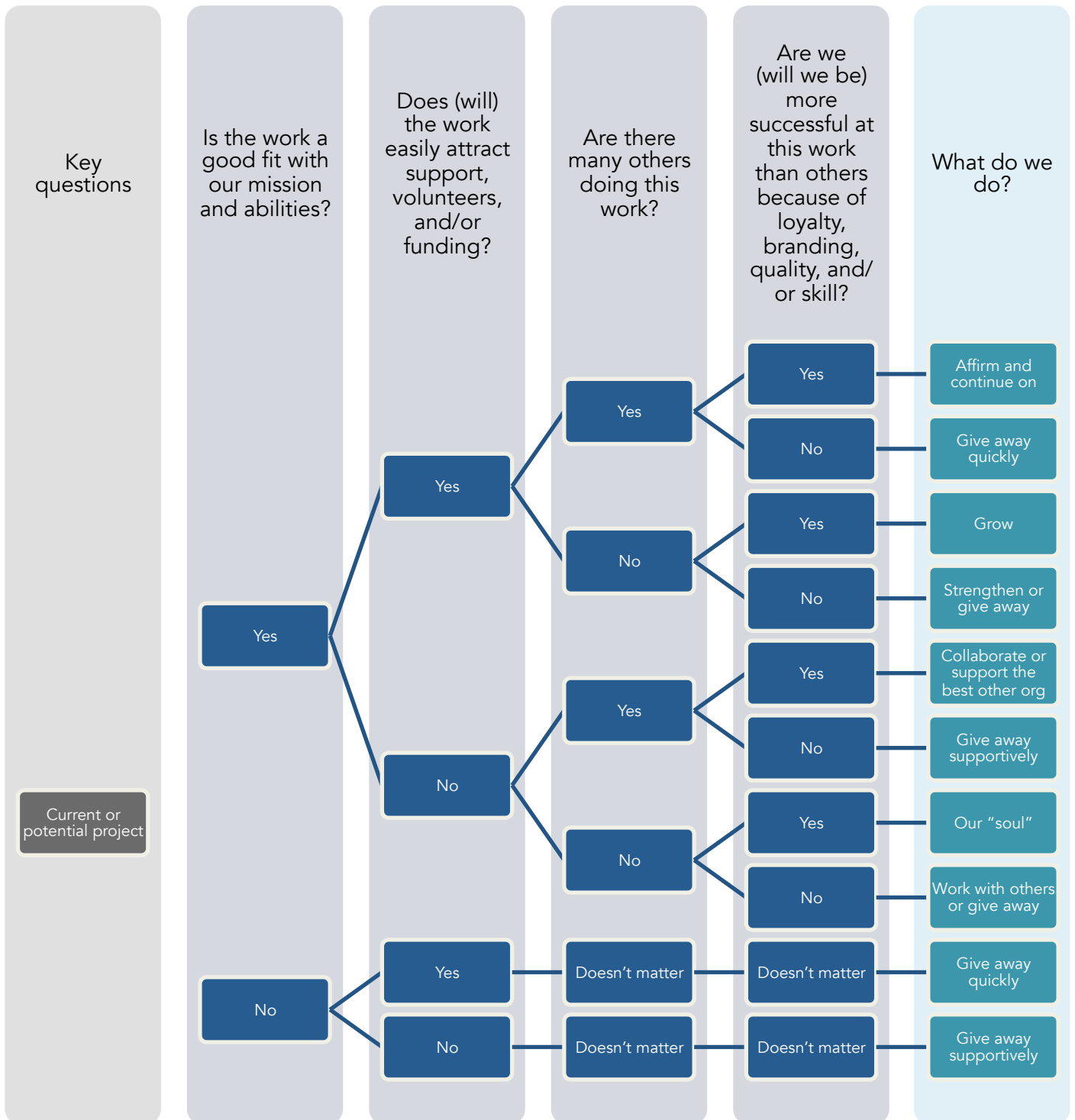| Key questions	Is the work a good fit with our mission and abilities?	Does (will) the work easily attract support, volunteers, and/or funding?	Are there many others doing this work?	Are we (will we be) more successful at this work than others because of loyalty, branding, quality, and/or skill?	What do we do?
				Yes	Affirm and continue on
			Yes	No	Give away quickly
		Yes		Yes	Grow
			No	No	Strengthen or give away
	Yes			Yes	Collaborate or support the best other org
Current or potential project			Yes	No	Give away supportively
		No		Yes	Our "soul"
			No	No	Work with others or give away
		Yes	Doesn't matter	Doesn't matter	Give away quickly
	No	No	Doesn't matter	Doesn't matter	Give away supportively

Image by Trina Isakson. Adapted from *The "MacMillan Matrix"* by the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL), originally designed by Ian MacMillan of the Wharton School of Business.

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Stop! Collaborate and Listen

Some may question... "do I really need to collaborate or stop?" The short answer is: you can do whatever you want. However, if you want the 'best' programs to flourish, directing resources to them is important.

The MacMillan Matrix assumes that collaboration is a viable option, and that allied groups are all interested in the success of the movement more than supreme power of an individual organization. The matrix also assumes that organizations should specialize to offer quality programs and services, and that there are limited resources.

WHY GIVE AWAY *QUICKLY*?

If this is where one of your programs has ended up, it is attractive, but just not the best program for your organization. Let another organization have success with it.

WHAT IF IT'S ALL "SOUL"?

If all programs seem to be done well, by you, and are in line with your mission, but none readily attract support, you're in for a tough go of it. Often more 'attractive programs' subsidize the resource costs of 'soul' programs. Some options to consider:

- Test your underlying assumptions. Is the program truly unattractive? Or do you just need support to gain expertise in fund development and volunteer engagement, etc.?
- Explore options to create unique programs in your mission area that are more attractive to balance your 'soul' programs.
- Diversify your revenues. Is your organization capable of offering fee-for-service/product activities like revenue-generating events or consulting?

Try it in your organization

1. Give your senior management or board members stickies with each major program listed on a separate sticky.
2. Have them place the stickies where they believe the organization's programs fall.
3. Is there alignment? Does everyone agree?
4. Are there any assumptions to test? For example, is a program truly attractive? Are other organizations truly not doing the same work as you? Do you have the brand strength or program quality that you think you do?

Resources

Institute for Conservation Leadership. (n.d.) The MacMillan Matrix. Available at https://www.icl.org/resourcefree/macmillan-matrix.

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