

TOOLKIT #2

Find Your One Constraint

Stop pushing on everything at once. Find the single limit that sets the pace of your impact, and focus the whole team on it.

A Lever & Core toolkit

Based on the Five Focusing Steps of the Theory of Constraints · Eliyahu M. Goldratt

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Every complex organization is inherently simple.

01 · WHAT IT IS

Every organization has one limit that matters most

Most NGOs try to improve everything at once: more donors, more programs, more volunteers, better systems. Effort spreads thin and results barely move. This toolkit helps your team find the one constraint that really limits how much good you can do, and organize everything else around it.

What it is

An organization works like a chain of stages: reaching people, taking them in, delivering a service, following up, raising the money that sustains it all. At any moment one of those links is the narrowest. Improving the others feels productive but changes little; improving the narrowest link moves the whole organization.

The Five Focusing Steps are a simple, repeatable way to find that link and act on it: **identify** the constraint, **exploit** it, **subordinate** everything else to it, **elevate** it, and **repeat** when it moves.

When to use it

- The team is busy and stretched, yet outcomes are flat.
- Waiting lists, backlogs or delays keep growing somewhere.
- Every department says it needs more staff or budget.
- You are planning the year and must choose where to invest.
- A new grant or project is about to add load to an already full system.

The NGO translation

In a company the goal is usually profit. In a mission-driven organization the goal is **mission outcomes, delivered sustainably**: the people served well, the change achieved, and the funding and team health needed to keep doing it. Before you look for a constraint, agree what "more of the goal" means for you, because the constraint is whatever limits that.

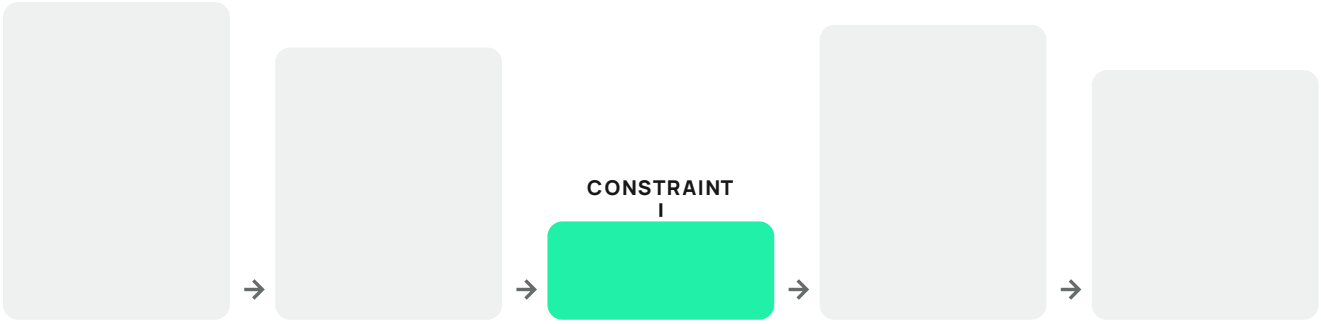
TIME	WHO	YOU'LL NEED
A focused 2–3 hour session for the first pass, then a short monthly or quarterly review.	The senior team, plus the people who run each main stage of the work.	A wall or whiteboard, sticky notes, and one printed worksheet per group.

Source. The Five Focusing Steps are part of the Theory of Constraints (TOC), developed by Dr. Eliyahu M. Goldratt and introduced in his business novel *The Goal* (1984), then extended in later books such as *It's Not Luck* (1994). This toolkit is an original adaptation for NGO teams by Lever & Core.

02 · THE FRAMEWORK

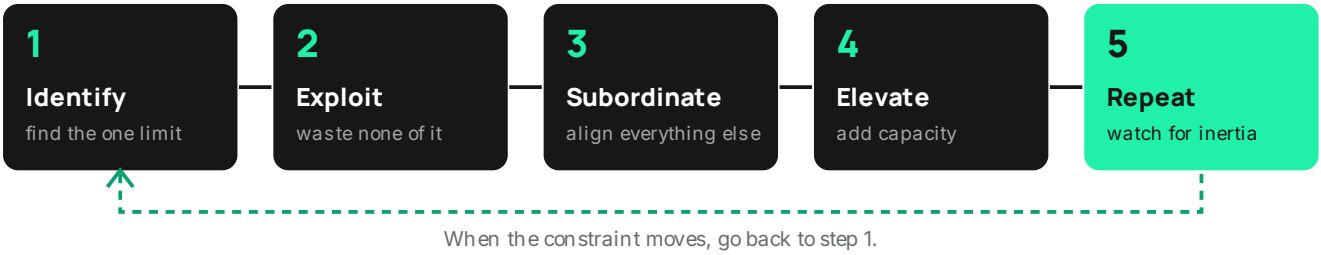
The constraint sets the pace of the whole system

THE SYSTEM: WORK FLOWS THROUGH A CHAIN OF STAGES



Box height = how much each stage can handle. The whole organization can only deliver as much as its narrowest stage.

THE FIVE FOCUSING STEPS: A CYCLE, NOT A PROJECT



When the constraint moves, go back to step 1.

Two kinds of constraint

Capacity constraints: a person, skill, time slot or resource there is not enough of. For example one grant writer, a single approval meeting, the hours of a key coordinator.

Policy constraints: a rule, habit or measure that blocks flow even when capacity exists. For example “every expense needs the director’s signature”, or judging staff by activity instead of outcomes. In NGOs these are very common and cheap to fix.

Three ideas that make it work

- **One at a time.** A system has very few true constraints. Name one.
- **An hour lost at the constraint is lost for the whole organization.** An hour saved elsewhere often saves nothing.
- **Busy is not the same as effective.** Stages that are not the constraint should work at its pace, not their maximum.

03 · STEP BY STEP

Running the five steps with your team

0

Agree the goal and how you will see progress

Write one sentence for the goal and pick one or two signs of progress the team trusts (for example, people completing a program, or families reached each month).

Ask: If we were twice as effective a year from now, what would we see?

1

Identify the constraint

Map the main stages of your work on one page. Look for where work piles up, where people wait, where the same person or approval appears again and again. Pick one candidate and test it: if this stage had more capacity tomorrow, would overall results rise?

Ask: Where is the queue? Who is everyone waiting for?

2

Exploit it: get the most from what you already have

Before spending money, remove waste at the constraint. Take admin, meetings and rework away from it. Make sure it never sits idle waiting for inputs. Check quality before work reaches it, so it never redoes anything.

Ask: What does the constraint do today that someone or something else could do?

3

Subordinate everything else

Set the pace of the other stages to what the constraint can handle. Stop pushing more work in than it can absorb; it only creates backlog and frustration. Change priorities, schedules and even measures so that every team supports the constraint first.

Ask: Which of our habits or rules make the constraint's life harder?

4

Elevate it, only if still needed

If steps 2 and 3 are not enough, add capacity: train a second person, fund a role, buy a tool, add a partner. Elevating is usually the most expensive step, which is why it comes fourth.

Ask: What is the smallest investment that would lift this limit?

5

Repeat, and watch out for inertia

Once the constraint is lifted, another stage becomes the limit. Go back to step 1. The rules you created for the old constraint may now be in the way; review them.

Ask: Is the constraint still where we think it is? When will we check again?

> **Rule of thumb.** Always try steps 2 and 3 before step 4. Most NGOs find real gains in what they already have before they need to spend.

04 · WORKED EXAMPLE

A youth mentoring program with a growing waiting list

TYPICAL SCENARIO

A composite of a pattern we often see in the sector. It is not a client and does not describe any real organization.

THE SITUATION	A mid-sized NGO pairs young people with volunteer mentors. Demand is high and the waiting list keeps growing. The board's instinct: raise more money and recruit more volunteers. The team is exhausted and morale is slipping.
0 · GOAL and signs of progress	Goal: more young people in stable, safe mentoring relationships. Signs: active matches, and matches still going after six months.
1 · IDENTIFY	Mapping the flow shows plenty of applicants and plenty of volunteer sign-ups. The pile-up is in the middle: volunteers wait weeks for screening and matching, and many give up. Everything passes through one matching coordinator. More volunteers would only lengthen the queue.
2 · EXPLOIT	The coordinator was also running social media, writing newsletters and attending most meetings. Those move to other staff. Interviews are batched into fixed weekly slots, and an intake checklist ensures files are complete before they reach the coordinator.
3 · SUBORDINATE	Volunteer recruitment campaigns are paced to matching capacity instead of run at full volume. The volunteer team now helps with reference checks. Managers ask about matches completed, not volunteers recruited.
4 · ELEVATE	After a few months the flow has improved but demand is still higher. The organization trains an experienced staff member as a second matcher and uses a simple shared scheduling tool for interviews, instead of hiring a whole new team.
5 · REPEAT	Matching is no longer the bottleneck. The new limit appears in mentor supervision: support check-ins fall behind. The team goes back to step 1, and retires the old "recruit as many volunteers as possible" target.

THE LESSON

The obvious answer, more money and more volunteers, would have made the queue longer. The gain came from protecting one stage and pacing everything else to it.

05 · WORKSHEET

Find your one constraint

Organization / team

Date

Facilitator

0 OUR GOAL AND HOW WE SEE PROGRESS

OUR MAIN STAGES, IN ORDER

Write one stage per box. Shade or star the one where work piles up.

1 OUR CONSTRAINT IS…

Test: if this had more capacity tomorrow, would overall results rise? Evidence we see:

2 EXPLOIT: WASTE TO REMOVE

What can we take off it? What makes it wait or redo?

3 SUBORDINATE: WHAT CHANGES ELSEWHERE

Pace, priorities, rules, measures.

4 ELEVATE: SMALLEST INVESTMENT

Only if 2 and 3 are not enough.

5 REPEAT: NEXT REVIEW

Date, owner, and which old rules to retire.

06 · FOR THE FACILITATOR

Tips and common mistakes

Facilitator tips

Start from the goal, not the problems

Without a shared goal, every complaint looks like a constraint. Ten minutes on the goal saves an hour of debate.

Follow the queue

Ask where work waits, not who works hardest. Backlogs, delays and “we’re waiting for…” are the clearest signals.

Make it visual

Draw the stages on a wall or whiteboard and let people place sticky notes where work gets stuck.

Protect the person at the constraint

When the constraint is a person, frame it as a system issue. They are not slow; the system is asking too much of them.

Agree one action per step

End the session with an owner and a date for at least one exploit and one subordinate action.

Common mistakes

Naming five constraints

If everything is a constraint, nothing is. Push the group to choose one, and test it.

Jumping straight to “more money”

Funding is sometimes the constraint, but often the real limit is how the money or people already there are used. Do steps 2 and 3 first.

Keeping every stage at 100%

Pushing more work into a full constraint only creates backlog, burnout and lost volunteers or beneficiaries.

Ignoring policy constraints

Approval rules, reporting habits and targets can block flow more than any lack of staff, and they cost nothing to change.

Stopping after one round

Once lifted, the constraint moves. Old rules then become the new obstacle. Schedule the next review.

QUESTIONS TO KEEP ON THE WALL

01 What is our goal, in one sentence?

02 Where does work wait the longest?

03 What is the constraint doing that it shouldn’t?

04 Are we feeding it more than it can take?

05 What is the smallest investment that lifts it?

06 Has the constraint moved since we last looked?

Want help running this with your team?

Lever & Core — Uriel Edery

We help NGOs and mission-driven organizations find the few things that really limit their impact, and build simple, focused ways of working around them.

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