

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.

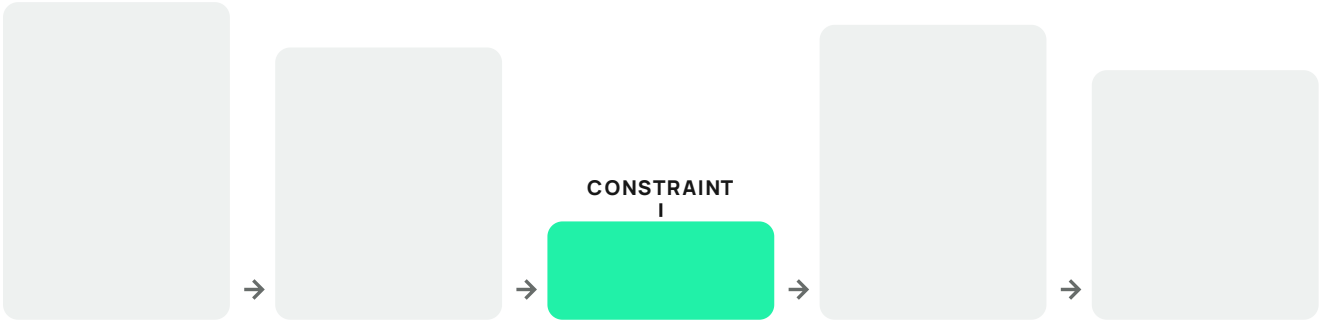
TIME	WHO	YOU'LL NEED
A focused 2–3 hour session for the first pass, then a short monthly or quarterly review.	The senior team, plus the people who run each main stage of the work.	A wall or whiteboard, sticky notes, and one printed worksheet per group.

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

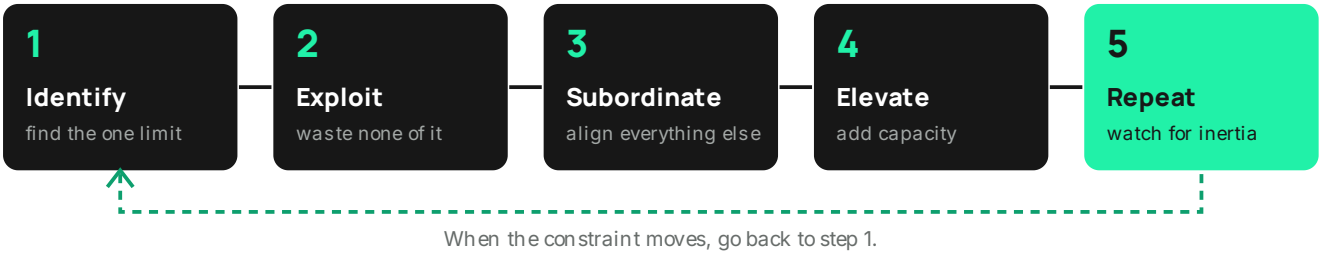
The constraint sets the pace of the whole system

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.