

Before You Begin

10 things every nonprofit leader should know before building with AI

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AI implementation fails when organizations skip steps — documentation, governance, data quality, leadership alignment. These 10 principles are the non-negotiables. Read them before you pick a tool, assign a pilot, or open a new tab.

THE 10 PRINCIPLES

Principle	What It Means	The Test: Ask This Right Now
1. Document first, automate second.	AI amplifies what's already documented. Workflows living in staff heads become faster problems, not fixed ones.	Can a new hire follow every core workflow without asking anyone for help?
2. Fix compliance before you build on top of it.	A broken compliance program with AI is still broken. It just produces the wrong answer faster.	Would your last audit finding still be open if your processes ran at AI speed?
3. Name a champion before you pick a tool.	Someone needs dedicated weekly time to own this. Without a named owner, AI adoption stalls at the pilot stage.	Can you name that person right now? If not, you're not ready to launch.
4. Start where friction is highest.	Not where AI sounds most impressive. Start where your team loses the most time to manual, repetitive work.	What's the one task your team most dreads for being slow and entirely manual?
5. Every AI output needs a human reviewer.	AI drafts. A qualified staff member approves. Build the review step into the workflow from day one.	Who is responsible for checking AI-generated content before it's used in each functional area?
6. Clean data before AI tools, not after.	Disconnected spreadsheets and siloed records limit what AI can do operationally. Garbage in, garbage out.	Can you pull program-level data in under 24 hours from a single, searchable system?
7. Get the ED and board aligned before anything goes live.	AI adoption that starts without leadership buy-in stalls at the staff level and creates accountability gaps.	Has the leadership team had a formal conversation about AI strategy and governance?
8. Write the policy before you deploy the tool.	An AI Responsible Use Policy defines what's permitted, what data stays out, and who reviews output.	Does a written AI use policy exist? Has every staff member using AI tools reviewed and signed it?
9. Don't confuse a pilot with infrastructure.	One successful use case is a start. Infrastructure is when the workflow is in an SOP and survives staff turnover.	Is the AI workflow documented in writing and owned by a role — or only in someone's head?
10. If the foundation isn't solid, build it first.	AI does not solve structural problems. It exposes them faster. Score below 15? Fix the foundation before adding AI.	Take the AI Operations Self-Assessment before building anything. → wendlingconsulting.com

The organizations that move fastest aren't the ones that skip the foundation.

They're the ones that build it right the first time.

Ready to go deeper?

The AI Operations Toolkit includes the full readiness assessment, use case map, 16-week roadmap, governance checklist, and self-assessment scoring guide. → wendlingconsulting.com