

“Founders Syndrome: An Affliction for Which There is Rarely Immunity”

by Henry D. Lewis, CFRE

The vast majority of Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs) experience a birth-and-growth process that is pretty much the same, no matter the locale or service being provided, and most experience the phenomenon known as "Founder's Syndrome" -- a label normally used to refer to a pattern of negative or undesirable behavior on the part of the founder(s) of a NPO.

The early years of a NPO are its INFANCY or YOUTH (also referred to as the mom & pop stage of life). It is the period beginning with a single individual, or a very small group of people, organizing (informally) to provide a service that they see as needed by their community. It includes the first efforts of the founder(s) and extends to where he/she/they realize that there is an increased need for their service(s) and/or for significant additional funding for operations.

Relatively speaking there are very few NPO's that begin their existence with a realistic concept of how, or even if, the demand for their services will increase, and how they will meet that demand. There is also no consideration given by the founders as to how their roles will have to change, as the needs of the "community" also change.

Because there is little consideration given to the inevitable change, the initial structure/by-laws of most NPOs do not provide for the growth/change of the “baby” they've worked so hard to create and grow. By-laws, by the way, should be written (and changed, as needed) to allow for the most effective operation, and the probable growth of the NPO.

In a typical mom & pop (or a single-parent) operation, the people involved are doing everything, with little thought of the need for board-member-term limits and/or a separation of the activities of the board from those of the Executive Director. Most often, there is no distinction between board and staff.

Over an extended period of time, however, new board members ("outsiders") with specific expertise are recruited to satisfy individual needs -- marketing, public relations, website creation, corporate involvement, fundraising, etc. And, as the board grows and begins to represent more diverse perspectives, there is more digression from the "original template" -- more is done differently than what/how the founders had envisioned.

In addition to the internal changes, founders may also be faced with a change in the composition of their community, a change in that community's needs, (increased) staffing/employees needed for the organization, and/or the need for more money for providing service to more people.

The board must then decide if they want to provide more service, add other services, hire (more) staff, become involved in the fundraising process, or continue as before -- offering the type and level of service they'd previously provided, in the same manner "as they always have."

The conflict arises, as the board grows and as more service(s) is/are provided, between those who had the original vision and never considered anything broader, and those who joined the board as part of a process of change. The latter group, being oriented toward change, looks to see what else can be changed -- to do it better, to serve more people, to be more businesslike.

This is where, all too often, founders see the possibility that the organization that they created, the baby that they've nurtured, will become something different -- that it will diverge from the mental image they have of what their baby should be, and will operate in a way other than what they intended. And this is where, all too often, those founders begin to resist that change.

Understand, the resistance is not toward helping people. It is toward those changes that will result in a (perceived or actual) loss of control, toward a change in the working environment -- from the comfortable "family-group" around a kitchen table to having all those "strangers" messing with "our baby," toward the (perceived or actual) inevitable change into "something we no longer recognize."

It is this period of transition -- the sometimes, painful period of growth, change and conflict -- that I refer to as the ADOLESCENCE of a non-profit organization.

As long as no one (internally or externally) sees the need for change/growth, Founder's Syndrome can't rear its ugly head. As soon as there is a conflict between the "this-is-the-way-we've-always-done-it" folks and the "circumstances-have-changed-and-we-need-to-change-with-them" folks, those who exhibit the former tend to attract the label of Founder's Syndrome.

There is one other frame of reference for Founder's Syndrome. It is when a sub-group of the board stages a "coup." Resistance from the "old guard" is also characterized as Founder's Syndrome.

Wherever it occurs, Founder's Syndrome can be very destructive - both for the organization and for the community it serves. It must be dealt with quickly and decisively. If the founders suffer from the syndrome, and are in the majority, they will likely continue to keep doing as they've always done. The consequence is that the newer directors will recognize that they are unlikely to implement, or even encourage change, and they will make an early exit.

If the founder(s) are in the minority, it will likely be necessary to "retire" them from the Board. Whether they leave voluntarily or are voted off the Board, the separation should be total and final. Because we're human, and none of us are perfect, founding board members and/or founding CEOs are unlikely to be able to return to the organization with a totally clear and open mind -- an acceptance of all the changes that have been made since they "left," and all the changes that will be required in the future.

Avoiding the syndrome, however, is a matter of forethought in the creation of the non-profit. It means building a number of structures into the by-laws at the beginning:

- Term-limits for board members -- the usual recommendation is two terms of three years
- Procedures to ensure that board members are selected based on the both the current and anticipated needs of the NPO
- Job descriptions for directors
- Provisions for board member evaluation, training, and removal
- A clear statement that the CEO (an employee -- paid or not) takes direction from the board, IS NOT A MEMBER OF THE BOARD, and can be replaced if s/he doesn't observe the policies of and the (reasonable) goals set by the board

Even with these provisions, it may be impossible to completely avoid Founder's Syndrome. The people who create NPO's are frequently local activists who are focused on meeting a community need. Most have no idea that Founder's Syndrome exists, or that it could affect their own organization.

The question at the heart of the "syndrome" is whether the "founder(s)" are more committed to what's best for the NPO and its service to the community, or to doing "it" their way. Too often, ego gets in the way of making that judgment -- the classic example of the malady. That's why a well-structured board (with term limits) gets to decide if it's time for the founding-CEO to be replaced, and why those term limits also solve the problem of board-member-founders.

Federal and State laws allow for the existence of non-profit organizations, and their special tax status, because those NPO's are supposed to be providing for the needs of the community. If a NPO fails to change and provide for its community's changing needs, then there's no justification for that NPO's continued special tax status and/or existence.

Founder's syndrome is often an indicator that the founder(s) may no longer be serving the best interests of the community, and/or that the organization may not be serving those interests as effectively as it should.

I would be remiss not to say that the above "rules" are not absolute -- that there can be exceptions, but the exceptions are so rare that anyone assuming their situation is different is most likely wrong.

I've worked with many organizations where Founder's Syndrome was a factor, and I've seen the pain inflicted on and suffered by the founder who had to move on. But, as much as it hurt some individuals, it wasn't-and-can't-be about those individuals, it was about effective service to a community -- and that had to be the ultimate consideration.

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Write to: Hank@Major-Capital-Giving.com