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Facing Founder’s Syndrome
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Imagine the discomfort when the board hears the founder of the organization assert that although the bylaws prescribed term limits, he was not ready to step aside. “I founded the organization and I’m not sure my passion and principles will be sustained,” he explained.

It was a delicate situation.

Every nonprofit organization was new at one time, having a principle person who drove its creation. They brought passion to the table as they gathered a core of volunteers.

Founder’s Syndrome is described in a Harvard Business Review article.

“Founders are usually convinced that only they can lead their start-ups to success. ‘I’m the one with the vision and the desire to build a great company. I have to be the one running it,’ several entrepreneurs have told me. There’s a great deal of truth to that view.”

It leaves the board, and the founder, in an awkward position. There are successful approaches.

Analysis

There are two questions to consider in order to assess if the organization’s founder(s) is still needed to lead the organization:

- Is the organization in a development stage, needing the guidance of the founder?
- Is the organization in an established phase in its life cycle where the mission and principles will be sustained and the founder has confidence?

If the first question was answered “yes”, there is a need for the founder or their designee to continue their work. This person is invaluable to a start-up organization and can constantly innovate but they should not be a permanent fixture.

If you answered “yes” to the second question, the organization has moved beyond the founding stage and needs a strong board effort with an aligned staff team to cultivate and manage growth for the future. A strong team is necessary.
to enable a smooth transition that is respectful of the founder’s achievements but also be strategic about the course ahead for success of the organization.

So, if the organization is beyond the founding stage, how do you gently help its founder let go and allow the organization to grow and thrive in its evolution?

**Bylaws Do the Heavy Lifting**

When founders won’t leave, make sure the bylaws include term limits. Easier said than done as the founder typically is serving on the board when the bylaws are created and they have a strong voice in the bylaws construction. This is when directors need to discuss terms limits strongly and ensure they are added. Of course, the board is the governing body --- while the founder is respected, they don’t have extra powers or more than a single vote on the board.

**Identify the Fears**

When asked why they won’t leave, it is often because they believe they have “values” that will be forgotten and goals might change. It is critical to ask what fears they have.

The following are the top fears observed:

- Fear the board will ignore the founder’s values or passion.
- Fear that no one can do the job as good as they can.
- Fear that no one cares as much as they do.
- Fear that no one has the connections they do.
- Fear that no one understands the issue as well as they experienced it or lived it (i.e. suffer from a disease, pioneered a new process, etc.)
- Fear that if they let go, the organization’s supporters will also let go.
- Fear that they might not have a purpose any more.
- Fear that family members serving on the board will also be asked to leave.
- Fear that the focus of the organization will shift.
- Fear that they are no longer valued.

Through problem solving and consensus each fear can be overcome. For example, values are extremely important and can be included in a statement of guiding principles. The ability to alleviate the fears will provide the founder with a sense of security knowing that the organization is a self-sustaining entity.

**Strategic Plan Memorializes Values and Mission**

To further respect and continue the founder’s efforts, integrate them in the strategic plan. Developing the plan is the best way to integrate by creating a roadmap for the long-term. By including founders in the process, they respect
the process and product that will guide the organization. It is a signal they can let go of their concerns.

In summary, it can be an uncomfortable discussion. But it is not healthy for a founder to hang on with the potential of intimidating new leaders.

The first step is to understand what is driving the founder to not let go. Through the discussions and addressing the concerns, it will help them realize that they can let go. Getting their priorities institutionalized has helped many a founder release their grip if they have confidence in their leadership and staff.

It may take a session with an outsider to drive the points home around letting go but in the long run, the organization will be better off and most importantly, the members will be best served.

The same Harvard Business article include as Chinese proverb, “decide on three things at the start: the rules of the game, the stakes, and the quitting time.” In this case, when will the founder recognize the “quitting time?”

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