

The Impact of Founder's Syndrome



by Robert Hodge

A long-time participant observer of nonprofit boards pondered, "What makes founders of nonprofit organizations some of our greatest leaders? And what also makes them the demon in many nonprofits' most turbulent and dramatic chapters?"

By nature, founders are strong mental models of what's right and what's wrong. But it is these strengths of character—insight and vision, a sense of justice, a hopefulness, an ability to take risk, determined purposefulness, and the ambition to succeed for the mission's sake—that can also be their downfall." She summed up her thoughts, "Founders—you can't live with 'em, you can't live without 'em; or sometimes you die in the process of trying."¹

The potent mix of a leader's strengths and weaknesses can devastate the leader. At a recent Christian conference, one session began by asking presidents when they knew it was time to leave. After a long pause, a brave man said he knew it was time to leave when his family packed up and left him. He had heard the call to come in, but not the call to go out.

Visionary leaders do not just experience personal stress but can also cause great organizational distress. Founder's Syndrome



occurs when an organization is driven more by the personality of the founder than by its own mission. It is an organizational problem more than a personal one. All institutions face this danger, but it is especially complicated in Christian settings, where founders often function as spiritual leaders as well. What causes Founder's Syndrome, and how can leaders—and the boards who keep them accountable—prevent or navigate this crippling development?

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Most factors that contribute to Founder's Syndrome are common to both Christian and secular nonprofits. Longtime leaders often fear for the organization's future without them. They might respond to those fears by attempting to cement every policy and process—including traditions that once demonstrated guiding principles but have become sacred cows—before their departure.

The leader's and organization's vision, pace and rhythm may become set to his perceived tenure. Board members who were handpicked by a visionary leader might feel more loyalty to

him or her than to the organization, allowing or even affirming this short-sighted thinking. In this way, a founder who was once such an inspiring force for innovation becomes an anchor, weighing the organization down at precisely the time it needs creativity and openness to address the impending leadership transition while moving forward.

On top of all of this, Christian ministries often confront additional challenges related to visionary founders. In many faith-based organizations, the leader and constituents share a sense of God's calling for that leader. Often the leader is also charismatic and has a long history of shepherding the constituency. Fulfilling this pastoral role, yet with his or her own vision, the founder might overspiritualize some issues, cutting off vital dialogue. If David was so hesitant to defy God's anointed, even after Saul had clearly gone off the deep end, it is no wonder that board and staff members shrink from confronting "God's chosen" leader.

Though Founder's Syndrome is primarily an organizational issue, not a personal defect on the part of the leader, there is much a leader can do to prevent it. One of the best things a leader can do is to establish a "kitchen cabinet" of peers who understand the loneliness of leadership, care deeply for the leader as a person, and can actively engage—if not confront the leader—at the deepest level. This group is not synonymous with the board; it might not include any board members at all. Particularly if the board is

not mature enough to govern rather than administer, it is imperative for the leader to have another set of voices to whom he or she will listen, no matter how hard the message is to hear.

Secondly, leaders should take an active role in succession planning from the very beginning of their term of service. Note that succession planning is not merely replacement planning. It is not aimed at replacing the founder/leader but moving an organization to greater, self-sustaining maturity. Scriptural

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models for succession planning include Moses, Nehemiah, Jesus, and Paul.

Astute, proactive boards can also take many steps to ward off Founder’s Syndrome:

- Honor God and the founder in all ways while focusing on the mission.
- Trust that as God provided the founder, he will provide the successor leaders as well.
- Begin the ministry with succession planning. Succession planning is a shared responsibility between the leader and the board. Replacement planning is the board’s responsibility.
- Get “the right people on the bus” and assure that those people pursue the mission as closely as the charismatic leader does, with the freedom to follow God’s calling for their work.

- Emphasize delegation, leadership development of staff, and mentoring.
- Assure that the legacy is contained in the mission, character, and principles of the organization, not in the personality of one person.
- When it is time to change the leader, avoid a lengthy time between announcement of retirement and departure. Long good-byes (including “cementing”), plus the almost obligatory 18-month “listen before changing anything” tactic of new leaders allows the momentum of the ministry to stagnate.
- Consider an interim leader to maintain momentum while the ministry grieves the departure of its founder.

Thank God for visionary founders. More than present accomplishments, the leader’s greater legacy is to develop others to continue after his or her season of leadership is done. A proactive board will honor God by assuring that the founder/visionary ends well while the ministry continues.

¹ Deborah Linnell, “Founders and Other Gods,” *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, Spring 2004 

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