The Nonprofit Super Hero: Founder’s Syndrome

Many organizations are created from a passion or a recognized need in society. Founders realize these needs and develop those passions into organizations. The initial responsibilities of starting an organization can be daunting. New organizations not only require vast amounts of physical resources, such as investments, property, and people, but they require a highly motivated Founder to get them going and maintain their progress.

But the passion and drive that a founder brings in the early days can become a liability over time. As the organization grows, founders often place invisible boundaries around various aspects of the organization to protect their efforts. In the early going, these restraints are a necessary part of a “controlled growth” strategy, but as the organization matures, these restraints simply hold back the natural development of the organization. This presents a challenge known as “Founder’s Syndrome”. This month, Cathedral Consulting Group, LLC provides insight on how this topic can impact a nonprofit as well as suggestions on how to minimize and ideally avoid the impact.

What is Founder’s Syndrome?

Founder’s Syndrome is defined simply as “a pattern of negative or undesirable behavior on the part of the Founder(s) of an organization.”¹ More specifically, there are certain behaviors that often demonstrate a Founder who is exhibiting some signs of Founder’s syndrome, including:

- A founder who is at the center of all decision-making with little input from others.
- A founder whose performance is never reviewed in a meaningful manner by the Board.
- An organization that has become reactive rather than proactive in planning.
- A Board that rarely meets, or has constant turnover, or is made up of friends and family who have little input.
- An organization in which there is little thought for succession planning.
- A Founder has few other interests or projects, devoting nearly all his/her time to the organization.
- A founder who has tried to leave, but always comes back.
- An organization which hires a new executive (other than the founder) every few years because they never work out.
- A place where comments such as, “I don’t know what would happen without (the founder)” are often heard.

To be fair, in the early stages of an organization, the Founder must demonstrate a strong sense of presence and control in an effort to get the organization off the ground. One interpretation of the phrase “Founder’s syndrome” is that situation where the very skills needed to “found” an organization are still present in a mature organization.

But what is appropriate in the development of an idea is not beneficial to its maturation. From the Founder’s standpoint, the countless amounts of resources invested into an organization have earned them the right to determine the operations of the organization. However, an organization cannot properly develop and mature from the sole performance of one individual. It takes a vast amount of teamwork to gain substantial growth and prosperity through time. The presence and encouragement of team work allows room for greater potential and growth. For this reason, Founder’s syndrome can paralyze an organization and prevent it from maturing properly.

**How does Founder’s Syndrome develop in some leaders but not all of them?**

Most organizations begin as an idea that is developed into a service or need by the public. The organization therefore goes through a growth period in which the Founder started the organization from an idea with little assistance. At that time, minimal planning occurred or was even deemed necessary because moving quickly was essential and there were few resources available.

With the growth of the organization, the adding of staff and the building of a board, new ideas, innovations, and maturations which will necessarily change course in meaningful ways from the original vision. While these changes are usually in line with the overall mission of the organization and occur naturally during the maturing process, they are seen as a threat if they do not match exactly with the visions of the original Founder.

Everyone has had experience of creating something and feeling a strong sense of ownership. But the fact is that most ideas can take any one of several paths to completion or prosperity. The great leader knows this and has the strength and flexibility to accept and apply input from many sources without letting them overwhelm their own vision. All choices will lead to unforeseen challenges, but with the right leaders and members already in place, odds are the organization will overcome set-backs and continue on a path of success.

**Testing for Founder’s Syndrome**

If you are a founder, take a moment and review the following questions to identify if you or an organization might be experiencing some syndrome characteristics. These questions do not imply that there is an immediate issue, but can help identify unhealthy tendencies.

1. Does the founder seek discussion and insight from Board members and staffing about the progress and success of the organization? If so, how often is it implemented?
2. When speaking of the organization from a long-term time frame, where does the founder place him or herself in regards to a leadership role of the organization several years from now?
3. Does the founder use the words “my organization”, or “my nonprofit” when presenting to external or internal audiences?
4. When the organization is discussed externally, is a greater amount of emphasis put on the story of the entire organization or on the story of the founder?
5. Does the founder currently hold multiple roles in the organization, i.e. Executive Director, Board President, Development Director, even after several years of progress?
6. Charting the development of the organization over the years, has there been a significant change or development that can be attributed to someone other than the founder?

There are few strategies that work as well as bringing on talented people and letting them soar...
with their strengths. A Founder’s presence in the organization is significant, but having more eyes and hands working towards the greater picture of the organization allows for more flexibility in how the organization can and will grow.

**Suggestions on mitigating Founder’s Syndrome in an organization.**

If you feel that there is a possibility that your organization has some of the marks of Founder’s Syndrome, consider the following remedies:

- **Build out the Board.** A strong group of influential and determined leaders who have a real stake in the organization is the best remedy for Founder’s Syndrome. Your board members should include some major donors who have a real say in the future of the organization. And, bring on some outsiders who are not close friends of the founder, but who have a passion for the mission.

- **Conduct an annual performance of the Founder by the Board,** even if this individual is chairman of the Board. Every healthy organization has a system of checks and balances. Founder’s Syndrome usually develops from this lack of accountability.

- **Fine tune job descriptions and organizational roles.** Part of the problem with Founder’s Syndrome is that the founder is not “staying in his lane,” but simply putting out fires and showing up wherever needed to solve problems. What little power the Founder leaves unattended becomes a vacuum that everyone tries to fill and a free-for-all ensues. The only answer for this is a strong org chart with very clear job descriptions for each role. To ensure everyone stays on target, take another precaution and utilize job performance reviews and evaluations for the entire staff.

- **Plan a retreat with the Board, key staff, and Founder.** This time away will build a stronger sense of camaraderie between all the key members of the organization and demonstrate the importance of everyone’s role in the organization. Make it a strategic planning retreat, and agree to have the Founder sit in the back of the room and listen rather than participate in the planning sessions. It will be a great learning experience for everyone involved.

It is important to realize Founder’s syndrome usually happens to the most talented people. Preventing Founder’s Syndrome is not a matter of squelching that talent, but of supplementing it with the hard work and good ideas of others. The most important word for Founder is this: trust.” Founder’s – like parents – need to come to a place where they trust that their “baby” has grown up, is changing, and will continue to change. And the real challenge is knowing that your organization will someday be okay without you. Not unlike a parent sending a child off to kindergarten, or college, there will be a sense of panic, but that needs to be replaced by a sense of trust.

Cathedral Consulting Group, LLC offers General Executive Counsel services to work in collaboration with your organization to provide fresh insights and objectivity. This service is an excellent method to minimizing the onset of Founder’s Syndrome in your organization, no matter what stage of growth the organization is in.

*Peter Giersch is COO of Cathedral Consulting Group, LLC and a Managing Director in the Midwest Office.*

*For more information, please visit Cathedral Consulting Group LLC online at www.cathedralconsulting.com or contact us at info@cathedralconsulting.com.*