

# HEROES, LIARS, FOUNDERS

B e l t o n

## AND CURMUDGEONS

How Personal Behavior Affects Organizations

J a n o f f

M e t a y e r

M a t h i a s o n

L e o n a r d



# Welcome

IT'S ODD THAT WHEN WE PERSONALLY EXPERIENCE PROBLEMS IN OUR ORGANIZATIONS, we often associate it in our own minds with someone's bad behavior ... but there are few organizational "solutions" (other than firing or the education or coaching of leaders) that recognize the enormous power of personal behavior in the way organizations function. It is as if we expect all of us passionate people to act in emotionally reasonable/neutral kinds of ways. We get outraged or flummoxed when our partners become driven by something that doesn't make perfect sense. And we are often blind to the more destructive effects of our own quirks.

But many of history's heroes have not made perfect sense. They have alienated partners, acted self righteous, insisted on their way above all others, refused to play ball, ignored what doesn't seem important to them ... hmmm! It sounds eerily familiar.

The truth is we all know that personalities can be powerful organizers in culture and the way that groups function and we are all curious about exactly how that happens and what we should do about the results. Maybe that's why this collection of articles from the *Nonprofit Quarterly* includes some of our readers' favorites.

These articles have appeared periodically from our very first national issue on. They are written by some of the most insightful and thoughtful people we have run across in the sector and they deal with everything from the effect of lying in the workplace to the issues and opportunities posed by conflict. They take on board personalities and the difficulties and benefits associated with our esteemed founders. And they address how history can make culture.

We are sure that these will be just the first of many *NPQ* collections on this topic. But don't wait for the next collection! If you subscribe today to the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, you will get the benefit every three months of the latest on everything from nonprofit financial management and fundraising to how boards really work.

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# Founders and Other Gods

by Deb Linnell

**F**OUNDERS—YOU CAN'T LIVE WITH 'EM, YOU CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT 'EM; OR SOMETIMES you die in the process of trying. 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? Why are founders so often our greatest inspiration, while so susceptible to an Icarus complex—sometimes even bringing down an entire organization with them?

Founders—those people who are sparked with a fury and a zest about a cause, a mission, an idea, and who (unlike most of the population) have the energy and the where-withal to do something about it—are typically incredible people. Not only do they see an injustice and feel inspired to fight it, but they almost always think they can win. These are the no-barriers type people whose righteous passion often catches others up in their beliefs. They take a cause, turn it into a mission, and build the people support and basic nonprofit structure to hold the flame of their passion. By nature, these are people with 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 mission's sake—that can also be their downfall.

In 1984, Karl Mathiasen<sup>1</sup> built a description of lifecycles for nonprofits based on the work of Larry E. Greiner. “Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow” was first published in the *Harvard Business Review* in July/August 1972 and later updated for republication in *Harvard Business Review* in 1998.

In his white paper “Passages: Changing Organizations and Boards,”<sup>2</sup> which describes for-profit lifecycles, Mathiasen helped many to understand, for the first time, that the sometimes strange or seemingly self-destructive ways in which many nonprofit organizations, boards, and staffs act are associated more with the phase of development they are in than with any perverseness on the part of a particular player during a particular effort. What a relief this would have been had most of the nonprofit world known about it!

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Because, as with parenting, it's important to know the common phases of development so you can plan for them and not overreact.

While the ways in which organizations develop, and the forms they take, have changed somewhat as we transitioned from the industrial to the knowledge era, the first few “evolutionary” phases and the “revolutionary” transition between them is still pretty common.

The first phase of nonprofit development, according to Mathiasen, is characterized by the organization's intense focus on cause and mission. An informal organizational structure tends to link the parties involved, and roles are largely interchangeable. There is a natural attention to outcomes because the organization measures its success by the results of its work. It is in this stage where founders have flourished, and organizations have flourished because of them.

The flexibility and informality of the first stage are critical factors in organizations that are young and under-resourced financially because they allow people to bring the full force of their personalities, passion, and creativity to bear on the situation. Some small organizations can stay in this phase for decades, retaining their “management by relationship” style and attracting others to them through the strength of their unified beliefs and combined energy level.

As Mathiasen writes, “Founders are usually highly entrepreneurial and passionately committed to the organization's goals. They attract a few other highly committed people who jump into long hours of work, rewarded not by status or money but by satisfaction of advancing the cause.” Organizational structure and management style are often driven by individual preferences and personality traits that complement the way the founder likes to work. Roles and responsibilities between all of the committed players are loosely defined and often overlap simply because that is the way things work best. Communication between staff is frequent and fluid, and they often will talk about feeling like “one big family.”

But for many organizations, success in a first stage will produce growth and investment, and these, in turn, eventually produce a natural push/pull between attention to the cause and attention to the systems needed to manage a larger organization. In Mathiasen's words, “As the organization grows, informal, sporadic communication becomes inadequate. New employees seem to be less fiercely dedicated and motivated than those who were there from the start.” Very often you will begin to hear calls from newer staff about the lack of clear and fair personnel practices, or complaints from funders about grants being misspent or unauditible. Staff and board will begin to ask why problems show up repeatedly—why questions go unanswered and gaps remain unfilled in management.

Founders do not always understand that these questions are the start of an important and somewhat inevitable transition to a more systems-focused stage. They may resist the questioning due to disinterest or because they see all such challenges as malicious or wrongheaded or an abysmal waste of time in the face of the real (mission) work of the organization. This can lead to all-out battles between the champions of mission and the champions of systems.

This is where the highly dramatized organizational passion play finds its stage—and typically there is quite a bit of sound and fury (think Macbeth). How many wonderfully

energetic visionaries have we seen forced out of their organizations as a result of this crisis? Conversely, how many original founders have literally drowned their own organizational baby by resisting the need for change or the call for a change in the power structure? These battles can be bloody and brutal and, in the worst cases, go on for a decade.

Part of the problem is that many organizations do not understand that they are playing out a highly painful archetypal moment. After all, it feels so intensely personal to the situation. Most organizations cannot identify the fact that they are making a life passage. Often the passage is actually held on the cusp of some other crisis. Staff, boards, volunteers, the founder—all will find one reason or another to bring the issue to a head, and what happens is some of the cruelest “kicking to the curb” that people will ever experience. It is particularly galling, considering the level of personal effort founders have given over the years, that they often go out with a whimper as the door hits them in the backside. (No this has not happened to me, yet!) But if a skilled outsider asks “the survivors” to tell the story a few years later, it will have all the earmarks of a growth stage in which the entire system did not have the wisdom to see all the various roles being played out, often to the bitter end. The “system” did not have the system-awareness and the leader did not have the self-awareness to step outside of the maelstrom and actually begin to describe “a shift in process.” Understanding that growth and shifts are inevitable would help ameliorate these times of crisis and allow for shifts to occur in a safer, gentler way.

Think of it; each of us has a story of the fair-haired founder who fell out of favor for:

- calling his or her own shots for one too many years;
- not empowering the (fill in the blank) board, staff, constituents;
- not putting in systems the board has requested or even formally voted on;
- losing ground to an emerging (and often opposing) power group (typically a staff-led revolt of some type);
- going too far out on a limb with a promise that was unable to be fulfilled;
- not dotting all the “i’s” and crossing the “t’s” on a major contract or a public event (detail is not a founder-personality’s strength) and losing face or embarrassing the organization;
- blaming people around them when the chips were down or simply not allowing the “baby” to grow and walk on its own.

Founder madness finds its end in some of the crises mentioned above, but most typically it starts with the staff circumventing the leader by going directly to board members to report “stuff” (that they originally suggest be kept “confidential”). The boards they are complaining to are often young, inexperienced, and used to following the founder, but board members eventually look into the allegations and find that the organization needs stronger management at this point in its growth. However, “creative founders classically are neither interested in nor temperamentally suited to provide this kind of managerial direction,” says Mathiasen. By the same token, founders do not want to let go of the “baby” they have toiled so hard to birth—sometimes over a period of many years. These struggles between founder, board, and staff—with people taking all sorts of sides and playing

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We could not live without the best among our founders. Nearly every great cause was started by a visionary, risk-taking, no-barriers, basically very courageous human being. But good founder or bad founder, the collective nonprofit story is this: Eventually the founder leaves. The leaving is often disruptive for the organization and emotionally charged for the people involved.

many major and supporting roles in the drama—often go on for several years, until finally with pride and prejudice, the founder leaves.

And while some founders are near saints whom normal people feel quite a bit of sympathy for as they limp away, other founders have left terrible legacies, and there is good reason for them to go. I worked for a founder who proceeded to bankrupt his own community organizing group rather than to adhere to some rules and systems, and to be accountable to those citizens in whose name the nonprofit did business. The bankruptcy also severely damaged several small businesses, and for several years his staff had been in one uprising after another over issues that had much to do with the ethics of how the organization operated.

“Bad” founders could be summed up as the types who really, when all is said and done, put themselves before the organization. The list goes on: their egos are huge, they do not feel accountable to anyone but themselves; they cannot plan in a strategic fashion and run their now million-dollar organizations by the seat of their pants like they did ten years ago when the budget was \$200,000. They get bored easily and move onto the next entrepreneurial program adventure without having completely stabilized the last venture, often leaving staff with a great idea, but no solid plan for implementation. They work eighty hours a week and don’t get why everyone else doesn’t have the same level of commitment.

Some cultivate chaos and disorder for a couple of reasons: one it provides the illusion that they are needed to “solve issues, problems, and crises.” More cynically, I believe that some people operate out of chaos as a way of creating near total control; if there are no standards or systems or organizational norms for communication, leaders get to control and change the rules as it suits them. The worst of founder-type personalities bully others under the guise of the mission/cause; political rightness or simply thinking their way is the right way. The very worst drag their organizations down as their leadership flame flickers into obscurity. Allowed to stay, they become more and more entrenched, not allowing for innovation that they do not understand and/or control. Many sadly become legends in their own minds based on some early-on success or achievement. They do not have the self-awareness to see how they only seek out those (staff, board, friends) who support their internal story about themselves, and they tend to turn away truth tellers or anyone who has a different idea of how the organization might be.

On the other hand, we could not live without the best among our founders. Nearly every great cause was started by a visionary, risk-taking, no-barriers, basically very courageous human being. But good founder or bad founder, the collective nonprofit story is this: Eventually the founder leaves. The leaving is often disruptive for the organization and emotionally charged for the people involved; and the founder’s qualities are lost to the organization as it moves on without him or her, closing the door on what now gets told and passed down as one of the organization’s old war stories.

This has been an observable trend for many years (since people like Mathiasen first made us aware of it). “Founderitis” has become a word to describe any leader in the throes of any part of what is described above. But founderitis isn’t just about individuals or their individual organizations. The founderitis phenomenon also has to do with the maturity and life stage of the nonprofit field as a whole. While nonprofits or “charities” have existed



for many years, the first wave of the modern, cause-related nonprofit (not focused on higher education, the arts and culture, or health and sciences) began in the 1960s. This wave has been characterized by literally millions of start-ups of cause-related organizations. You might call this the “founder stage” of the nonprofit sector, as we know it today.

For some years now we have been in reaction to the individual nonprofit founder/leaders, and have built an industry around pushing the nonprofit sector into sound management practice—or its second stage. We have turned our backs on our flaky founders (but at least they have passion!) only to embrace, too fully, “management” and second-stage managers who excel at administrative systems development as the be-all end-all to the effective nonprofit organization. The industry supporting nonprofits (nonprofit support centers, foundation- and United Way- sponsored management assistance programs, management consultants, university nonprofit centers) have played their part in helping the nonprofits to see the “error” of their first stage/founder ways, and they have ground in second-stage lessons ad nauseum for the last 20 years. It has gotten to the point that the “fix” for sound second-stage management has created a bit of a beast—an era in which second-stage management is the zenith for thousands of organizations, and where outsiders, including some foundations, benchmark a group on how well it fundraises or markets or manages (constrains) its staff versus how well it is meeting its overall mission.

The entire sector—nonprofit, philanthropist, and capacity builder—has contributed (as we co-shaped this second stage of development together) to the era of “institution building” and “right management.” The intellectual and capital investment in the second stage has been so forceful, it is hard to imagine the level of leverage and shift that will be required to drive the sector both backwards to its creative roots and forward to a new style of connectedness, crossing boundaries and reaching constituents in an effort to achieve our missions, regardless of the fancy institutions we build.

Nonprofit founders and second-stage managers are only human, as are the boards and staffs that surround them. They are also terribly under-resourced and doing more with less than any other sector (business or government). In some organizations the story of how the founder went away is the source of the group’s deepest collective pain. In others, the revolt against the “my way or the highway” second-stage manager without a heart is the most painful story. It is time we stopped pitting the two “eras” within the nonprofit against each other and find more holistic responses to the positive tension that arises within all organizations as a result of growth and change. In fact, there is so much growth and change happening so rapidly—and so much more accountability demanded of both the first- and second-stage types—that we are, as a sector, already rewriting how founders will found and how organizations will grow.

Hence, there can be a different story—with new descriptions of organizational growth that tell how people found organizations. We can learn from the thirty to forty years of “founderitis” methods, and the twenty years of excessive emphasis on “the right management” and the right tool; we can identify the best and worst of both extremes—and chart a middle course.

In order to do this people must conspire positively to push the sector to:

Help leaders, boards of directors, and line staff understand that shifts will occur and

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that different phases in an organization call for different kinds of leaders, flexible governance models, and different types of skills and competencies among staff. If the people in the system are given the heads up that the whole system will constantly shift and change, they can become generators of the change (story writers) versus reactors to the change (characters in the story).

Undo the stiff boundaries and sacred cows defined by the second stage of organizational development. Do all founders or past executive directors really have to “completely” leave an organization in order to allow the next leader/executive director to flourish? In some immature organizations with founders who lack self-awareness, this is called for; but can we be a bit more situational for those more mature organizations and leaders, so that the qualities of the founder are not entirely lost to the organization? Who are our role models for the new roles that founders can play in organizations when they let go of day-to-day control? (See sidebar at [www.nonprofitquarterly.org/founders](http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/founders)).

Support personal growth in leaders. No one human being can know him- or herself completely, but with founders who tend to have large egos tied up in the success and failure of their organization, it is even harder to let them know their weaknesses or to offer constructive criticism. There is enough literature now on the pitfalls of founderitis for seasoned board members, consultants, and even foundation staff to start talking directly to founders about the classic patterns that might emerge, and about ways in which others have managed them.

Help founders and leaders to harness their strengths and identify and build support around their deficits. Give them guidance as to what signs to look for as an indication that the organization is beginning to move into another stage of development. Ask them honestly if they have the wherewithal to become a truly “situational” leader, able to emphasize sound management practices over vision and program, for a period of time, in order to steer the organization to another level of needed strength and capacity.

Tell the truth about “bad” founders, and move them out quickly—not over several years and not through a histrionic, damaging process of hand-wringing, accusation, and blaming. This story (like the bad office gossip) simply should not be given countenance anymore by the broader nonprofit system. This means the difficult work of getting the people in the organization to change from dwelling on the more negative (and albeit more fun) founderitis stories to collectively building a book of positive stories on how to navigate leadership challenges, growth, and change in first-stage organizations.

There is emerging literature on what constitutes effective nonprofit organizations. Themes that run through this literature include the ability to remain focused on mission, focused on clients (customers), and the ability to adapt in the “information age,” or a time of continuous change. These are competencies for which many founders are naturally suited. But they will also have to know how to manage change at multiple levels and create a shared understanding of both current reality within the organization and a preferred future reality as defined by many stakeholders, not just one leader.

For those organizations that swing radically away from the informality of the founder stage to the excesses of the second stage, they too need to blend emerging leadership theory into the old “control and compliance” management style. Organizations will simply

not survive (or will be in continuous staff turnover and diminishing returns on mission) with leaders who dictate to paid employees what their jobs are and how to do them from a top-down perspective.

People who choose to work or volunteer in the many domains within the nonprofit sector typically do so with a passion to make a change in the lives of other people and in our society. Organizational systems should harness the gift of the founder and each subsequent leader's energy by facilitating them to their own (and the organization's) highest expectation. Expectations need to be evolving and raised up as the whole field of nonprofits also learns, reflects and grows. We have enough lessons now to know, at least for this time in the sector's history, what those expectations should be. The best leaders now and the leaders of the future will be facilitative by nature.

Some founders—particularly those who are self-aware and challenged to grow personally—will make the transition from the essential and still-needed role of start-up/founder, risk-taking “holder of the whole” to the role of “facilitative sharer” of vision and the whole. For those who cannot or do not want to make the transition, the nonprofit sector system needs to describe and articulate, coach, and teach (wherever and however it can) that change will happen—and that it presents an opportunity. We need to move away from transition as crisis and go forward to a time of both predicting transition that is about to occur and leveraging it to the organization's best advantage toward fulfilling its mission. Our best founders and leaders will understand how to build, maintain and transition, both personally and organizationally, and these will be core leadership competencies.

The story of a founder's passage may still be dramatic in the future; but let's make it less hurtful to the individuals involved, and to the organization. In fact, founderitis is a disease we can work together to cure. The story of the founder should be of the challenge well met; and when the need for change emerges, there should be understanding, resulting in a more intentional, thankful, and where possible, celebratory transition of some of the sector's greatest contributors—our founding leaders.

## Endnotes.

1. Karl Mathiasen of the Management Assistance Group, Washington, D.C.; [www.managementassistance.org/](http://www.managementassistance.org/), 202-238-7587.
2. Management Assistance Group, Washington, D.C., 1984.

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# Brave Leadership In Organizational Conflict

by Kenneth Bailey

For the brave  
leaders of a  
nonprofit, what  
does it mean to  
handle conflict  
well?

**C**ONFLICT WITHIN A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION CAN BE SCARY. AT THEIR BEST, nonprofits put into collective practice the personal passions and beliefs of their members. This may intensify a conflict or, conversely, cause it to be buried in the name of surface unity. Either way, intractable conflict can cause loss of funding or of leadership, or it may destabilize the system in any number of other ways. People within the organization know this and may react with fear, choosing sides or assigning blame.

For the brave leaders of a nonprofit, what does it mean to handle conflict well? To answer this question, we need first to distinguish between everyday, or discrete, conflict and noxious conflict.

## Discrete Conflict

Most conflicts are minor and can be handled relatively easily. Managers, staff and even board members can help each party understand the other's point of view or help them agree to disagree. This kind of simple tinkering is a constant requirement of managers.

Suppose the development director and a program director have an argument when they're on deadline for a grant proposal. The agency's executive director gets complaints from each about the other. After the grant is safely in, the director might make a point of thanking them for working as a team to get the grant out. In individual supervision sessions, she could talk about the conflict, reviewing each person's responsibility for what happened and being clear about behavioral changes she expects. She could also take time in a staff meeting to publicly acknowledge the courage it took for both parties to make the situation work.

At this point, the program director and development director could formally or informally agree to put the matter behind them. They might even make e-mail suggestions to the rest of the program directors about how to avoid a similar situation. This is good management of a conflict.

## Noxious Conflict

From time to time, more mean-spirited conflict may emerge with sufficient intensity that it threatens the health of the organization as a whole. In some cases the conflict will extend over many months or even years, finally influencing a significant portion of the organizational culture. This noxious conflict makes work difficult and drains the energy of everyone around it.

The solutions for noxious conflict require changes in the structure and norms of an organization. Noxious conflict indicates that it's time for an agency to question the assumptions that underlie how it does business.

**Scenario 1: The Frustrated Manager.** The community and the funders of the Clearwater Community Development Corporation (CDC) encouraged the corporation to create the new position of Community Liaison. The CDC chose Tamara Sensul, the Director of Community Programs, to develop the position. She designed it as a bridge job, in which the liaison would bring together residents, community boards, politicians and businesspeople to discuss the needs of the residents in the CDC's properties. The liaison would report to the Director of Community Programs and would need to speak the language of both the CDC's planners and CDC residents.

The position description called for two or more years' experience working with CDCs, a master's degree in urban planning, strong written and oral communication skills and a track record of facilitating community meetings. Soon afterward the hiring team found Syl Jones, who surpassed the job requirements. But a month later Tamara was less than convinced that the team had hired the right person, questioning whether Jones, who seemed very disengaged, was at all interested in the residents' points of view. After eight weeks on the job, Jones announced that he had accepted a job as assistant director of community mortgages at a local bank.

Because this happened so quickly, the hiring team then offered the position to Val Guenther, their second choice. Val accepted, but within a month Tamara again questioned whether they'd hired the right person, as Val constantly argued with her. After six heated arguments in a two-month period, Val approached the Executive Director (ED) and complained that Tamara was micromanaging him.

The ED refused to intervene. He told Val to take it up with Tamara directly. Afterward the ED told Tamara to keep track of her problems with Val so that she could let him go.

Within two weeks of that discussion, the CDC received an unexpected opportunity to bid for a series of projects. This required large portions of Tamara's and the ED's time. The interactions between Tamara and Val became more and more charged. Val, who had resolved originally to figure out a way to get back on the right track with Tamara, instead decided to quit after three months.

The ED blamed Tamara for not resolving the situation more quickly. The resignation came a mere week before the Clearwater CDC's annual stakeholder meeting. The ED told Tamara that the resignation would look very bad, as the liaison position had been declared

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a priority at the previous year’s meeting.

Subsequently, the ED “rode herd” on Tamara in terms of her supervision of staff. However, the real issues at stake remained unresolved. Did the hiring criteria and the job description fit the needs of the liaison job? Did the ED’s refusal to get involved indicate a weak system of support and guidance for the position? Did this in turn indicate a weak organizational commitment to the liaison’s role in the community? Most fundamentally, did the CDC have any real commitment to the quality of life of the residents, or was the organization too focused on housing development and management to give more than lip service to residents’ concerns?

These are questions that could easily cause rifts between the CDC board and management. But by not asking them, the organization runs the risk that the conflict will resurface in the future.

**Scenario 2: The “Insistent” Board Member.** The constituent-driven board of Kelsey Parent Advocacy Organization (PAO) wanted to fire one of its board members, Jane Osbourne. Other members were fed up with Jane’s behavior, especially the way in which she droned on about the organization’s quarterly newsletter. The other members felt she was drawing valuable time and energy away from other important projects.

On the other hand, Jane, a neighborhood parent of three middle school students, was the hardest-working volunteer on the board, creating a draft of the newsletter every quarter and turning it over to the staff to complete. Kelsey PAO only had three people on staff: a Parent Organizer, an Administrative Assistant and an Executive Director (ED).

The other board members complained among themselves about the extra work the newsletter required after Jane turned in the draft. It had become a running joke to make fun of her flowery language—a point of comfortable connection, in fact, among other board members. In board meetings when Jane opened her mouth, people rolled their eyes and sometimes just cut her off.

This low-grade conflict went on for more than a year without being formally addressed. Staff members were eventually drawn into it. Things came to a head when Jane declared her interest in a new staff position. At a board meeting, the treasurer remarked that Jane should not apply because the job needed someone who could “perform in the position.” Other board members chuckled and the meeting turned into a tearful shouting match.

After this disaster, the ED suggested hiring a facilitator to get to the bottom of the dysfunction on the board. In the course of that intervention, board members finally confessed their long-standing frustration with Jane and her newsletter drafts. One board member muttered, “If you can call them drafts,” after which more laughter erupted from board members.

Jane left the meeting in tears again. The ED tried to talk her into returning, but she refused. Then the ED scolded the board members for their behavior. The members felt mildly regretful for a few weeks, but they soon got back to business as usual, eventually dumping the newsletter.

The tensions about Jane and the newsletter might have been a doorway to healthy



organizational change if the players had been able to look more deeply at the dynamics of the whole agency. For example, if Kelsey PAO was committed to developing a newsletter, why did it permit such an inefficient publishing process to persist for a year? If it wasn't, why did it continue using up valuable resources on the newsletter? What did this say about the degree to which the board had thought through a strategic approach to the organization's work? The newsletter conflict was a flashpoint—a symptom of a nest of interconnected problems, utterly common in small nonprofits.

## The Leader's Role

Think about the carnival game in which gophers pop up and you have to hit as many as possible as quickly as possible, using a mallet. The leaders of Clearwater CDC and Kelsey PAO swung a mallet at the gophers without catching the pattern of the pop-ups. In so doing, they actually blocked organizational resolution. They were not creatively using the energy produced by the conflict to bring about positive organizational change.

But this is easier said than done, of course. Leaders of organizations are still learning how to perceive and welcome conflict's messages. Here are some helpful hints:

When a conflict emerges, see if you can connect it to others. Trace it back in time. Think about the issues that have surfaced in the conflict. Have they surfaced previously? What is the history of the situation? Have conversations with people about how the situation has evolved. Be willing to give up your own construction of reality in the process. In the meantime, stay in touch with the people directly involved in the conflict.

Overcome the cynicism of others. People in and around the organization might believe that the current state of affairs is the way leadership wants it. Staff might, in fact, think of any questioning as a trick or a waste of their time. People might also fear that they are being asked to air the dirty laundry of others. If you experience ambivalence and silence from people with potential information, start by expressing openness and your own willingness to be proven wrong (which had better be genuine!). Let them know how you are going to move forward—that you truly want their point of view to be included in a whole-system view of the problem.

Face your own and others' fears of irretrievable rupture. If a problem with deep implications surfaces, you might experience some sort of organizational rupture—in other words, a breakdown that portends a loss of staff, board members, managers or funding. As you conceive and implement a re-organization, emotions—and resistance—will be very high. The more you retain those in fear as participants in the conversation, the less powerful such resistance becomes. Also, don't make the mistake of underestimating your own fear. Talk it through with a trusted advisor who is willing to be honest and, if necessary, lovingly harsh with you.

Resist the urge to maintain stability. Many believe that the mark of a well-run organization is in its stability. But the ability to evolve powerfully is just as important. One of the inherent contradictions at the core of organizational life is that we struggle to adapt and evolve at the same time as we struggle mightily to stay the same. This contradiction inherently causes tension.

Hold that tension and legitimate it as an energy source for change. This may feel

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unbearable to those who like to get things in order as quickly as possible. Remember that good management in a developing organization (which we all are) requires leaders who can maintain a balance between the chaos of not knowing and the orderliness of knowing.

### In Closing

When organizations begin to fail or when they have failed repeatedly, they start to send out showy flares. Some of this will materialize as conflict.

Leaders can help their organizations uncover the problems beneath this conflict, or they can retard and obfuscate the process. When leaders get in the way of the process, sometimes it's because they believe that they alone are responsible for solving the problem. That's not the case. Leaders are responsible for keeping their organizations relevant and effective. One way to do that is to bravely undertake holistic inquiry into the true origins of noxious organizational conflicts.

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# The Organizational Importance of Honesty

by Erline Belton

**W**E HAVE ALL EXPERIENCED THE PUBLIC LIE THAT GOES UNCHALLENGED. It may be baldly untrue but somehow accepted as the basis for action with life and death consequences. Some of our experience of public lies may be based on differences in values or perceptions, but sometimes what is said just simply violates the facts—this is disheartening and drives people out of public participation.

The same may be said of organizations. A nonprofit may, on the surface, be making every effort to promote teamwork and “the higher good,” but if its people continue to perceive a culture that supports a different and less reliable set of operating norms and assumptions than what is written or espoused, they will not bring themselves wholly to our efforts.

Here are some typical reasons for telling lies:

- to avoid pain or unpleasant consequences;
- to promote self-interest and a particular point of view;
- to protect the leaders or the organization;
- to perpetuate myths that hold the organization or a point of view together;

Regardless of why they are told, untruths and lies can cause people to disengage—and they can also diminish the spirit people bring into the workplace. This leads to a sometimes massive loss of applied human intellectual and physical capital assets. A disinvestment of human spirit results in what I refer to as a Gross National People Divestiture (GNPD). The GNPD index in any organization or society can be directly related to the prevalence and magnitude of untruths told and allowed to stand. GNPD occurs when your organization’s tolerance of untruth creates a climate of cynical disbelief engendering a lack of trust in information and relationships. This automatically creates management problems that are sometimes difficult to put your finger on but are often very powerfully present nonetheless.

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risk.

Our challenge is to buck the culture and engage people in building a climate of truth telling that will lead to a newly revived work ethic and heightened individual and collective energy. In order to do this effectively, we must understand the conditions that support the emergence of truth, and understand and eliminate those that routinely undermine its presence in our organizations.

### **Staying Safe: Are You Avoiding Pain, but Inviting Extinction?**

According to psychologist Abraham Maslow, our strongest mutual instinct is to be safe from harm and to protect our sense of well-being. It is this instinct that guides us to avoid risk (or what we perceive to be risk), and to respond cautiously to changes in our environment, relying heavily on familiar patterns of behavior in an effort to promote and sustain a sense of equilibrium. As coworkers or managers, this instinct often propels us to play it safe and go along with the program. Ironically, in a quickly changing environment this is obviously counterproductive.

Thus, too often, we opt for the illusion of stability in order to promote a sense of psychological well-being. This sense is acquired in exchange for at least a fragment of the whole truth; and since we all know “the truth” is relative anyway, we hardly notice the cost. It is true that we all seek solid ground when in doubt. But does that solid ground need to be sameness? Solid ground might be, for instance, a place to stand for something we can believe in and whose integrity we can rely on when all else appears undependable and unpredictable.

Over time illusions dissolve and evaporate. When they do, those who have used them for grounding are left less safe, less secure than ever. And those who have allowed even the smallest of illusions to inform our management decisions, have placed entire organizations, teams and ourselves at risk.

Because of the diversity of perspectives and information available in any group, a collective organizational “truth” has the potential to be stronger and more accurate than any one individual’s truth. But it is only when we have the combination of individual as well as collective seeking of truth, that organizational potential is realized. This requires an open atmosphere where people can depend upon one another to engage honestly, respectfully, and with spirit intact. It requires the testing of personal assumptions among people and that requires a level of trust.

More often than not, organizational potential is not realized. Why? Team meetings, team coordination, and team feedback all involve a diversity of people and personalities that have at least one thing in common: they don’t want to get hurt; they don’t want unpleasant things to happen; they want to feel safe; and they want to contribute. We, as fallible individuals create the environment, and environmental conditions can support either truth or lies.

### **Conditions That Support Untruths**

**Groupthink:** The tendency to just go along with the crowd, avoid drawing criticism to ourselves, and assume that everyone agrees, is so subtle and unconscious that we are generally unaware of it. As a result, we often all wind up somewhere nobody really wanted to be. For instance, imagine the scenario of an organization trying to decide on whether to apply for a major contract. Most staff members are in favor of going forward while a few

are privately concerned that the organization does not have the capacity to handle the work or the money. The push toward acquiring the contract is so strong that the isolated few remain silent for fear of being characterized as pessimists or naysayers. The organization lands the contract and finds itself in terrible straits trying to handle the management challenge. One variation on this is situations in which everyone knows something but there is an undercurrent of pressure not to state it aloud. Colluding in lies can be crippling. In one organization I know, the staff was asked about the biggest lie inhabiting the organization. After much hemming and hawing, one man finally blurted out, “The lie is that we provide good services that the community wants. We don’t and we treat any client who complains like a troublemaker.” He went on to provide examples. Everyone else around the table nodded agreement immediately. Consider the enormous cost of having kept this silent for years! This was a key organization, serving an isolated immigrant community. Unfortunately the dialogue group did not include the executive director or board members who later did not allow the conversation to progress further. This was seven years ago, and to this day, funders see the organization as “chronically in trouble.”

**Imaginary conflicts:** People often choose their words and edit their facts to protect themselves from anticipated reactions. One person’s imaginary conflicts can warp the way information is exchanged. In a team, the distortion is amplified by the processes of repetition and groupthink. Eventually, the distorted facts may culminate in a “self-fulfilling prophecy” where our worst fears materialize precisely because we acted in fear. Think about the executive director that everyone soft pedals around for fear of hitting one of her sacred organizational cows. Rather than gently prodding for potential change or aiming for a more open debate about organizational myths, staff members assume that some topics are “off limits” and live in silence with the uncomfortable consequences. Of course, this only fulfills the idea of the executive director as a leader entrenched in her ways, and prevents her from getting accurate feedback—and so it goes.

**Hidden agendas:** When individuals have their own interests at heart, or believe that something is true but fail to disclose this fact, seemingly straightforward discussions have a way of going wrong. Unexpected disunity and conflict can undermine team spirit and group confidence, preventing the group from working efficiently and effectively. Self-interest isn’t so bad in itself, but when kept underground it acts like a dark matter pulling everything in its direction—down. The most distressing of these situations occur when individuals see themselves as self-righteous warriors using any means necessary in their “struggle for justice.”

## The Spectrum of Everyday Lies

**Exaggerating or underplaying the truth:** This is often done for one’s own benefit, for that of the team, or for a teammate. These lies usually reflect (or exceed) desired expected outcomes.

**Shading the truth:** This is usually done to make a point or to protect yourself, your team, or your teammate. Again, such a lie is used to make the impression that things are more like you want or expect them to be than they actually are. These lies are often used in a noble effort to protect others from the truth.

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By not fully disclosing your knowledge, you are in fact manipulating people for your own purposes (whatever they may be).

**Beating around the bush or throwing up a smoke screen:** This is a delay tactic used to enlarge the insulation or cushion of safety between you and somebody who makes you uncomfortable. This category includes situations in which you withhold an opinion or fail to tell a person where he or she really stands with you for fear of creating complications or undesired reactions. It also includes instances when you fail to say no directly, when no is what you mean.

**Pretending certainty or expertise:** There is a lot of pressure in the workplace to provide answers now, to know the facts, the status, the scoop. These lies are often passed off as bravado, but they create unfounded expectations and dependencies in others, thus setting them up for unpleasant surprises.

**Not letting others know your true position:** Especially in times of ambiguity or controversy, there is a temptation to cover yourself by either making your stand unclear, or stating it in such a way that it sounds as if you are in agreement with others when, in fact, you are not. This is a common feature of groupthink and often leads to outcomes nobody really wanted, but everybody assumed they did!

**Consciously withholding relevant information:** This is often used as a kind of power play to leverage the value and impact of information that you have. By not fully disclosing your knowledge, you are in fact manipulating people for your own purposes (whatever they may be).

**Perceptions of powerlessness:** Especially in teams with strong leaders, people may feel they have no legitimate voice and are vulnerable (by proximity) to the “powers that be.” Opting to assume that others know best, some people often let others make choices and decisions for them, and withhold information that might influence the discussion. Once this happens, these people have made themselves powerless to do anything but accept the consequences.

**Perceptions of invulnerability:** Belonging to a successful team can be exhilarating—so exhilarating that maxims such as “success sows the seeds of its own failure” seem irrelevant and only applicable to somebody else. There is a strong sense of being “in the know” and having a unique advantage over others who are outside the circle of your team. This can lead to carelessness, letting perceptions, communications, and facts slide by without diligent examination and discussion.

**Misplaced loyalty or dysfunctional rescuing:** Relationships that have longevity often interfere with the ability to be objective about performance, and ultimately one’s competence to do the job. Loyalty to these relationships can cause individuals to look the other way and avoid listening to obvious data that suggests that either the person is in the wrong position, or that it is time to move on. Silence on the issues of lack of performance is a major untruth. If unacknowledged it creates disharmony and reduces leadership’s credibility. Once acknowledged, and once actions have been taken, an environmental unfreezing occurs that revitalizes human spirit and performance.

**Failing to give due credit:** A common way of self-promotion in a group setting, this denies or diminishes the value of others’ input and contributions. It disempowers people and leads to the inappropriate use of human resources.

**Deluding yourself—self-deception:** This is perhaps the most common source of

everyday lies. You have both conscious and unconscious internal mechanisms that operate to protect you from cold hard facts in the misguided belief that what you don't know won't hurt you. These self-deceptions set you up for hard falls, and introduce faulty information into whatever team dynamic you are part of.

## Conditions That Support Truth Telling

**Individual examination/accountability:** Individual organizations and teams can “build better truths.” Since untruths can be intentional, the truth must be intentional. Collective truth for a team is the result of individual encouragement through consent that is informed, uncompelled, and mutual. The leader has a critical and essential role as role model and must understand that his or her behavior is under more scrutiny and will be given more weight than that of the others. If the leader fails at this, the organizational setting will also fail.

**Visible commitment to truth telling:** Relentlessly stating that truth telling has value is only the first step. Explaining thoughts, acknowledging the power of our words, and being accountable to one another for our actions will demonstrate that concept. In spite of our fear about telling the truth, relationships can be consistently strengthened with truth as the foundation.

**Collective truths and collective responsibility:** All team members need to collaborate in a dialogue that sets the foundation for an agreed-upon definition and description of “reality.” This vision of reality is not complete until each member gives explicit consent and can accept the idea that the view of reality presented, even with qualifications, is one that they can sign on to. Once there is ownership and a feeling of collective responsibility, a future can be created. This kind of dialogue requires personal risk, courage, and time.

**The Whole Truth:** Access to reliable, solid, and truthful information is the one commodity every person, regardless of role or position, needs in order to succeed. As people who live or work together, we require information that is communicated openly and freely. Information based on the “whole truth” informs decisions, actions, behavior, and dialogue to support an outcome. Organizations that support truth telling understand that there are four critical components to the whole truth, and to laying the foundation for achieving outcomes that have meaningful results and credibility: information must be complete, timely, accurate, and true.

**Information Flow:** Information creates its leaders' legacies and the values they stand for. Consider an organization's values and beliefs in the context of its history and current reality. All available facts and information (including personal stories, feelings, and visible and invisible reactions) are on the table in an accurate and accessible way; all information is understood and shared.

**Free choice, sustained environmental spirit, safety:** In organizations that value truth telling, each individual is free to evaluate and decide based solely on the merit of available truthful facts; there isn't even a hint of social, political, or economic coercion. The environment must show evidence that it is “safe” to tell the truth. There must be visible examples of situations where the truth was told, acknowledged, and acted on—

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and the consequences were not punitive. This does not mean that the truth may not bring a fallout; that could very well happen. People will leave organizations in which they don't fit, and that is a positive thing for the organization and the individuals involved.

Running an organization based on truth requires—and demands—the taking of personal risks and time. The perception that time is limited, or the fear that the truth will hurt us, or hurt someone or something we care about, are perhaps the greatest obstacles to organizational truth telling.

Busy men and women are always looking for shortcuts and abbreviations to help speed things along. But truth lies at the very foundation of a successful organization, and you can't lay a solid foundation when you cut corners; doing so places the whole structure in danger of eventual collapse. But if your culture now includes a tolerance for and comfort with lying (as it is described in the above "spectrum"), you have to be explicit about changing your culture and about what the "whole truth" must include. And then you must patiently and persistently inch your way toward it, in practice. Organizational healing and reconciliation are the natural first steps toward restoring a culture where truth telling is a value. It is through the process of making the change as an organization-wide effort that we reclaim the vital human spirit necessary for renewing our organizations, communities and country. Truth telling leads to freedom. Freedom requires that we challenge the way things are in organizations if we truly want them to accomplish what is in our collective hearts.

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# Defending Defensiveness

by Sandra Janoff

**N**OT LONG AGO I WAS REGALING A FRIEND WITH MY STRONG VIEWS ON systems change. “There is no such thing as sustainable change!” I said, “People have to keep discovering for themselves how they can best respond to the changing world.” When I got no answer, I repeated what I had just said. Without waiting for a response, I reworded my assertion and said it again. At last I paused for breath.

“I don’t agree,” my friend said mildly. “We have to keep looking for ways to insure sustainability. The most important thing in any change process is making sure that it lasts.”

“Lasting is not the issue,” I shot back, with some vehemence. “What we do each step of the way is the issue.” I was determined to win what had now become an argument. I felt we were on different wavelengths. How would I defend myself and the rightness of my point in what had become a very unpleasant situation? I secretly deployed my ultimate weapon. I simply wrote him off. Once discounted, this person became unimportant to me, not worthy of my time.

In full self-righteous bloom, I now felt superior. I put myself on automatic pilot, driven entirely by an unconscious impulse. I could neither see nor hear anything outside of my construct of the interaction. More, I had shut down parts of myself—my curiosity, my openness, and my capacity to appreciate the complexity of the situation. I had originally wanted my point heard. Now I was stuck with the busywork of looking for rationales to protect my ego. It was some hours later, reflecting on this difference of opinion that had turned into an unpleasant exchange, that I remembered that this was not the first time a conversation had gone off-track due to my insistence on “being heard” (read: being right).

Now I have known this weakness in myself for some time. I am after all, a grown-up psychologist, not a little kid. But that is exactly the point. I consider myself an expert adult and still couldn’t get myself heard! In an eye blink I had reverted to a childhood strategy for protecting myself. I had become defensive—in a good cause, I thought—but not to good effect.

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The worst part is the fact that my expertise lies in facilitating difficult conversations among contentious players in large diverse groups. But human dynamics are filled with contradictions that we hear about regularly, for example, organizations that offer conflict resolution but can't stop their own internal fighting, or anti-poverty agencies that pay staff less than a living wage. We all have so much growing up to do. In this article I want to outline some thoughts on personal and organizational defensiveness.

### Taking Things Personally

Taking things personally and needing to be “right” (feel superior) can adversely affect the health of our organizations. Granted, we all live at the center of our own universes, but working with others in systems requires a mental shift— from seeing yourself as the central character with “the right” view to experiencing that you are one of many players who have a full spectrum of views. Shifting your world-view can mean rethinking your place in the larger picture. This frightens many people because it is destabilizing.

Here is an extreme example. When Copernicus discovered that the earth was not at the center of the universe in the early 1600s, he held back from making it public and died not knowing the impact of his work. When Galileo announced it 50 years later, he was imprisoned and forced to renounce his belief—and he spent the rest of his life in jail. It was such a hard pill to swallow for the religious and politically powerful people in the seventeenth century because it implied that “man” was simply a part of nature and not superior to it, which ran counter to the theories of the day. How does this translate to everyday life with work systems? If we believe that every nonprofit organization—along with the communities we work in and our field of endeavor—really are systems, then we have to act on its most important precept: no one part is superior or inferior to any other part. That doesn't mean losing our credibility or sense of self, but developing the ability to see the connections we have to everything else, the dependence we have on each other and the “both/and” nature of things. That means not taking things personally—not being wedded to seeing things one way (my way).

### Defensiveness: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

We use defensiveness as a protective armor to help us maximize our pleasure and security, and minimize our internal conflict and anxiety. Unfortunately, and perversely, it often has the reverse effect.

We all learn defensive mechanisms as small children, developing strategies when we have few choices, little consciousness, and few ways to protect against thoughtless adults or hurtful peers. In those early years when we learn how to defend ourselves, the process is as inevitable as it is benign. We keep anxiety at bay by turning down the volume of adult demands, retreating into ourselves, throwing temper tantrums, drawing pictures, or going outside to play. Indeed all these ploys work pretty well.

As we grow up we adopt adult versions of our defenses. We can also add a layer by developing defenses for our defensiveness. For instance, we may feel so aggressive about an opposing point of view that we look for others who share our view, have outraged conversations with them, and create alliances to feel supported in our “rightness.” Addition-



ally some of us go to work in organizations, usually hierarchical, with all sorts of triggers to childish feelings and behavior.

Unfortunately, complex systems very often reproduce problems at many different levels. How we act individually will often be reproduced organizationally, even throughout an entire field. In my opening story, I personally retreated from continued conversation with my colleague. When leaders act that way, it should come as no surprise when their organization similarly retreats from difficult interactions or disagreements. In fact it might do so to save its leader from losing face, status, or positioning. This can have some disastrous results—blockading the progress of collective learning and preventing the development of optimal strategies and collective clout. In fact, a major reason for organizational limitations can be leaders' personal "issues." Let's try to get a grip on this!

## Leaders' Anxiety About Losing Control

Many of us look to leaders of organizations to be confident and unflappable; so it can be especially difficult to appear unsure of how to proceed in a particular situation. It's also true that we don't like to lose face. In fact, if we are in an organization that has traditionally functioned in a parent/child hierarchical mode, all may collude in the fantasy that leaders have or should have within themselves all that it takes to set organizational direction. This is just plain silly, especially in the world we are living in.

Today's rate of change is explosive and has gone beyond what our individual psyches and intellects can tolerate. Thinking skillfully about how to direct an organization takes multiple skills, ongoing dialogue and a variety of perspectives. To make it work, all must feel able to discuss their own points of view and all must feel commitment to the whole of the organization and its constituents. The role of the leader, therefore, is to create the conditions for all to understand the whole and contribute to constructive next steps.

Maybe this role is less alluring than one that pretends to have all the answers, but in the end it will work better. The trick to being this kind of leader is in learning to contain your own anxiety while acknowledging, mobilizing, and transforming your organization's capability for constructive action. Here are some simple insights that might help:

**Acknowledge and Contain Your Own Anxiety.** My first suggestion may seem so simplistic, it could be easily dismissed, but it's the essence of good leadership. When you feel that you are losing control because the group you are working with is acting out of control, become aware of your rising anxiety and don't act impulsively. Contain your anxiety! Then try a path different from the one you would normally take. If your tendency is to flood the air with words to quiet the din around you, force yourself to keep quiet. On the other hand, if your tendency is to withdraw, then force yourself to stay in the conversation. In either case, be aware of how your behavior, under the stress of tense and sometimes virulent disagreements, acts as a model to others in the room. Once you abandon your habitual response, you may wish to check and acknowledge anxiety elsewhere in the room. Ask people to say where they are on the issue. You'll get a more differentiated, realistic picture of where the group is. Keep the purpose front and center. Your group members' job is to do the best they can in the time they have—and that's your job too.

**Mobilize Energy and Transform Group's Capability to Act.** No matter what

Then try a path  
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the conversation.

Don't ignore the fact that anxiety is energy, sometimes called "blocked excitement," and it can fuel progress if you work with it in the group. Remind others in the group about this and about the fact that change always elicits some discomfort.

the circumstance is, internal or external, you don't have to solve every last problem on the table to be successful. Do you know the 80/20 rule? We spend 80 percent of our time struggling over the 20 percent of things we don't agree on. Change the focus. Instead of looking at where you're apart, focus on where you're together. What's the common ground? Help group members determine where they're in agreement. If there is shared energy on some issues, start working immediately on those. What about the issues people don't agree on? Make a "not agreed" list. Acknowledge the divisive issues. Take that information into account as you move forward, and help the group figure out how to attend to them later. You will be surprised at how much energy there is when you don't have to negotiate every conflict immediately. The "not agreed" issues won't disappear; you can handle them at another time with more information. They just don't have to be turned into action items at that moment. Agreeing to work on common ground despite unresolved differences is a transforming step.

You will also limit people's need to be right by not giving in to a "win/lose" mentality in the group. You will eventually create a community that has bonded in active service to what it can do together.

Finally don't ignore the fact that anxiety is energy, sometimes called "blocked excitement," and it can fuel progress if you work with it in the group. Remind others in the group about this and about the fact that change always elicits some discomfort. We don't fully know what is facing us. Try to get to the point where most of your discomfort is simply curiosity about what will happen next. Check the group and find out who else is curious. It may sound corny, but you can mobilize the group's energy when you have common ground on which to act and curiosity as a framework for taking a next step. I promise you something different will happen.

### **If I Make the Effort to Evolve, Will My Nonprofit Follow Suit?**

If it wants to be effective, your nonprofit doesn't have a choice but to evolve.

What is an evolved, mature organization? It is one where members have developed the ability to solve increasingly complex problems with external as well as internal partners. A mature organization is one that can manage and resolve its task and process problems as they arise and move forward consciously, reflecting on how they are doing. The process of going from an immature group to an evolved group involves discovering new skills, insights, creative ideas, and points of view. When the group gets stuck, the leader champions the will to stay engaged, researching the issues, working through differences and finding common ground for action that deploys the energy of all those in and around the organization. In this way the smallest group can act powerfully as part of a larger system. It is the soul of an adaptive organization, as described by Carl Sussman in the Winter 2003 issue of the *Nonprofit Quarterly*.

Most of us aspire to work with others in a collegial, collaborative way, but when we let defensive behavior into the mix, things can go offtrack. Your job as leader is to help groups find a way forward, even when differences seem acute, directing the energy to areas of agreement. Your job is also to be mindful of what you can control and what you can't control. You can control who's involved in planning decisions. You can control who

has access to what information. You can control the conditions under which people work together. You can't control people's behavior but you can, by your own behavior, set standards for inclusion and continuous, courageous learning.

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You can't control  
people's behavior  
but you can, by your  
own behavior, set  
standards for  
inclusion and  
continuous,  
courageous learning.

# Considerations on Leadership in an Immigrant Population: Lessons from the Haitian Community

by Nesly Metayer

Multiple studies on leadership have concentrated on the attributes and behaviors of the individual. A major flaw of this approach is that it ignores the environmental and situational factors that condition the leader's orientation to his or her position in the situation.

**M**ANAGING ANY NONPROFIT HUMAN SERVICE ORGANIZATION IS A difficult endeavor. But for immigrant organizations the battle is even more taxing, requiring the organization and its participants to function between two worlds—each with a different set of priorities, standards, demands, languages, and cultural protocols. Leadership at such organizations must be particularly agile on the one hand and firmly grounded on the other to handle this bridging function without sacrificing important aspects of the organization. But this and other observations of leadership paradoxes can also be found in other kinds of organizations in communities that are culturally, politically, and economically marginalized.

Multiple studies on leadership have concentrated on the attributes and behaviors of the individual. A major flaw of this approach is that it ignores the environmental and situational factors that condition the leader's orientation to his or her position in the situation.

While there is fairly wide acknowledgement of the critical role played by nonprofit organizations in building the health and overall viability of immigrant communities, there is relatively little recognition of the demanding complexity involved in leading and managing immigrant organizations. These complexities, in my observation, flow, in large part, from the mix of political histories in the organization; ingrained cultural assumptions and legacies that have been brought forward into the organizational setting; and the group's experience of being culturally marginalized from the mainstream. All of these components create an organizational "habitat." Building from empirical investigations in the Haitian community, this article will highlight leadership challenges inside Haitian organizations with the hope that these insights will be relevant to other immigrant and marginalized organizations.

Haitian by birth, I have worked with many community-based organizations over the past 14 years. As the Director of Community Planning at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, I helped design and provide capacity-building initiatives for many differ-

ent types of nonprofits involved in public health initiatives. Particularly where communities were at special risk for health concerns, I have supported the creation of new organizations and overseen management-consulting services to existing nonprofits. In so doing, I have worked with mainstream American organizations, Hispanic and African American organizations, and immigrant organizations, including a number of Haitian organizations.

Over this decade and a half, I have repeatedly watched otherwise excellent management consultants fail miserably to assess the dynamics of Haitian organizations. Well-meant recommendations and interventions on issues such as constituent involvement, governance, personnel policies, decision-making, and transparency of operations produced little to no meaningful change inside these organizations. It became common to see these organizations involved in lengthy periods of paralysis, chronic conflict, and, sometimes, system-wide disengagement—by staff, board, constituents, and eventually, funders. A number of them have failed entirely.

These observations motivated me to engage in a series of investigations of organizational practices in Haitian-community-based nonprofit organizations in the U.S. This article draws on those empirical investigations, conducted over the last four years in multiple U.S. cities with large Haitian populations. My overarching finding is that cultural norms in the home country have profound and lasting impacts on the ways in which leadership and management are practiced in U.S.-based immigrant organizations. Further, I believe that the situation presents an extraordinarily powerful opportunity for leaders.

My research<sup>1</sup> was based on the hypothesis that the repressive politics of the Haitian government have greatly influenced collective action and the formation of organizations in Haiti; and that, in their turn, these institutional experiences in Haiti influence the formation and the development of Haitian organizations in the U.S.

Unfortunately, few organizational studies have seriously looked at the replication of major societal issues in nonprofit organizations. While organization development theory, cross-cultural studies, and comparative management studies have emphasized the organizing power of culture in the way organizations look and act, transnational organizations and immigrant-based organizations in the U.S. significantly push even at the boundaries of this set of constructs. For instance, while most studies on comparative management examine the differences of management practices in organizations immersed in their home environments, a major focus for the ethnic-based organization must be on the adjustment of the interaction between external cultural pressures and the internal dynamics of the organization in its community.

Research conducted over the last four years has evolved from participant observation,<sup>2</sup> phenomenological interviews, and structured focus groups with different Haitian organizations. The major findings can be summarized as follows:

- The reproduction of old patterns of organizing and managing organizations
- The extension of social conflict and social competition inside the organization
- Predispositions about Haitian leadership and cooperative behaviors

[A]s one participant commented, “The Haitian organization in the U.S. can be compared to an organization in Haiti that’s been transported” — and that trip has involved a lot of baggage.

## Haitians in the United States

Although it is impossible to obtain an exact number of Haitians in the United States, it is estimated that about one million Haitian immigrants live in the U.S.; the largest of these communities are in Miami, New York, and Boston. These communities number 350,000, 300,000, and 70,000 respectively and they include all strata of Haitian society. Haitian organizations exist in all of these communities, easing the transition process of Haitians to the United States and attending to the political, social, and human service needs of community members. With such strength of numbers comes the possibility of maintaining cultural prerogatives, and, as one participant commented, “The Haitian organization in the U.S. can be compared to an organization in Haiti that’s been transported”<sup>3</sup>—and that trip has involved a lot of baggage.

Haitians created the third major revolution in modern world history. From the successful resistance of slaves and their organizing to defeat in 1804 the most powerful army of that time (the Napoleonic army), Haiti emerged as the first black republic and the second independent nation in the Americas. This caused colonial powers like the U.S. to isolate Haiti as a threat. However, there were major obstacles for development of the new republic. Isolated from the rest of the world for more than a century, Haitian politicians have manipulated the masses, marginalized the peasant society, and claimed power for personal gain, using patronage and coercion to maintain power. The bourgeoisie marchande allied to whomever was in power used commerce for enrichment and to sustain its social positioning. In this context, there is no history of accountable institution and community building. Organization is seen largely as the vehicle for exploitation and self-enrichment. Although some efforts were made in the nation’s history to change this system, these practices have prevailed. Pean summarized the Haitian experience with the following statement:

Very early after the Haitian Independence, the practice of corruption named *Plumer la Poule* (‘Pluck the Hen,’ in reference to the pillaging of public funds) explained all forms of loss for the nation—loss of credit, trust, knowledge—all together to explain the precariousness of the living conditions and the insecurity.<sup>4</sup>

The transition of Haitians into the U.S. has not been easy. Many came fleeing political oppression and bring strong feelings about the trustworthiness of political and other leaders. Once here, many have found that the experience of discrimination against Haitians in America is not only multilayered and intense in and of itself, but also reinforces existing divisions in the Haitian community. Very early in life, Haitians see the manifestation of social practices of exclusion: the *moun la vil* and *moun an deyò* (the antagonism between peasants and urban settlers). These and other deep divisions based on old class structures actively play out in the practices of Haitian nonprofits here in America. The stakes are quite a bit higher, however, than they might be in more mainstream organizations, because community-based organizations and the politics of the larger Haitian community are often solidly interconnected, with the power structure in those organizations representing the new field for power positioning and reinforcement of class distinctions.

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Without understanding these stakes, the contextual politics of the community, and the cultural “markers” of class or power position embedded in a particular political history, a management consultant may be nearly oblivious to cues that might otherwise be essential guides to our work.

Handled traditionally as posts of authority, leadership positions bring with them a designation of social class and social status. We see this play out in all kinds of hierarchical organizations. But in any society deeply marked by class competition and social marginalization, leadership is seen as social positioning, providing power and control over the agenda. With Haitian organizations in the United States, you see this dynamic play out internally based on the politics of division brought over from Haiti, and also externally as this community tries to position itself in an environment that often discriminates against it based on a multiplicity of perceptions. Other communities of color have experienced this funneling effect in terms of leadership—the tendency to designate one or a very few leaders to represent a community.

### An Example

The Haitian Minority Project is well established in Florida and involves a good representation of the Haitian population. Over the years the organization has built a solid reputation with private and public funders; it exudes a level of professionalism. The organization provides social services, health education, and client advocacy for a growing constituency. The organization recruits young Haitian professionals anxious to contribute to the life of the Haitian community.

Once in the organization, however, the aspirations of staff and their commitment to their own and their constituencies’ human development and empowerment are confronted with the lack of structure and lack of direction that permeates the entire organization. As noted by one staff member I interviewed, “In this organization everyone fends for themselves, there is no sense of direction, everyone does as they want.” The absence of internal accountability systems appears to be reinforced by a system of favorites, where your relation with the executive director determines your level of influence.

Why is it that the appearance of professionalism for the external world did not extend through to internal operations? How could the leaders not see the threat to the very infrastructure they have built over the years? What should the role of the leader be in creating and maintaining an energetic organization?

As we know, leadership is a continual interaction between the leaders and the followers. A closer look at the behaviors of followers and leaders in the Haitian context provides the insight that the followers heavily condition the leaders. One assumption embedded in Haitian culture and history is that leaders act as authority. The leader must have the requisite knowledge for a particular decision or, if not, must pretend to know. Participation and delegation, in this context, are often seen as weakness, incompetence, and laziness. Other related practices in Haitian organizations are that the followers need to be taught; they should limit questions in meetings (staying alive in an organization requires private, off-the-record conversations with the boss); and they need to watch out for the boss and try to get close to him or her—the closer you are to the boss, the more

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power you have in the organization. There is a constant manipulation of the leadership system for personal status, which requires competing with the others inside the organization. These practices are the grammar of everyday actions, jeopardizing organization unity and team spirit inside the organization. This, of course, also jeopardizes the quality of information the leader is working with.

Again, there are other types of organizations that exhibit this dynamic. Just keeping afloat within these organizations can take an enormous amount of energy, which is then not spent on the work or on ensuring that the community feels well served.

This context, then, might begin to mold organizational leaders in a charismatic and authoritative style, when a method that would produce a broader cross section of leaders would be more beneficial to the community in the long run.

### An Example

Women's Empowerment for Progress emerges from the collective action of a group of Haitian women determined to create an institution to deal with the multiple issues faced by Haitian women in Chicago. As a multi-service center, Women's Empowerment deals with economic development, literacy, health education, and women's advocacy.

The mission of the organization is totally in harmony with the mainstream liberal movement of women's emancipation and advocacy, and serves a significant role in giving a voice to the struggle and suffering of Haitian women in Chicago. Inspirational leadership is at the heart of the movement's call for women's participation and liberation inside the Haitian community, and provides credibility to the funder community. The dedication and commitment of the organizational leaders are without question, attested to by long hours, often without pay. The vision of the organization is very clear, and has been stated by the leader and understood: The organization strives to create conditions in which Haitian women can grow and become fully liberated, with access to skills, jobs, and resources for the betterment of their lives.

However, in this organization of about 10 primarily female staff members, the climate is heavy. Staff complain of not having a voice in the affairs of the organization. The absence of communication, the decision-making processes, and the structure of the organization combine to create an environment of mistrust and dissatisfaction—all working against the laudable mission of the organization.

How does one reconcile visionary leadership, servant leadership, and what appears to be close to autocratic behavior? How does one make sense of those conflicting behaviors?

Charismatic and visionary leaders work well in America. This can be acknowledged as a "romance for leadership," and there seems to be a continual search for it. Research from Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Project ([www.thunderbird.edu/wwwfiles/ms/globe](http://www.thunderbird.edu/wwwfiles/ms/globe)) supports that love for the charismatic, visionary, and inspirational characteristics of leadership.

The assumption that many on the outside of such models hold is that the charismatic, passionate advocate represents accurately the needs of the people who are supposed to benefit from the work of the organization—and possibly this is true for some limited period of time, but it may not be the way to develop sustaining community organizations for a number of reasons.



First, in a country such as Haiti, plagued with a history of deception, charismatic or inspirational leadership is viewed with great skepticism. Inspirational leaders with honorable causes have routinely betrayed constituents throughout Haiti's history. They come and go in both the public and private domains. In other words, charismatic leadership and visionary leadership are often associated with autocratic and repressive forms of management. Staff and constituents' experience is that management led by inspirational leaders tends to cultivate personality cults that have to be played to. Accordingly, it is familiar for staff to have either a heavy structure or absence of structure, supporting autocratic control of the agenda.

To pose an alternative, if the well-established concept of servant leadership were embraced as a conscious goal, it might serve to help Haitians running organizations in the U.S. to change the level of trust between stakeholders. This would simultaneously increase the potential and power of those organizations. Greenleaf's idea of servant leadership proposes that leaders first be experienced as a servant to others, including employees, customers, and community. This, however, might not be an easy shift to make. Applying and implementing the servant leadership paradigm in the organization could, at least at first, be seen as manipulation strategy. A passive-aggressive reaction could range from refusing to participate to excessive unrealistic demands on leadership. Consistency of practice would need to be maintained over time to ensure that both leaders and followers were confident in the new approach and in hopes that the ranks of leaders would grow exponentially over time.

## Conclusion

Haitian organizations are not, by any means, the only ones that function within these paradoxes—we see the same model in many organizations led by native-born people. In such organizations, the leader is often both the victim and one of the major perpetrators of this disposition. In America, it is only relatively recently that a conscious effort has been made to eradicate the long history of “top-down” approaches to leadership and management practices. These practices, left over from the management theories of a long bygone era, provide a thin patina of order and clarity. One can well understand the allure of the highly traditional for an organization attempting to establish itself in the mainstream of public life in a foreign culture.

Leadership in the immigrant community—and especially in the Haitian community—is very complex, as it requires the understanding and the reconciliation of two worlds. Social and cultural factors pose significant constraints to the management of immigrant organizations. Based on empirical investigation conducted in the various Haitian communities in the U.S., I propose the following elements as the foundation for core leadership and organizational development in the context of immigrant organizations:

1. An Appreciation for Cultural Heritage. How does a good organization work in the home country? What does not work, and for what reason? What prevents the organization in the home country from working effectively?

What type of organization do we want to create? To what extent does our history in our home country influence organizational practices in our host country? What do we

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want to bring forward and what don’t we want to repeat? How should we define new norms of practices?

2. Greater Individual Awareness on Issues of Personal Accountability. Ego defense mechanisms are actively reinforced and reproduced, even with environmental change. A conscious effort should be made to look in the mirror. It should be encouraged and nurtured.

Haitians tend to talk about Haitians in the third person. How could we talk about the “I”? For instance, what role do I take in supporting unproductive behaviors? For Haitian leaders, how do our actions support or limit our effectiveness in organizations? How do we unlearn unproductive behaviors? How do we engage others in a collective search for authenticity and accountability? Do I encourage feedback on my behaviors? Could I listen differently?

3. Staff and Constituent Participation and Accountability. How do we give everyone a voice in the making of the organization? How do we ensure a culture of execution and joint accountability for the whole? How do we reward good citizenship behavior in the context of the organizations?

These things can be collected under the umbrella of a shift from a charismatic and autocratic leadership style to a more facilitative leadership style, and under a shift in organizational form from a hierarchical to a learning organization. Haitian community organizations and Haitian communities are rich with talent and drive—figuring out how to help all of this reach its collective potential should be a large part of the work of our community-based organizations.

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# All A-Board

by Karl Mathiasen

A fully engaged,  
working board must  
faithfully struggle  
to form a body  
within which there  
are shared values,  
understanding,  
tolerance and  
mutual respect.

**Editors' Note:** This piece is excerpted from an article written in 1986 by Karl Mathiasen of the Management Assistance Group in D.C. Mathiasen achieved something of an icon status with the article, and a number of other roughly copied pieces that at first just passed flatteringly from hand to hand among practitioners and were later made into pamphlets. His observations are drawn largely from his experience as a consultant to nonprofits, and are often excruciating in their accuracy.

**T**HE WORD ADVOCACY CAN MEAN MANY DIFFERENT THINGS IN THE NONPROFIT world and can be at the heart of activities, strategies, mission, core values, and overall organizational effectiveness. Fundamentally, advocacy is about speaking out and making a case for something important. The target of the advocate's voice is most often a person, group or institution that holds some power over what the advocate wants.

It is an underlying assumption of this article that most of us want a working board and, if this is what we want, the personal qualities of board members are enormously important. Why?

A fully engaged, working board must faithfully struggle to form a body within which there are shared values, understanding, tolerance and mutual respect. It does not have the time to deal with those who come to the board without real commitment or are unwilling to learn about and follow the dynamics of that board.

Thus, as difficult as the task of identifying desirable personal qualities might seem at first glance, it remains an important and worthwhile task. My observations about some desirable and undesirable qualities for board members follow.

## Desirable Qualities

**Commitment.** The most important quality a nominating committee should seek in a board member is commitment to the organization's cause or purpose, or at least openness to that commitment—a demonstration of a potential for commitment, and evidence that the candidate shares the values of the organization.

What do these candidates do with their time, and what other causes or purposes do they support? Do they have a history of committing time and energy to an agency, are they faithful, and do they follow through? If an agency is dealing with social-change issues, other social-change organizations may offer prospective candidates.

People's interests vary enormously, and different things turn them on. It is a common error to expect that a good board member in one organization will make an equally good board member in another organization—perhaps in moving from an arts organization to an action-oriented public interest group. Gather some other evidence of the candidate's interests.

**Common Sense and Good Judgment.** Common sense is unfortunately a rather rare commodity. But it can be found, and is sorely needed when board tempers flare, when the presentation of new ideas is upsetting, when strong positions are taken, or pressure for decisions mounts. People with common sense somehow know that nothing is as good as it seems; they sense that amid adamantly held and apparently opposite points of view, there is common, sensible ground, and they are instinctively aware that the need for haste and immediate action is always exaggerated.

Judgment relates to common sense, obviously, but it has more to do with how one proceeds as a board member. People with judgment understand how and when to raise issues. They know when to support the staff or the staff leader, and how and when to confront leadership without raising staff defenses more than is necessary or useful.

An important piece of information that nominating committees can seek is whether that person has been able to raise difficult issues in other situations, in a way that has been firm but helpful. That sort of person is what a board needs, rather than someone who enjoys the heady role of the adversary, one who is determined to win at any cost, or even one who is willing to be a “yes” man or woman.

**Respect for Group Process.** Another desirable quality is found in those people who really like working in group situations—those who actively enjoy helping a group come to a good conclusion.

Let's face it, we all have friends who are fine, bright people and yet have very little tolerance for any sort of group process. Often they ridicule group decision-making, feeling that it reaches the lowest common denominator, rather than the best decision. Again, one way of considering whether people have this quality is to see what they do in their lives. Do they often involve themselves in group situations? Are they members of other working organizations and have they been members—successful members—of other boards? What do others think of them in terms of their capacity to work in group situations?

A fourth quality is **centeredness**. People who are centered and self-aware have come to

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some reasonable acceptance of who they are. They are not joining a board solely to prove something, or simply as a way of gaining recognition.

This is not to say that people should not join a board out of self-interest. Quite to the contrary, while a good board member must be committed to the organization's interests, the best board members often have personal goals that they hope will be furthered in part through their board service.

At a minimum, most people who serve on a board believe that their own standing in the community will be improved. What is difficult for a board to bear, however, is a person who is so self-important—or perhaps so insecure—that every question requires an answer, every remark requires a riposte, and all situations require the wisdom that only that board member can impart.

Nominating committees will need to ask questions about how that board member is perceived by others. Does that person seek to be heard and acknowledged, or is he or she able to listen to others, speaking only when a genuine contribution can be made?

Centered people often have the courage to raise the hard questions, the dumb questions, and to risk. They will say things that others with less courage or self-acceptance might not be willing to say. These people often reassure weaker board members by their limited use of power, and frequently provide much of the cement that binds a board together.

**Openness.** People who have this quality are open to new ideas. They manifest in all that they do—in their career paths and their community endeavors—that they are not stuck, that they quest for what might work, and what might help. They are not unreasonably angry at the changes in our society, hoping only to go back to the “good old days.” They do not hold on for dear life to what is, or what they dream must have been, but demonstrate a keen interest in going forward in the face of upheaval and uncertainty. They are also wise enough to know that the future offers choices—often difficult choices—and do not insist that one particular approach is the only path an organization can take.

I'm vividly reminded of a woman who has devoted 40 years of effort to the issue of peace. After describing her work, she said, “We've lost every significant battle for 40 years. The masses of armaments accumulate and the danger of nuclear holocaust increases.” Still, she is ready to go again, and seeks new ideas and possibilities that can serve as tools for peace.

People like this, people who are excited by the possibilities of life, are assets to a board. They can be life-giving—not only to the board, but to the whole organization.

**Sense of Humor.** This last quality may seem idiosyncratic or frivolous, but it is no less central than the other qualities discussed above. Having a sense of humor does not imply that a person must be humorous, but it does suggest that if board members do not have modest vestiges of humor, board work can become irritating, arduous, boring and unrewarding.

Boards of directors do odd and perplexing things. In response, one can become annoyed or one can adopt a more philosophical stance, and a sense of humor helps. A tol-



erance for the strange and wonderful things people do in groups is enormously important, particularly for caring and committed board members. It is, after all, better to laugh than to cry.

A second value provided by those who have a sense of humor is the capacity to relax and not take themselves too seriously. Board members rarely win or carry their points, and will more than likely have to compromise or adjust to the emerging consensus. People who see the humor in a situation, and those who can perceive the possible absurdities in their own positions, are generally more satisfied—and satisfying—board members. They often make the most of their points or positions as well.

Of course, one may say, you will never be able to find people for your board like those described. Is your organization not good enough to attract such people? Or have you simply not taken the task seriously enough, and not devoted enough energy to the job?

### Some Less Desirable Qualities

Years of experience in the boardroom, coupled with a persistent, puzzling sense of concern, have led me to try to identify several kinds of people who prove to be unhelpful in the boardroom or, worse, both frustrating to board members and disruptive of the board's work.

**Johnny One-Note.** This is an old rubric derived from an Ethel Merman song, about a person who is only able to sing one note. Unfortunately, Johnny One-Note is seen only too often in nonprofit boardrooms, raising one particular concern meeting after meeting, sometimes relevantly, but most often irrelevantly. The issue or concern has become the focus of that person's life, and so dominates his or her existence that it must be drawn into every discussion at the slightest provocation—or even without provocation. The issue itself may indeed be legitimate and important (special education, healthcare for the elderly, affirmative action, environmental preservation, etc.), but it has become an obsession.

Board members don't know how to respond, or how to incorporate that person's views, and often end up feeling both irritated and guilty. It takes a skilled chair to acknowledge this individual, and then to restart the discussion that has been interrupted. Boards need people who will venture beyond single compelling concerns and join with fellow board members in determining what is best for the whole organization.

**The Over-Boarded.** Every community has a distinguished panel of well-known board-sitters and every board aspires to bring these people to its organization. Yet for all of their allure, they are usually so committed to other activities that they will do little for a working board.

Somehow we are so dazzled by these people that we all miss those who are competent, potentially open to commitment, and anxious to serve their community. They are next year's movers and shakers, and are worth seeking out. Most often, they make better board members for the kinds of organizations we serve than those who are community stars.

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**The Devil's Advocate.** "It is my job to raise issues that will not otherwise be considered by this board as it rushes to achieve consensus," says the devil's advocate. Self-appointed, and a bit sanctimonious, this person enjoys pulling the board back, insisting that each issue be carefully dissected for hidden pitfalls and "what ifs."

Boards do need to ponder carefully what course they choose to take, and that is hard work. But it is presumptuous—not to say annoying—for one person to assume that role for the board. It demeans the capacity and the credibility of other board members and retards the work of the whole board. Such people are easy to spot in conversations, and often actually offer themselves to board nominating committees as devil's advocates. Beware!

**Authority Figures.** Boards are often disabled by having one among them who is regarded with such respect or awe that other board members are reluctant to speak their minds. Intentionally or unintentionally, these people exude such authority that board meetings can become little more than monologues. Policies are not thoroughly and usefully thought out, but are pretty much preordained.

A board either needs to aim to have a number of authority figures—preferably of differing points of view—or decide that it can do well enough without any. Those who are accustomed to leading find it hard not to run things, and thus tend to dominate meetings.

**Off-the-Wall Artist.** There must be a much more genteel term that describes this person but, after several months' thought, none has come to mind. Perhaps little needs to be said about the people who somehow seem to misunderstand the role of a board member. They are happiest when the discussions at board meetings stimulate them to propose a tangential—or even farther out—idea about what the organization might do. They tend to be stimulated rather frequently, and their ideas usually don't fit in well, or at all, with where the organization is going. Undaunted, they bask in their own sense of creativity and frequently lead the board astray.

A companion characteristic of these off-the-wall artists is a tendency to do nothing or virtually nothing between board meetings. The feeling of having been so immensely creative at the last board meeting often appears to have exhausted their capacities until the next meeting.

## Final Thoughts

These two lists are undoubtedly incomplete, and experienced board members could surely add to them. But the central point is this: since most of us recognize the desirability and undesirability of the people described above as board members, it's well worth the effort to avoid those who are truly unsuited and uncomfortable with board work, and to seek out those who understand, respect, and enjoy working with others.

**Endnote.** This article is excerpted from Board-membering. Reprinted with permission. Copyright 1986, Management Assistance Group. The entire article is located at their Web site: [www.managementassistance.org](http://www.managementassistance.org).

**About the Author.** Karl Mathiasen is one of the nation's leading experts on board/staff dynamics and board development, and co-founded the Management Assistance Group (MAG) more than 25 years ago. Based in Washington, D.C., MAG is a nonprofit that helps social justice organizations to plan strategically and to address organizational challenges in areas such as management, board and staff development, fundraising, and adjustments to change and growth. Mathiasen has served on more than 35 nonprofit boards of directors.

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# Looking Together in the Same Direction

by Sister Margaret Leonard

“When a homeless mother with children knocks at the door of Project Hope, we should see her as a ‘woman of strength,’ for she has survived a profound human struggle and comes to our door with capacities, insights, and promise.”

CENTRAL TO ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORIENTED TO SOCIAL CHANGE is a core relational principle called mutuality. When it is present it has the power to erode the dominant “I” consciousness that pervades our universe of “power-over”-type institutions, and can begin to replace it with a “We” consciousness where “power-with” engages us in the co-creation of new types of participative organizations.

Mutuality is a way of seeing, being, and acting in a world that was founded on the belief that human growth is a shared process. For those of us who see through the lens of mutuality we are human beings in relationships with one another—a community of We who share life, who believe in and call forth the artist in one another to create a work of art in ourselves, our organizations, our community, and our world.

These calls resonate with what we are seeing and hearing in our larger world. The eco-feminist movements, for example, are promoting the importance of relationships with one another, with the earth, our planet, the universe. Insights from quantum physics, molecular biology, and chaos theory, beautifully articulated by Meg Wheatley,<sup>1</sup> challenge us to create dynamic, ever-changing organizations that organize themselves around natural processes and risk launching into chaos as the experience from which a new order of relationships will emerge.

In this article I would like to share with you how the guiding principle of mutuality—power-with—which is espoused by those of us who make up the Project Hope community, influences who we are and what we do. I will focus on identifying this core belief and then show its influence upon the evolution of Project Hope and on a statewide advocacy organization called Homes for Families.

## Project Hope

“If you come to help me, then you waste your time, but if you come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then we can both grow.” This African maxim embodies both the

principle and the challenge of mutuality. It calls for a transformation of consciousness among human service providers and their constituents, which affects program design and organizational development.

Project Hope, located in Boston, Massachusetts, is a human service organization that operates out of this maxim. We call it mutuality and it is embodied in everything we do. A former resident of Project Hope's Family Shelter, who is now a member of our board of directors, once shared this observation with us: "When a homeless mother with children knocks at the door of Project Hope, we should see her as a 'woman of strength,' for she has survived a profound human struggle and comes to our door with capacities, insights, and promise. She couples her journey with ours so we can learn together new ways to help families move from homelessness to permanent housing and stability in the context of community." (This expression—Women of Strength—subsequently became the title of a video on real welfare reform produced by Project Hope in collaboration with women on welfare. It chronicles real stories that help eradicate the stereotype of women on welfare.)

Traditional human service organizations are characterized by providing services to and doing for their patients, clients, or consumers (or whatever nomenclature we may use). They have been organized in hierarchical structures where there are diverse and distinct roles and responsibilities and everyone is accountable to the person above them. They are funded by public and private funding sources that bring their own sets of regulations that are frequently prescriptive and controlling. Consumers are the lowest people on the totem pole, whose voices are often muffled and marginalized. Human service organizations share many of the characteristics of power-over models.

How does a human service organization like Project Hope defy these trends and transform its structures to give shape to power-with models? The response to this question would require a book and several sequels. Ours is an unfinished but unfolding story, filled with small successes, painful failures, sometimes jubilation, and often a messy, turbulent experience in which loss of control feels like disaster and then suddenly a new pattern emerges which is life-giving. This evolutionary process has given birth to new and exciting initiatives that renew our commitment to stay with the process and not retrench to control models or noninclusive behaviors.

## Guideposts

What have we learned about mutuality over these years? What are the guideposts that don't shift and change, but provide some stability in the chaos?

- Commitment to the centrality of our mission, which places the consumer voice at its center, is paramount. It carries with it the responsibility to adopt communal disciplines that engage staff, board, and consumers in a process that articulates the mission, owns it, expresses it in diverse programs, is accountable for the mission across programs, and continues to evaluate its expression individually and collectively.

- Commitment to a human development process that nurtures mutuality is primary. This commitment provokes a number of questions: What is the identity from which I act, from which we act? Do I opt for a job category as my primary identity: teacher, social

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Commitment to ongoing reflection, evaluation, and education is a core discipline that enhances the culture of mutuality.

worker, child care worker, house manager? Or do I name myself primarily as a person with capacities, needs, and human experiences, who is reaching out to others? And how do I perceive others? Are they primarily clients, consumers, welfare recipients? Or am I a person in relationship with another person who is equally gifted with capacities, skills, needs, and life experiences, and with whom I share a mutual relationship of giving and receiving? Creating a relational fabric of shared growth in the one-on-one relationship provides the road-map for mutual interdependence at other levels: among programs within the organization and with other groups within the neighborhood and community.

- Commitment to understanding the systemic causes of poverty at every level of the organization is critical. Comprehending the larger forces that create hunger, homelessness, inadequate education, and impoverishment, transforms our perceptions and helps us to move our focus from who needs to be changed to what needs to be changed in our society. Creative use of popular-education learning processes releases consumers from behaviors of self-blame and converts their energies to behaviors that result in social change for themselves and others.

- Commitment to ongoing reflection, evaluation, and education is a core discipline that enhances the culture of mutuality. We recognize the need for ongoing evaluation, celebrating our victories, acknowledging our failures, and owning our need to become a learning community when it comes to the important mission of social transformation.

A significant outcome of our unfolding story is that many of the women once sheltered at Project Hope are now in permanent housing, off welfare, working in jobs with benefits, and continuing their education in community and four-year colleges. Several of them are involved in their communities and are participants in activities, committees, and boards of directors that enhance family strengthening. Others have been spokespersons at local, state, and national conferences where their articulate and compelling voices are clearly heard.

## Homes for Families

Project Hope, in collaboration with provider and advocacy organizations in the state, has long been committed to ending family homelessness. However, our agenda to identify solutions often excluded the collective voice of the homeless families themselves. In 1994, several like-minded groups addressing the issues of family homelessness and frustrated by the lack of consumer presence, raised these questions: What would a statewide advocacy organization that coupled the energies of the provider and consumer community look like? What would its mission and action agenda be?

We invited a number of current and formerly homeless women to join providers and advocates in a process of reflection to address these questions—should we formulate a mission statement and create such an organization? The answer was a resounding Yes! Homes for Families was born. The Homes for Families' mission was largely shaped by current and formerly homeless women, who took a holistic perspective to the problem by pointing out the comprehensive needs of homeless families. So rather than focusing on a single issue, we recognized that homelessness can involve a variety of issues—lack of housing, food, access to financial resources, income, and safety and health resources;



therefore we work in all these public policy areas in building emergency response systems and permanent community-based solutions.

The group's organizational structure certainly reflects its commitment to partnership. Fifty percent of the board, staff, and membership have experienced homelessness. Furthermore, Homes for Families can point to many gains it has made in mutual interdependence with other advocacy organizations, such as access to family shelters, increased housing options, and access to jobs that pay a living wage, to mention a few. And, like Project Hope's, our journey has been one marked by chaos. On occasion we have failed to follow the process to which we are committed simply to achieve rapid response to public policy agendas, resulting in muffling the consumer voice and giving in to the provider voice. But we are learning from our mistakes to be faithful to our process and grow in mutual understanding with our diverse partners.

## Conclusion

The African world view is expressed in the words: I am because We are. Our efforts to embody the relational principal of mutuality in who we are and what we do brings us closer to understanding the wisdom of this view. We have only just begun. We are a work in progress. We invite you to join us in our efforts to become a community of "We" creating anew.

**Endnote.** Margaret Wheatley 1999. *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, second edition.

**About the Author.** Sister Margaret Leonard's life focus is to serve low-income families in crisis. Acting collaboratively with many partners as executive director of Project Hope, she creates enriched services and programs and models that empower families to live healthy, meaningful lives. She is a founding member of Homes for Families, an advocacy organization composed equally of shelter providers and currently/formerly homeless residents, and she is an active board member of neighborhood organizations whose mission is to rebuild the infrastructure of Boston's inner city. Sister Margaret's most recent writings include, *We Need to Stand Together: The Impact of Welfare Reform on the Dudley Street Neighborhood and the Community's Response to the Challenge* and she is a contributing author to Donna Haig Friedman's forthcoming study, "Parenting in Public." In recognition of her multiple contributions to society, she is the Year 2000 recipient of the national Isaac Hecker Award for Social Justice.

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