

Founder's Syndrome? Who Me?

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Much has been written about Founder's Syndrome from the point of view of the board or an outside consultant, focusing on infrastructure steps that can be taken to strengthen the organization.

But what about the founder him/herself? I haven't been able to find an article that helps Founders understand what has brought about the changes everyone feels he/she needs to make. Nor have I found anything that helps founders make those changes.

My interest in this subject is not academic or professional. For me, this is personal.

I am a founder.

As many of our readers know, in addition to keeping Help 4 NonProfits buzzing along, my partner and I started a NonProfit organization that is quite extraordinary (aren't they all?). The organization - a Diaper Bank - provides diapers to those in need, because virtually none of the safety nets provide for diapers or incontinence supplies. And being the proud parents we are, if you would like to check out the Diaper Bank's website, you will find it at <http://www.diaperbank.org> www.DiaperBank.org.

Our dual role provides us with a unique perspective, the ability to understand Founder's Syndrome from both the inside and the outside. Wearing our Consulting hat, we have been called in to address the problems that Founder's Syndrome has wreaked in other organizations. And wearing our Founder hat, we have experienced much of emotion that creates this situation in the first place.

And so we thought it might be helpful to share with other founders the lessons we have learned along the way. These lessons are not intended for boards who are wondering what to do about a founder who is hanging on, although we know these insights will be helpful to boards as well. (If you do find yourself in that position, see Hank Lewis's excellent article in Nonprofit Boards and Governance Review [CLICK HERE](#)).

The lessons that follow are instead written to founders themselves, asking them to dig down deep to look first at what motivates the behaviors that have become lumped together as "Founders Syndrome," and second, to encourage them to take the next steps - to help their organization move to a place that isn't founder-driven, but community-driven.

What Is Founder's Syndrome - The Nutshell Version

Founder's Syndrome occurs when a single individual or a small group of individuals bring an organization through tough times (a start-up, a growth spurt, a financial collapse, etc.). Often these sorts of situations require a strong passionate personality - someone who can make fast decisions and motivate people to action.

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Once those rough times are over, however, the decision-making needs of the organization change, requiring mechanisms for shared responsibility and authority. It is when those decision-making mechanisms don't change, regardless of growth and changes on the program side, that Founder's Syndrome becomes an issue. We see this most frequently with organizations that have grown from a mom-and-pop operation to a \$12 million community powerhouse, while decisions are still made as if the founders are gathered around someone's living room, desperately trying to hold things together.

Founder's Syndrome isn't necessarily about the actual founder of an organization. The central figure could be the person who took over from the founder. It could be someone who took over in a time of crisis, and led the organization to clear waters. Or it could just be someone who has been at the helm forever.

The "founder" could be the CEO. Or it could be a board member, or a handful of board members who have either been there since the beginning or have ridden the organization through tough times.

But the main symptom of Founder's Syndrome is that decisions are not collectively. Most decisions are simply made by the "founder." All other parties merely rubber stamp what the founder suggests. There is generally strong resistance to any change in that decision-making, where the Founder might lose his/her total control of the organization. Boards of these organizations usually don't govern, but instead "approve" what the founder suggests. Planning isn't done collectively, but by the founder. And plans / ideas that do NOT come from the founder usually don't go very far.

In other words, regardless of the size of the organization, everyone who is NOT the founder is relegated to the role of support staff to the Founder. (If you ever hear a board say, "Our board's role is just to support the ED," that is one of many classic signals that Founder's Syndrome is likely at play.)

For more symptoms of Founder's Syndrome
[Click Here](#)

Some may ask, "So what's wrong with that?" And the answer is simple: If the "founder" is hit by a bus tomorrow, the organization is not sustainable, and all the good work the organization has done over the years is in danger of screeching to a halt. That's because organizations facing Founder's Syndrome usually have little infrastructure in place, because it simply hasn't been needed. In these situations, the founder IS the infrastructure!

What Founders Need to Know

We use two analogies to describe our relationship to the organization we founded. We try not to mix these metaphors, but sometimes it happens. Here goes:

Once you have birthed it, it is no longer your baby. Just as it is with our own children, once they are born, they are their own persons. We can guide our children, teach them, nurture them - but our son or daughter is a person in his/her own right. As is "our" organization. It's not ours. It is its own thing. We don't own it.

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Once you give a gift, it's no longer yours. Ok - that's the other metaphor. We have created this amazing gift for our community. Now that it is used and depended upon by others - now that we have given this gift to the community, it is no longer ours. It belongs to the community. That's the definition of a gift.

From these two facts - that the organization is a being in its own right, and that that being belongs to the community, not us - come a number of other facts many founders don't want to face.

1) Along with the decision to bring a child into the world comes the responsibility to raise it to live independently. We all know the old adage - that the only certainties in life are death and taxes. Well the part we don't like to admit to ourselves is that there is another certainty associated with the "death" part - and that is that none of us knows exactly when our days will be done. Because we know we are not going to live forever, and we cannot know if our last day will be tomorrow or 50 years from now, it is irresponsible to run our organizations as if we will, in fact, be around forever. It is simply not fair to the organization, nor to those who benefit from the work we do. The only responsible approach, therefore, is to raise this child to NOT need us.

2) The world doesn't owe you anything for having founded your organization. We gave up our lives to create the organization we founded. We went without sleep, sweated blood, and in our case, even went into debt. But the sad truth is that nobody owes us anything for doing that. We did it because we cared. And regardless of which metaphor you use - that of having a child, or that of giving a gift - neither of them provides for a payback. Our "payback" in having a child is in seeing our children grow and take on the world themselves. And our "payback" for giving a gift is in seeing how happy the recipient is to use that gift, hopefully for a long long time.

3) It's not about you. Harsh, but true. It's hard sometimes to acknowledge that regardless of how much we put into nurturing the organization we founded, in the long run, none of that really matters. It's not about our emotional needs - regardless of what those are. It's not about what we've sacrificed to make it all work, or the recognition / gratitude we think we should get. It's about the community, which is why we created this gift in the first place. If we have not prepared the organization to survive (and dare I say thrive?) without our presence, and we therefore cannot even think of leaving, as the organization would crumble without us, then we have somehow made it about us, rather than about the community.

4) Your vision isn't nearly as important as the organization's vision and the community's vision. Yes, it was our vision that founded the organization in the first place. But as the organization grows and matures, that vision may not be all there is. The ability for the organization to dramatically affect the community may be far larger than the vision we had when we first opened the doors. Doing things the way they've always been done, and thinking the way things have always been thought is not necessarily the best thing for the organization, nor for the community it serves. It is simply what WE would do. So if we fear the vision would change if we weren't there, perhaps it's time to let it evolve while we are still present.

So What is a Founder To Do?

First, if you are the founder of a brand new organization and you are just starting out, build it right. Build it to sustain for the future. Build it as if you won't be there to see it through its life. Think about the future while you are creating the organization's present.

If, however, the organization is an older one, and it and you have become inextricably entwined, then there is work to be done. Some of that work is organizational. Some is personal.

Let's start with the personal side:

- 1) Acknowledge that some day, the split will happen. The only way to ensure that your legacy is an organization that serves the community long after you are gone is to acknowledge, right now, that you cannot be there forever - and that you never know when that "forever" will occur. Take that to heart and be conscious of it as you plan for your organization's future, and you will likely put the needed tools in place to survive you.
- 2) Get help. Find a professional coach who can help you work out the personal aspects of your eventual separation from the organization, even if you are not going anywhere but are just thinking about ensuring the organization is ready in the event you do. This is especially important for those of you who don't believe you have Founder's Syndrome, but have heard it whispered about you. If you or your organization show the symptoms listed here ([Click](#)), then find a coach to work with - for the good of those you serve.

Hint - if someone slipped this article onto your desk anonymously, there's a good chance you should start looking for a coach.

From the organizational side:

- 1) A healthy organization starts with a healthy board. Whether you are a board member or the CEO, if the board as a whole is depending on you for everything from the organization's vision to the connection to the community, then it's time to begin developing, training and restructuring your board to be the ones to lead the organization. This will likely take some recruiting efforts as well, because there is a good chance many of the existing board members were hand-picked by you! (That's all part of the syndrome.) If the organization is to thrive into the next decades and further, the board will have to understand its role at the top of the organizational chart, and it will have to be populated by people who want to do that job.
- 2) Codify the vision and values that are at the heart of the organization. Create a working credo that will guide both the board's future decisions and those made by the staff. (For a sample of the credo we created for the organization we founded, [Click Here](#).) There is nothing to say that the credo won't evolve over time - ours already has, and likely will again. But the core of what is important will remain, and that will be another part of your legacy.
- 3) Create a succession plan that proactively deals with all the things you (or the board) is scared might happen when you leave.

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- Are they afraid that you have been the link to the community, the public image of the organization? Then determine a way to proactively deal with that, perhaps creating a speakers bureau or PR committee.
- Are they afraid that most of the institutional memory of the organization resides inside your head? Then find a way to proactively deal with that - perhaps having you take time off to commit some of that knowledge to paper.
- Are they afraid that you have been the best fundraiser they could dream of? Then find a proactive way to deal with that - perhaps by developing an army of development volunteers with a passion for the mission.

Whatever the fear, make sure your succession plan deals with it proactively to ensure the viability of the organization for the long term. While the main focus of this plan will be succession, the ancillary benefit is that you will be building organizational infrastructure. And that will provide benefit immediately.

- 4) As part of your succession plan, train someone now who could replace you, even temporarily, in the event something happens to you. This doesn't mean you are going anywhere soon. You may not be leaving for the next 10 years! But if the whole organization relies on you for its survival, and you really are hit by a meteor tomorrow, then what will happen? Find someone you can share your institutional knowledge with, and train them to share the load now, while you still can.

Conclusion:

As a founder, I owe the community my organization serves the obligation to ensure that the child I birthed is capable of living on its own and benefitting the world into eternity. Just as we have the obligation in real life to make plans for the future of our children in the event something happens to us (life insurance, a will, etc.), we owe the community the pledge that we will do the same for the gift we have given them.

Founder's Note:

After running the organization we founded for 10 years, while simultaneously raising our families and running our business, we have made the decision to extricate ourselves from the day-to-day side of the organization within the next two years. As we make plans to ensure the Diaper Bank will be poised to thrive beyond the time of our direct involvement, we will keep you posted on our progression from actively participating founders to merely board members. We are excited to see what the road ahead brings!

For additional resources
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