

Founder's syndrome — a serious corporate malady

Signs of stress started showing in a wonderful charitable organisation, with which I had close ties some years ago. Staff members complaining that they could no longer cope with the working environment approached board members. Staff dissatisfaction became such an important issue that the board became stressed and the chairman and others of the board resigned. Ever been in the same situation and wonder why a great organisation sometimes goes wonky or worse? Could it be a case of Founder's Syndrome? This condition is not unique to non-profit organisations, although they seem to be more prone to its occurrence and effects. What is it then, what are the symptoms, and how should it be treated?

Having been close to several cases that were considered to be Founder's Syndromes, my attention was drawn to information on the subject available on the Internet. The descriptions by Carter McNamara and Hildy Gottlieb on the Google search engine correspond closely to personal experience, and others too may recognise similar traits in themselves or their organisations.

Founder's Syndrome occurs when a person or a small group of individuals start an organisation or bring it through tough times. Such situations often require tough, passionate personalities. However, organisational change with shared responsibility and authority is required once the difficulties have been surmounted. When such change does not occur Founder's Syndrome may result. The syndrome is not necessarily about the person who started the enterprise — it may be someone who took over, or merely remained at the helm for far too long.

Organisations must evolve through life cycle changes. This change is typically from entrepreneurial growth to well-planned and managed development. Such development requires a stable administrative structure that requires a change in the nature of the leadership from a highly reactive individualistic style to a more proactive, consensus-orientated style. Many founders cannot make this transition and stick to the cult of the personality. The organisation experiences the same problems over and over. Plans may not be implemented, money runs out and board members and staff quickly come and go. The organisation struggles from one crisis to the next, no one seems to understand what is going on, and people become afraid of the founder.

Founders are dynamic, driven, and incisive and carry a clear vision of what their organisation can be. They know their customers' needs and are passionate about meeting those needs. However, other troublesome traits too often become major liabilities. They are often highly sceptical about planning, policies and procedures; make reactive, crisis-driven decisions with little input from others; hand-pick their board members or staff; attract board members through their charismatic personality and not through focus on the organisational

mission; count on whoever seems most loyal and accessible; and motivate by fear and guilt, often without realising it. Ultimately Founder's Syndrome sets in because the organisation becomes dependent not on its systems and structures, but on the unique style of the leader.

Well-developed leaders of lasting, well-developed organisations have experienced many changes and managed to develop their organisations along the way. Such leaders appreciate plans and budgets that make their organisations more responsive to the needs of their clients; make proactive decisions based on mission and affordability; make staffing decisions based on responsibilities, training and capabilities; and value board members for their strong expertise and feedback.

Eventually most founders realise that they must change the way in which they operate and develop their leadership to the next level. Firstly they realise that they must change from within. This requires them to understand that recurring problems are not their fault as they are trying the best they can. They need to be willing to ask for and to accept help; communicate openly and honestly; engage in stress management; and be patient with themselves, their boards and their staff.

Boards play a crucial role in the management of organisations. They can be the founder's greatest help. It is therefore vital that they firstly understand their roles and take full responsibility for the role of board member. They need to know what is going on in the organisation and how to come up to speed quickly. Strategic planning is one of the best ways to engage the board and to take stock of the organisation. Boards should be participative, help staff keep up their hopes, and support the founder with ongoing coaxing and affirmation. It is critical that, by dealing with problems realistically and firmly, boards do not end up becoming part of the problem!

Founder's Syndrome is primarily an organisational problem — not primarily a problem of the person in a prominent position. NGOs seem particularly vulnerable to such personalities and organisational inability to deal with them. But professional bodies, governmental structures and business of all kinds may also suffer from its harmful effects. On a larger scale it seems to me that countries such as Zimbabwe and others with virtual or real dictators suffer from overblown Founder's Syndrome. May the people respond!

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