

Special Challenges TO ORGANIZATIONS DURING TIMES OF TRANSITION

FOUNDER SYNDROME CHALLENGES THE BOARD

An organization still run by its founder has to deal with transition issues not faced by other groups. The founder may be the personification of the organization and its artistic mission, and the board is usually reluctant to make the first move toward change.

“We’ve broached the subject, but we just haven’t gotten to a full discussion of the issue. It should be done, particularly since we have an artistic director, a co-founder, who’s been there for decades and [is] clearly not going to be there forever.” (board member)

A strong leader who builds an organization from scratch may find it difficult to delegate responsibility or develop staff who could potentially take over.

“[The founder] has been a fantastic manager. [The founder] knows where every penny of every foundation grant went, and all of that. But [the founder has] run it all very much as a personal thing. The mission, the vision, the story, the administration, the fund-raising, the program—the whole thing is all embodied in [the founder].” (board member)

“Sometimes the person who founded the organization is directing the organization and . . . finds it very hard to let go of anything. They don’t let in their junior staff. Their leadership is very top-down.” (emerging leader)

Sometimes the founder steps down graciously, but for most organizations, getting the founder to accept the change is the most difficult problem of the transition.

“[The founder] could not get to that place of letting any of it go. We really tried. Structurally, we kept appointing a number-two person and eventually we just gave it up. [The founder] kept saying ‘you’ve got to make this happen,’ and then would sabotage it every time.” (board member)

An organization whose founder stays too long can start to decline. The problem is compounded when the board is complacent, too loyal, or unwilling to take charge of the organization.

“You know [founder’s syndrome] when you see it. The artistic product starts to suffer, the audience might start slipping away, maybe the demographics become less favorable. The board has to be able to recognize a problem and figure out what it means.” (individual interview)

Founder succession can be handled well if the board focuses on what is best for the organization, remaining sensitive to the feelings of the founder but forcing the issue if necessary. Boards find this difficult, but if the culture of the organization has been to think strategically, a succession plan will be part of the group's long-range planning.

"You have to play to that founder's will. Talk about the progress of the organization. After two and a half years, I had to sit her down and talk to her. I said if she wanted this organization to progress, we had to make some changes. We had to make some changes to the board, and we had to make some changes in her attitude." (board member)

"I felt like I could have run the organization for another twenty or twenty-five years because in some ways it was getting easier, but I had other challenges I wanted to take on, and I thought it was best for the organization to bring in a new executive director while the organization was strong." (former executive director)

DUAL-LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE IS ANOTHER CHALLENGING SITUATION

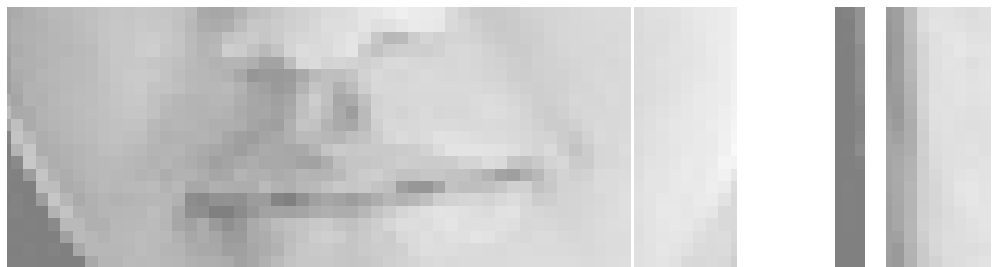
In performing-arts organizations with both an artistic director and a managing director, the two leaders must work cooperatively as equal partners. This can create many problems, not the least of which is finding two leaders who can work well together.


"As silly as it sounds, I think you have to look at the personalities of the other people with whom the executive director is going to be working and try to find a good match. We have had serious problems with the executive director–artistic director match. . . . We need someone who can work with that personality, because he's not going anywhere, at least for now, so when we hire someone, we have to honor that." (board member)

"When the artistic side is run separately, it's a situation where you have two spiders but hopefully only one web." (former executive director)

Dual leadership puts a particular burden on board members. They must clearly define each person's authority and responsibilities, never pit one leader against the other, and never take sides in a dispute.

"The worst situation is when the artistic director and the managing director get into a competition for board members' attention. It becomes a contest of who has whose ear, and it can be fatal for the organization." (individual interview)





Some board members and outsiders said the partnership is so important that when one job is being filled, the other partner should be allowed veto power over the board's choice.

“If there is a major staff person with whom your executive director or managing director is going to have to work on a day-to-day basis [and] that person has some kind of visceral, intuitive reaction that is negative, you have to honor it.” (board member)

The relationship is often likened to a marriage, but this metaphor introduces an emotional aspect that may be counterproductive. A better approach is to think of the match as a partnership between the artistic and business realms. Ideally the two leaders share a common vision, and each understands the other's job but has no desire to do it.

“If you're in a performing arts organization where you're not the general director, as in opera, you have to have a partnership with the artistic leadership, because most of the responsibility for building and managing the board and the organization lies with the managing director. But it's the artistic director's mission and vision that we're supporting.” (former executive director)

“In most arts organizations where there is a dual-management structure, I think the managing director sees himself as a facilitator of the artistic mission or vision, and the challenge is how to keep that balance so that ultimately the best work can come out of the whole company.” (former executive director)