

Ethics Column Q&A The Charismatic Founder

Q. Our founder stepped down from being Chair after accomplishing our initial goal over our first three years. However, she remains on the board as Past Chair, and everyone defers to her opinions—opinions which are not helping us move forward. Your advice? I'm the Executive Director.

Jane says...

Thousands of community benefit leaders are reading your question and wishing they could change places with you. *Their* founder insists on retaining control! Yours has recognized that the organization's continued work matters much more than her ego, and taken an appropriate step to move to a supporting role. Quite possibly, she wishes people would stop deferring to her, but doesn't want to leave because she cares so much about the work of the organization. No doubt she still has skills, knowledge and especially contacts to offer.

I am sure you want her many supporters to continue to contribute to your organization, so they have to perceive her as treated with appropriate respect. Pushing her out would be too contentious and hurt the organization in the short term at least. Nevertheless, there must be changes or the organization is harmed in the long run by not being able to change as it needs to.

Here are some options to consider, and they aren't mutually exclusive:

Coach the Founder

She may not realize that once she speaks on an issue, people are reluctant to offer a different opinion. Would you feel comfortable suggesting that she avoid speaking on board agenda items until a number of others have contributed to the discussion? Or asking the chair to have this conversation with her?

“We've always done it this way” or “we tried that and it didn't work” are phrases that stifle conversations and drive away board members. If your founder says things like this at board meetings, she needs to hear how much it discourages newer board members from offering innovative ideas and solutions.

Likely other organizations still approach the founder as the key spokesperson for the organization. She should now defer to the new chair or to you, depending on the issue and your media and partnership policies. There may need to be a transition, where she comes to make the introductions or smooth the way then lets you or the chair lead the rest of the conversation. You'll need to plan that approach with her in advance in each case.

Coach the Chair

The new chair is likely someone recruited by the founder and perhaps even the most deferential. There are resources on how to chair a meeting, and ensure that all voices are heard and respected. The chair may need to make more effort to hear from others before the founder

speaks, and make the board meetings a safe place for everyone's opinions. If the founder rambles, the chair could set a time limit on discussion contributions.

He or she could also assign lead for various items to other board members, which makes sure they speak first on the topic and set the tone. It is easy to put the names of committee chairs and officers opposite selected agenda items. The chair can give lead to others by asking them to research an issue outside the scope of any committee and bring the results to the next meeting, or cover for an absent committee chair, or contribute their special expertise on a topic.

At times, the chair may have to firmly step in whenever anyone, not just the founder, speaks for too long. It is the chair's role to keep the meeting on agenda and within time limits unless the group agrees to a change to one or both. Assign times to every agenda item, and help the chair remind people that if an item runs over, they may need to amend the agenda or lengthen the meeting. The latter option usually moves groups to a quick wrap-up and resolution!

Board Support

Consider whether people defer to her at meetings partly because they don't understand the issue or know enough of the history. Are they receiving the right advance information to be prepared for the discussions and decisions? Would a better summary of the background, current situation, options, analysis and recommendations make them more willing to speak up? Board members deserve that kind of advance support for high quality decisions in any case.

Honour the Founder

She has done something amazing by achieving the original goal in less than three years, and is respected for good reason. You can create a new role for her, as Honourary Life Member, chair of the new Patron's Advisory Council, whatever—but this new role does not include automatic board membership. Create an award in her name while you are at it, and let her chair the Awards Committee, and the Capital Campaign too. Let her gracefully shift roles into something high profile but less involved, without leaving the organization and without angering her many supporters. Consult her before announcing a new role; it may not be one she wants and she might have her own ideas. The chair should lead on this, not you.

Amend the Bylaws

Most Canadian nonprofits will be reviewing their bylaws in the next few years to address new federal and provincial requirements. Many bylaws now show the immediate past chair as staying on the board until the current chair retires and becomes the immediate past chair. This approach often means three extra years on the board. Past chairs are usually extremely valuable for history and mentoring for the new chair for a year. After that, past chairs could be treated like any other board member, with term limits and a need to stand for re-election or take a year off because of serving the maximum number of continuous years.

Summary

You are lucky to have a founder willing to transition. Some or all of these ideas may ease the transition and remove barriers to creating a better future for the community and organization.

© Garthson Leadership Centre 2012