



## Strong Boards: An Antidote to Founder Syndrome

By Joan Garry

The nonprofit sector is deeply in debt to individuals who identify a needs gap in their communities and are propelled to launch a formal effort to address that need by founding a 501(c)(3). It takes but a moment to consider the many transformational founders who have introduced world-changing innovations.

In that context, it is ironic that we often brand nonprofit founders, Hester Prynne-like, with a chronic illness we call founder syndrome. Symptoms include autocratic decision-making, lack of receptivity to new ideas, and leadership rooted in personal ego. I have seen these traits in many of the founders I have worked with as an executive coach and governance expert for organizations large and small. I've also seen them in many of the CEOs I've worked with who have followed those founders. Of course, I have; at their roots, these traits help make these remarkable trailblazers successful.

These founders are tremendous assets to their organizations. So the question is: When and why do these assets become organizational liabilities? Often the most influential trigger is found within the structure of the organization itself—specifically, the board of directors. It usually begins with the board's origin story.

Far too many boards have only a cursory understanding of their role in leading and governing their organization. In its most recent survey of nonprofit boards, BoardSource reported that 55.2 percent of board members spend little or no time investing in an understanding of their vital role in the organization. The story I hear from so many of the board members I work with inside the Nonprofit Leadership Lab is something like, "I was originally recruited to the board to support the leadership of the organization." Perhaps a funder was ready to give money, but the organization needed to have

501(c)(3) status to begin receiving funds. The grant application required a minimum of three board members and so, with time of the essence, the founder turns to friends and colleagues who want the founder to be successful. They agree to be named on the application to support the leadership of this new organization.

This is such a common path for the creation of a founding board, but it sets up a key mindset issue that I like to call the “Make Way For Ducklings” board. This references Robert McCloskey’s children’s book many of us have read more than a few times. The founder leads and the duckling board members follow right in line as the founder marches into the Boston Commons.

It is at this moment that the seeds are planted for founder syndrome, not because of the founder but because of the relatively thoughtless structure built around them. Organizations can continue on for decades, adding more ducklings all along the way, often hand selected by the lead duck (founder).

It is absolutely vital that boards of founder-led nonprofits understand this dynamic, as the long-term sustainability of the organization rests in their hands. Our sector must begin to look at a thriving nonprofit as one that values partnership, and nowhere is that more important than in the relationship between the board and staff, and more narrowly in the relationship between the staff leader and the board chair. Think about a nonprofit organization as a twin-engine jet: Each “engine,” the board and staff, must function well independently and in partnership, with the board chair and staff leader in the cockpit leading the organization’s journey together.

It is easy to see how drastically this model differs from a board of followers (ducklings). And for board members with founder leaders, it may be nearly impossible to imagine how a board can change the dynamic.

It can be done. To ensure the long-term sustainability of their organization, boards have no choice; they must lead the mindset shift. Creating the needed tipping point will require a group, as a single board member will merely swim upstream as they attempt to change board culture. This cohort absolutely must have a passion for the mission that overcomes allegiance to the individual founder and stand ready to lead

difficult conversations. Challenging the founder will be a new muscle to exercise but it is critical to the fulfillment of their duty as a board member.

With these catalysts in place, here are five practical strategies a board can and should employ to move to a board that partners with a founder.

## 1. Educate Your Board About Their Roles and Responsibilities

Leanne Chasteen was the founding executive director of New Day Children's Theatre. While Leanne had strong founder attributes, she saw the sustainability of her organization as a legacy. A new board chair saw retirement on the horizon for Leanne and was the catalyst for change that the organization needed. My consulting firm provided a workshop to the board on this very topic—how a board must lead with an executive director. We spoke at length about board leadership during founder transitions and board members left understanding that they were a vital engine on the New Day twin-engine jet. This shift did not happen overnight and you can be sure there were challenges. That said, it is critical that all current board members understand the unique challenges of leading with a founder and why getting it right matters so much. When boards understand why change matters, they will be more motivated to make necessary shifts.

## 2. Recruit With Intention

For 25 years, Michael McElroy's vision drove Broadway Inspirational Voices (BIV), a diverse community of Broadway artists united to change lives through the power of music and services. Originally a program of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights Aids, Michael spun BIV off as its own organization in 1999.

I worked as the organization's coach to help with the kind of change management necessary to ensure the sustainability of BIV after Michael ultimately stepped away. We began that work with a fundamental change in board recruitment. For years, recruitment was Michael's work. He identified candidates and drove the process.

Through our work together, we helped the Board Governance committee to understand that recruitment was a process the board must own (with Michael fully engaged as a generator of prospects). One very big shift was the recruitment of a board co-chair to complement the skills of the existing chair (with a deeper mission focus). A co-chair with deep nonprofit governance experience joined forces with the existing chair and this combination allowed for a significant shift in the board's understanding of the need to own and execute an intentional recruitment process, especially during a founder transition. Shifting the ultimate authority led BIV to Cause Lead, a program of Cause Strategy Partners, and the recruitment of Rob Acton to serve as co-chair. Rob has deep nonprofit governance experience and garnered the respect of the board and Michael and his team. Rob co-chaired the board with Schele Williams, a well-known Broadway director and close friend to Michael. It was the perfect combination of best practice and relationship management and this combination allowed BIV to create a new recruitment process that the board owned. Michael continued to identify possible candidates that were not rubber-stamped but instead carefully considered in the context of recruitment priorities.

### 3. Introduce 360 Performance Reviews

An effective board must introduce real accountability around job performance. In fact, a key indicator of a “follower” board is when the board doesn't offer the founder an honest assessment of performance. With founders, it is absolutely essential that this annual review includes staff. Charismatic and driven founders often need to develop stronger management skills that offer staff greater agency and autonomy. A 360 performance review will allow the board to see opportunities for the founder to develop in this area.

### 4. Engage in Legitimate Succession Planning

The key word above is “legitimate.” Thoughtful discussions about the departure of the founder put the elephant in the middle of the room and that is important. Boards all need to have that difficult conversation about how the organization will continue to thrive after the founder steps away. Far too often, a follower board will concoct strategies to ensure, by any means necessary, the founder has a role after stepping down. Allow me to offer some tough love: If you as a board believe that the organization will not survive without your founder, reread this piece and get to work.

## 5. Invest in Ongoing Board Enrichment

Use reading as an enrichment (and team-building) mechanism for your board. Making the shift to a “co-pilot” board demands that board members hone their soft skills. Three excellent resources for boards navigating this change: *Mindset* by Carol Dweck; *Difficult Conversations* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen; and *Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott.

If nonprofit board members really understood just how important their jobs are, they would invest more time and energy in being excellent at these jobs. The impact that would have on our sector would be immeasurable. This is especially true of boards of founder-led organizations. It's no use to stand by and blame founders for the very attributes that make them heroic. Instead, let's turn our attention to building boards strong enough to be real partners in the work.

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