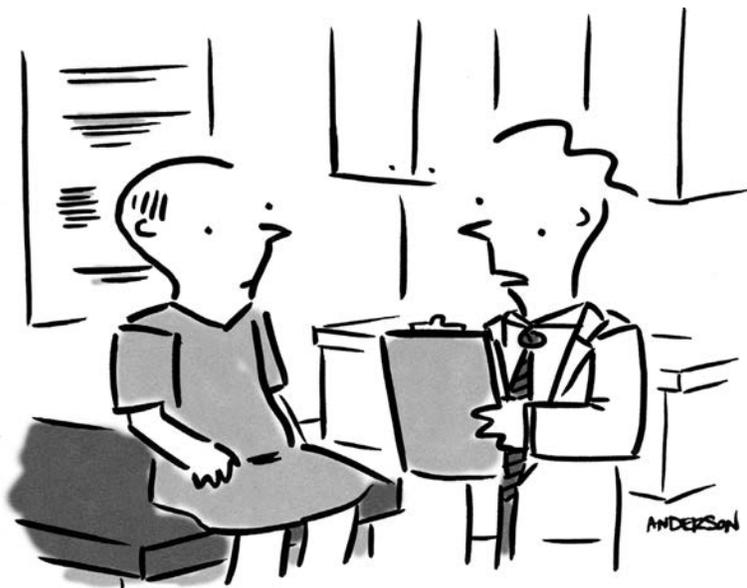


BY Andy Robinson



LIFE AFTER Founders

It starts out well enough—with passion, commitment and accomplishment—but somewhere along the way things go wrong.

“Your ‘acres saved’ count is up, but your leadership level hasn’t budged and your management systems are weak. Looks like a bad case of founderitis.”

You know the story. A beloved local landscape is threatened by development. A charismatic leader steps up, pulls together a group of neighbors and raises enough awareness and money to protect the property. Flush with victory, they do the necessary paperwork to become a nonprofit organization and create a land trust. The charismatic leader makes more friends, raises more money and closes more land deals. The organization grows and prospers. They decide to hire their first staff member. Guess who they hire?

Years go by; problems appear. Maybe it’s poor record-keeping, or poor communications, or perpetual crisis management. Lots of staff turnover. Budgets that roller-coaster up and down. In the words of one person interviewed for this article, “Founders are seldom sustainers,” adding, “Ours wanted to keep doing land deals. He didn’t want to manage; that wasn’t his personality type.” In other words, it takes one set of skills to create something from scratch, and a different suite of skills to grow that enterprise to maturity.

If this story hits too close to home, well, you’re not alone. Welcome to Founder’s Disease, or Founder’s Syndrome, or Founderitis—a malady so common it has multiple names.

This is a delicate subject. Founders are beloved, and with good reason. They inspire people. They make

things happen. To paraphrase baseball great Reggie Jackson, they are “the straw that stirs the drink.” Yet they tend to hang on far longer than is healthy for themselves or their organizations.

In preparation for this article, I interviewed four land trusts that went through challenging post-founder transitions. In two cases, the founders left amicably on their own initiative, but without a long-term plan for developing organizational leadership. The others were forced out or negotiated an uncomfortable truce—and may even remain involved today. Given the emotional nature of this topic, only one person interviewed wanted to be quoted and have his organization named.

Diagnosis

Nonprofit organizations tend to form in one of two ways. Either a collective joins together to solve a problem, or a visionary individual creates a group to help implement his or her vision. While the first model is not immune to founder’s disease, it’s less likely: participants in these groups share power and responsibility from the start, so it’s in their organizational DNA. The first step in diagnosis is to look back to the dawn of your land trust. Who was present at the birth, and what roles did they play?

Founderitis manifests itself in several ways:

1. Entrenched leadership on both the staff and board. Consciously or not, founders often surround themselves with supporters and allies who will defend them without question.

2. A deferential culture: deferring to the will and wisdom of the leader, rather than challenging assumptions and practices.

3. Organizations may run into problems with financial management or recordkeeping, because founders tend to be poor at creating systems. (To be fair, these weaknesses plague many nonprofits.) As one interviewee told me, “We outgrew what he could do. He paid very little attention to taxes and recordkeeping, and it got away from him.”

4. Relationships with most key donors and funders are managed by one person: the founder. Intentionally or not, this concentrates power.

5. Built-in hierarchies based on gender, age, race and social class. As one interviewee notes, “In these situations, you tend to see a 50 to 60 year old guy surrounded by 25 or 30 year olds who aren’t paid much.” This is the opposite of consciously building a succession plan with a pipeline designed to develop future leaders.

Treatment

Most of the suggestions below come from people who have inherited and managed founder issues in their own organizations.

1. *Create a transition plan long before you need it.* As one long-time, well-respected executive director who succeeded a founder confided to me, “I’m thinking about a succession plan, but the organization isn’t.” This is one area where the board can and should lead.

2. *Consider term limits for staff.* I believe that term limits, which mandate a certain amount of turnover and new blood, are helpful for nonprofit boards. Given the problems outlined above, I’m beginning to believe that term limits may be a good idea for executive directors as well. (Note that the Land Trust Accreditation Commission does not require board term limits as a condition of accreditation.)

3. *If needed, use outside expertise.* In one case, a consultant from the Alliance “blew the whistle” and helped the organization both identify and deal with the problem. Other land trusts have hired interim directors—typically a 6-month to 18-month assignment—to smooth the transition to the next generation of staff leadership. Another good option is a transition committee composed of community leaders respected by all involved, including the founder. One organization relied on a trusted advisor “who stood in the middle” between the founder and the board. Notes one person who was involved at the time, “He was a stabilizing influence” during the transition.

4. *Recruit new board members who are less beholden to the founder.* They bring a fresh, unbiased perspective.



FURTHER READING

Blue Avocado, www.blueavocado.org. Online newsletter focusing on nonprofit management issues, including founder transitions and succession planning.

Building Movement Project, www.buildingmovement.org. One of their projects is called Generational Changes in Nonprofit Leadership. Their website includes links to a variety of useful reports. Also look for their book *Working Across Generations: Defining the Future of Nonprofit Leadership*, www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0470195487.html.

CompassPoint, www.compasspoint.org/research-publications. CompassPoint produces lots of great materials for nonprofit leaders, including the archives of the online newsletter *Board Café*.

Grassroots Fundraising Journal, www.grassrootsfundraising.org. The archive includes a variety of articles about organizational transitions seen through a fundraising lens. Downloads are free to subscribers, \$3 to everyone else.

Institute for Conservation Leadership, www.icl.org. ICL provides training and consulting services to individual leaders, organizations and networks that focus on environmental issues. Among their many useful publications is *Four Stages and Four Challenges of Organizational Development*, www.icl.org/resource/free/four-stages-and-four-challenges-organizational-development, which provides a simple framework for thinking about organizational transitions and the leadership skills and qualities you need at each stage.

Nonprofit Quarterly, www.nonprofitquarterly.org. Thoughtful, in-depth articles on a wide variety of nonprofit topics, including succession planning. A good place to start is “Founders and Other Gods,” www.nonprofitquarterly.org/index.php/management/87-founders-and-other-gods.

5. *Maintain a positive, respectful message.*

In conversations beyond the board room, always be respectful of your leaders—past, present and future—and consistently present a positive story.

6. *Build board capacity for fundraising.*

Those who raise money have power. If the board relies on the founder to generate most of the income, they disempower themselves. Expand the pool of people who work directly with donors and foundation officers, or who can help generate fee-based income.

Getting It Right the Third Time

After helping to found the Northeast Wilderness Trust in Vermont and running it effectively for six years, Kathleen Fitzgerald left the organization for a conservation opportunity in Africa. This is not one of those stories detailing an acrimonious breakup or a relationship that went on too long—rather, it's about planning and expectations.

The next two executive directors, hired from outside the trust, each lasted a year. At that point, the board turned to one of its own, Jim Northup, and asked him to take over. More than two years on, the organization is stable, the staff is growing and Jim is planning for the future. He's looking to hire an operations director, a conservation director or "a hybrid," in Jim's words, with the skills of both who can be trained over the next few years to succeed him.

"For a small nonprofit, it's especially difficult to bring in a new executive director who is completely detached from the organization," he says. "It can be extremely challenging and stressful for the new leader. If this person doesn't have strong relationships with the board or the donors, it's a steep learning curve."

In selecting your next staff leader, Jim offers advice that some will find controversial, given that so many land trust staff come from the world of science. "It's easier for a new executive director to learn conservation skills than administrative and leadership skills. Yes, you need a personal passion for land protection, but we need to look beyond

Board to Board

Establishing a Corridor

The Solano Land Trust in California was recently recognized in the *San Francisco Chronicle* for completing a 1,500-acre, \$13 million deal known as Rockville Trails. The land trust sees this parcel as the key to establishing a corridor of open space stretching from the East Bay to Clear Lake. Open to the public, the plan is to build a park with a regional trail system between Solano and Napa counties and eventually link up with the 800,000-acre Blue Ridge Berryessa Natural Area. To learn more visit www.solanolandtrust.org.

A Chance to See

The Land Trust for Central North Carolina offers canoe trips every fall and spring as a way to connect more people to their work. The land trust operates primarily in and around working landscapes, so even though they have beautiful recreational amenities on the Yadkin/Pee

Dee River and its major tributaries, such as the Uwharrie River, it's not easy for people to get out and experience these places. The canoe trips give people a chance to see and experience the areas the land trust is working so hard to conserve.

The Benefits of Trails

The Santa Fe Conservation Trust in New Mexico was on the cover of the summer issue of the International Mountain Bicycling Association's magazine for its innovative work on Santa Fe's extensive multiple-use trail system. They have also been a leading partner in the Santa Fe Trails Alliance and recently hosted the Southwest Trails Conference, designed to promote outdoor recreation on public trails. The conference highlighted the benefits trails provide to communities, including low-cost recreation, a healthier, more active population and increased economic benefits. To learn more go to www.sfct.org.



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the conservation community to identify and groom our next generation of leaders."

"When you walk in the door in the morning," says author and consultant Kim Klein, "the first thing you should ask yourself is, 'What am I going to do today to replace myself?'"

Nearly every land trust has the word "perpetuity" in its mission statement, yet

none of us live forever. In the long run, what we want or need as individuals is less important than meeting that mission. We must honor founders for the good work they do, while also creating organizations that can grow even stronger and healthier when they step aside. 

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