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“Nonprofit Leadership Headed for Rough Sailing”
Dianna L. Sutton

I'm looking forward to walking on the new lily-white sand at Smathers Beach when the beach renourishment project is complete. The beach is getting a makeover because the sand has worn away due to the natural forces of storms and erosion. Watching the transformation of the beach made me think about the difficulty people have with keeping things the way were or are now while accepting change for the better. Just like the forces of nature that have impacted the beach, there are natural occurrences that affect how nonprofit organizations preserve and protect their organizations and missions while improving and adapting to current and future needs.

Although turnover naturally occurs in any organization, many nonprofit groups are unprepared for the wave of turnover among charity leaders about to hit. The executive transition expected in the nonprofit sector is giving some concern that nonprofit leadership is headed for rough sailing. According to a nationwide study, 2,000 of nearly 3,000 executive directors surveyed said they plan to leave their jobs within five years with 10 percent already planning their exit. Close to 60 percent of the executives surveyed were over the age of 50. In less than 10 years, nearly one quarter of the executive directors will have retired, and in 20 years, nearly 60 percent will have retired. But only 17 percent of the organizations headed by the executive directors in the survey have a written succession plan, leaving doubt about the board's ability to hire the right replacement.

Some charity leaders are delaying their retirement plans because of the slow economy and its effect on their retirement plans. Although the economic downturn has negatively affected their organizations and increased the anxiety level of chief nonprofit executives, the surveyed revealed that 22 percent of the executives age 60 or older are waiting to retire primarily because of the loss of their retirement savings. Some fear it may not be in the best interest of the nonprofit sector to keep executives around who may be postponing retirement primarily for financial reasons which may lead to nonprofit inertia or having a leader who is interested in maintaining status quo versus taking chances and trying new and different things.

Another very common but immobilizing factor in the nonprofit world is when charity leaders refuse to give up control. Commonly referred to as “founder's syndrome,” leaders who cling to their positions of power for fear that the organization cannot exist without their leadership can keep an organization from maturing. Founders are extremely mission-driven and usually personally and passionately tied to their organization's cause. Thus, nonprofit consultants claim the issue with founder's syndrome is generally not a mission-based problem but a personnel problem with founders who are unwilling or ill-equipped to recognize the need for new leadership in order to face the challenge of change or growth.

Most founders are visionary, entrepreneurial people who built an organization to respond to a community need who may not be good at day-to-day management. “The fact is that some people are cut out for the founding and building part of an organization or company and some are skilled at ongoing management and long-term sustainability.” A good founder sees themselves as the spark that builds a fire in others and will plan for their own obsolescence leaving others to tend the organization. Some founders are able to adapt and carve out a role within the organization in order to remain central to the organization after they relinquish their leadership role. These positions may be in the form of a formal

or informal arrangement allowing founders to share their skills, institutional memory and key personal relationships in the capacity as an advisor, consultant or ambassador.

A really good nonprofit executive or founder (and board member) cares about how their organization continues to progress onward and upward without them. One way for them to leave a legacy is to help the organization become more sustainable with long-term planning. Helping an organization create and build an endowment can help sustain an organization during difficult times while adapting to change. An endowment can preserve the mission of the nonprofit even if the leadership changes or the organization ceases to exist. After all, isn't creating change at the core of a nonprofit's work---helping people achieve a better condition while preserving and improving the quality of life? Change and transition is not inherently bad. According to Charles Kettering, "The world hates change, yet it is the only thing that has brought progress."

Dianna Sutton is a nationally certified fundraising executive with more than twenty years of fundraising and nonprofit management. She is currently the President and CEO of the Community Foundation of the Florida Keys. She can be contacted at dsutton@cffk.org.