



December 2012
Volume 50 Number
6
Article Number:
6FEA2

Moving Forward with Founders: Strategies for Change in Volunteer Organizations

Paula Rogers Huff

Professor

Oconto, Wisconsin

paula.huff@ces.uwex.edu

Sue Pleskac

4-H Volunteer Leadership Specialist

Professor Emeritus

Centuria, Wisconsin

sue.pleskac@ces.uwex.edu

Abstract: *Founder's Syndrome can create barriers to change in Extension programs. As a result, Extension staff have experienced challenges in effecting organizational change where Founders are present. 4-H Youth Development staff in Wisconsin applied a variety of strategies to move forward with 4-H programming, despite the influence of the Founders. Staff development has focused on three strategies with regard to Founders: Staff Awareness and Understanding, Training and Support, and Teaching Tools. A comprehensive educational approach that includes multiple strategies is likely to yield the most benefit to Extension staff dealing with Founder's Syndrome in volunteer organizations.*

Introduction

Extension has a long-standing tradition of working with volunteers to build community and expand program outreach. Extension has remained committed to working with volunteers in their community even as the face of its programming continues to change and evolve to meet the needs of its clientele. Across the nation,

today's Extension faculty and staff engage volunteers as partners in a wide variety of community organizations, from 4-H to Master Gardeners to local government boards. Oftentimes, volunteers in these organizations play a key role in delivering programming.

Extension, like many forward-thinking organizations, has evolved over the years in response to clientele needs, which has in turn affected the community groups with which it works. According to Wheatley (1999), an organization must be both fluid and reactive if it is to continue to meet the needs of those it serves. But change is not always an easy process in organizations, including Extension. Change may be impeded by individuals who have strong emotional connections to the organization and an adherence to past practices. Some of these individuals, commonly referred to as "Founders," may create barriers that prevent an organization from instituting needed change. Founders have been an issue in volunteer organizations across the nation, including Extension programs.

The typical Founder provided decisive leadership at a critical point in an organization's history, but did not change along with the evolving needs of the organization (Gottlieb, 2003). When this happens, the Founder's involvement is no longer an asset. Instead, it hinders progress and may give rise to an organizational malady called "Founder's Syndrome." According to McNamara (2000), Founder's Syndrome occurs when "rather than working toward its overall mission, the organization operates primarily according to the personality of a prominent person in the organization."

Founder's Syndrome may be present without causing a problem; it typically does not cause a problem unless the Founder is challenged. Problems arise when there is a conflict between a "new reality" and the original organization that the Founder wishes to preserve (Lewis, 2002). As long as the organization continues without challenge, there will be no conflict. It is only when a Founder is directly confronted with the need to change that conflict may arise. If a Founder is able to impede the progress toward organizational change, that change does not occur despite a need to do so (Rubenson & Gupta, 1996).

In an empirical study comparing individuals who founded non-profit organizations with non-founding leaders, Block and Rosenberg (2002) documented evidence that supported commonly reported observations regarding Founder's Syndrome. They found that Founders' influences were greater than those of non-Founders in areas of board management and organizational direction. They were also able to document

the existence (or lack thereof) of systems that supported the influence of Founders, such as the lack of term limits.

As a dynamic and responsive organization within Extension, 4-H Youth Development has instituted new policies and procedures that have improved and diversified the 4-H Youth Development program, both on the national and state level. Yet new policies and procedures have been met with resistance from local 4-H volunteer leaders, especially those leaders who have served in key leadership positions for long periods of time and display behaviors characteristic of Founders (Huff, 2003). As a result, Extension staff have experienced challenges in effecting change in organizations where Founders are present. 4-H Youth Development staff in Wisconsin have applied a variety of strategies to move forward with 4-H programming, despite the influence of the Founders.

Staff Development Strategies

Initial work by Huff (2003) in Wisconsin prompted further exploration into potential strategies for staff development about Founder's Syndrome in 4-H organizations. These strategies, consistent with volunteerism research, are directly applicable to volunteer situations where Extension provides oversight of volunteers. The three areas of strategy focus are: building awareness and understanding; infusing key information into on-going training and support of professional staff; and developing and distributing teaching tools for professional staff and volunteers.

Awareness and Understanding

Increasing awareness and understanding of the behaviors of Founders and the situations that support their existence are a logical first step in dealing with the situation. Conflict specialist William Ury (1993) advises parties in difficult situations to "Name the Game," that is, recognize the tactic being used and then apply strategies to change the "game." With Founder's Syndrome, strategies for change include employing educational and operational means to limit the influence of Founders (Huff, 2003). Specific strategies depend on a variety of factors, including the local situation, individual issues and concerns, time, knowledge, and skills.

In the last decade, presentations and workshops to increase awareness and understanding of Founder's Syndrome were taught by Wisconsin staff to nearly 200 professional staff members and approximately 75 4-H Youth Development volunteers through state, regional, and national workshops. Professional staff and volunteers reported that the information was critical to their current situations and that they

would implement strategies to address the issue in their programs.

Training and Support

New 4-H Youth Development staff in Wisconsin receive information and educational materials regarding Founder's Syndrome through formal orientation sessions and on-going collegial support. In addition, the topic has been included as part of the annual professional development offerings for all 4-H Youth Development staff at regional and other workshops.

Development and Distribution of Teaching Tools

A teaching plan entitled *Going Forward with Founders* has been made available for use by Wisconsin staff members in workshops with professionals, paraprofessionals, and volunteers. The teaching materials, including a PowerPoint presentation, have been piloted and reviewed; they are available on a designated volunteer development website (Huff & Pleskac, 2011).

Methods

In 2010, an electronic on-line survey was offered to 106 Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development Staff across 72 counties to gain an understanding of the progress they have made in moving programs forward while addressing the issue of Founder's Syndrome. Sixty-one professional staff responded (57% response rate). The survey, which consisted of forced choice and open-ended questions, was developed by the authors working in conjunction with Evaluation Specialist Ellen Taylor Powell at the University of Wisconsin-Extension. Each author independently reviewed the data and grouped responses in a content analysis. Only illustrative quotations that were representative of the themes that emerged from the analysis were used in this article. These quotations are used to provide face validity, allowing readers direct access to the data (Patton, 2002).

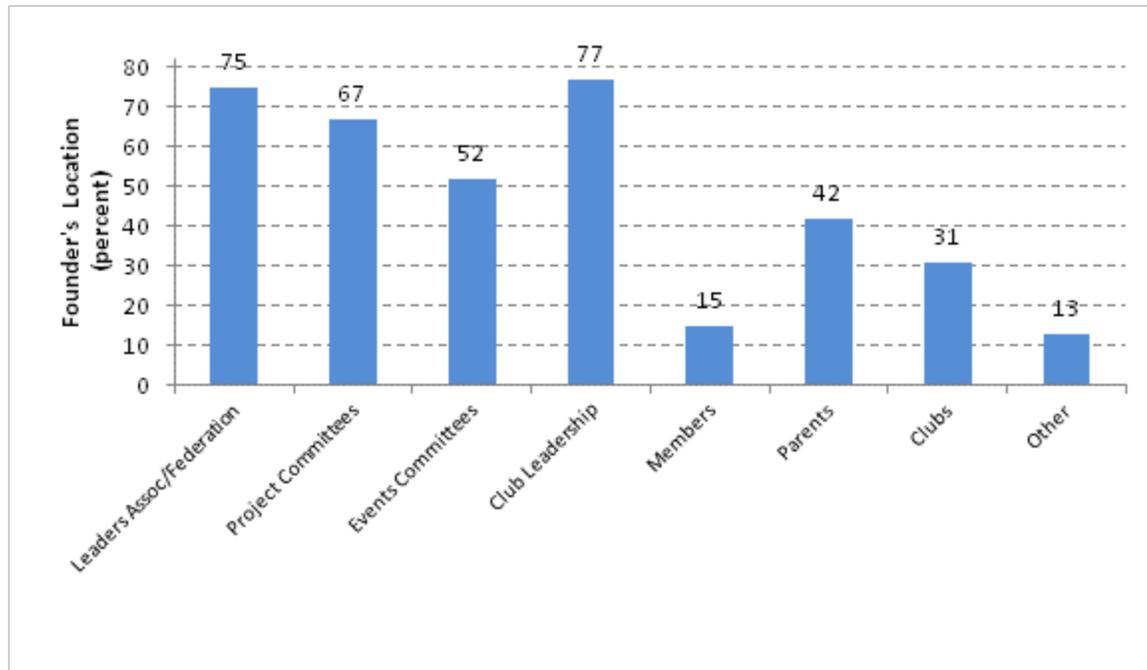
Results and Discussion

Observations made by Huff (2003) formalized what 4-H Youth Development staff had been experiencing in 4-H programs across Wisconsin. Once the characteristics of Founders and their behavior patterns were communicated, along with the external and internal factors that supported Founders, staff members were able to identify Founders in all aspects of county 4-H programs. Ninety-two percent of participants in the 2010 survey reported the presence of Founders in at least one portion of their county program. The highest percentage of Founders was found in 4-H Community

Club Leadership (77%), followed by 4-H Volunteer Leaders Organizations (75%), and 4-H Project Committees (67%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

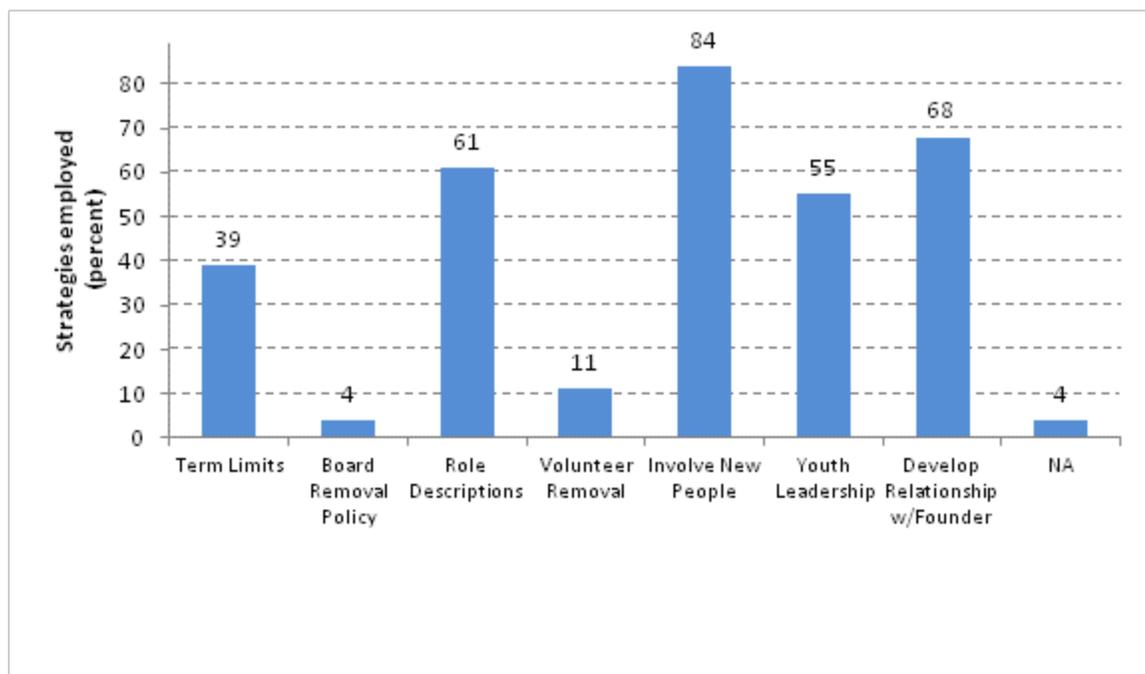
Location of Founders in County 4-H Programs (Reported by 52 Wisconsin 4H Staff



Recognizing both the behaviors that Founders use and the motivation behind them has helped staff members in Wisconsin deal more positively with Founders. One 4-H Youth Development staff person related, "Now that I understand that the Founders are trying to protect the organization that they so dearly love, I can understand the origin of these behaviors, and appreciate where the Founders are coming from." As Wisconsin staff members became aware of the Founders' behaviors in their counties, they employed a variety of strategies to move their programs forward (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Strategies Employed by 4-H Staff Members to Deal with Founder's Syndrome (56 Wisconsin 4-H Staff reporting)



Successful Strategies in Managing Founders

Involve New People

The strategy Wisconsin staff members most frequently reported using to manage Founders situations was involving new people in the organization (Figure 2).

However, involving new people can present a challenge because the behaviors that Founders employ often discourage the involvement of new people. One staff member reported that it was unusual for new volunteers to attend a second 4-H Volunteer Leader Organization meeting in her county, citing the negative climate experienced at the first meeting.

Staff members reported that it is critical to assess the readiness of the organization to welcome new members. It is also important when involving new people to find the right venue for them. Some found success in situations that did not directly involve Founders or provided a buffer from the behaviors of Founders. Staff members reported using strategies such as pairing new leaders with positive mentors and building alternate committee experiences away from conflict situations.

Develop a Relationship with Founders

4-H Youth Development staff members who provide leadership for a county 4-H Youth Development program are charged with the implementation of Extension policies and guidelines. However, enforcement of policies in a Founders situation often can contribute to the negative situation. Nearly 70% of staff members in Wisconsin, who responded to the survey, tell us that relationship building is one of

the key elements that they have used in working with Founders. This approach involves recognizing the positive contributions that a Founder may make in an organization and finding an appropriate role for him or her that can benefit the group. An ideal role would build on the assets of the Founder while redirecting his or her efforts in an area that does not trigger an emotional response and resultant negative behaviors. Relationship building takes time and effort but can yield long-lasting results, minimize conflict, and serve as a positive model for others in the 4-H program. According to one staff member, "[It is important] working *with* [italics added] the founders and others to educate why the change is needed and the benefits to change."

Involve Youth in Leadership Roles

4-H is organized around youth and focuses on providing opportunities for youth to be involved in 4-H as equal partners (The Power of Youth, 2001). That equal partnership applies to all aspects of the program, including organizational leadership and teaching roles (from planning through to evaluation). Helping participants—both youth and adult, Founders and non-Founders—to embrace that philosophy can also help alleviate a programmatic stalemate. In Wisconsin, 51% of staff report using youth leadership as a strategy to move the program forward with Founders. One respondent suggested, "Get youth excited. [Founders] are more likely to consider the ideas if it comes from the kids."

Formalize Organizational Structure, and Provide Connection to Larger System

4-H volunteers and staff members in 12 states identified "Organizational Structure: 4-H and CES" as a core competency; researchers felt it was not a skill or a competency but it was important that volunteers make the connection between Extension and 4-H (Culp, McKee, & Nestor, 2007). Organizational structure also can provide the framework for a dynamic organization that is poised for growth. Bylaws can be an important organizational tool in guiding a group in a positive direction. Structuring bylaws to encourage the involvement of new people and developing an arena in which ideas can be generated provides a critical opportunity to move from a "Founder-driven" organization to a "community-driven" organization as described by Gottlieb (2003). In 4-H, a community-driven organization would equate to a youth-driven organization as envisioned by National 4-H (The power of youth, 2001). Including the following components in bylaw changes was useful in 4-H Volunteer Leader Organizations:

- Term limits for board members
- Role descriptions for board members
- Limitations on the number of committees on which an individual may serve
- Provision for youth membership and leadership roles

In Wisconsin, 56% of staff members reported using role descriptions as a means of managing Founder's Syndrome in their county programs; 36% employed term limits. On a statewide basis, Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development instituted a behavior agreement that all 4-H volunteers sign annually as part of the Youth Protection Program. The behavior agreement serves to remind volunteers of the expectations for them, provides consistent communication with volunteers, serves as a foundation for on-going volunteer training and support, and reminds volunteers of connection to the larger system of the University and the 4-H program.

Volunteer Education

Direct teaching that focused on skill building has also been found by Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development staff to be an effective strategy in working with Founders to strengthen local programs. Respondents reported that they increased the competence and confidence of volunteers with regard to organizational change through direct teaching of the concepts of conflict resolution, diversity and inclusivity/creating welcoming environments, organizational development and planning, communication skills, and working with youth. On a statewide and national level, the authors found volunteers receptive both to the concept of Founder's Syndrome and in strategies to implement change.

Volunteer Removal

In extreme cases, it has been necessary to remove volunteer privileges from an individual; this method was reported by 10% of respondents to the 2010 survey. Volunteer removal is often recommended to remedy Founder's Syndrome in non-profit organizations (Lewis, 2002), yet in Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development, removal is considered only after careful review of individual circumstances, role descriptions, and behavior agreements that are in place. Volunteer removal from the 4-H program in Wisconsin is considered a last-resort strategy and one that is executed with respect and confidentiality for the volunteer.

Conclusions and Implications

Change is a slow process, especially when it involves introducing new policies and new values into the existing culture of an organization. Change becomes even more difficult when the culture revolves around a Founder and his or her value system. It has been posited that it is not possible to create a new culture by simply eliminating the old one, because the only thing that will result is the destruction of the old culture (Senge, et al., 1999). Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development staff members found success in applying educational and operational strategies to their Founder situations while maintaining the integrity of their programs.

The following implications have arisen from the work on Founder's Syndrome in Wisconsin.

- Awareness of Founder's Syndrome and the characteristic behaviors of Founders leads to solutions. As one participant responded: "Once we realized it was Founders...it made it easier." The process of creating awareness of Founder's Syndrome facilitated change in individuals, programs, and organizations.
- Awareness of Founder's characteristics in others may lead to increases in self-awareness. Comments from survey respondents included: "I am a Founder." "Anytime I hear a phrase like 'This is how we did it last year' or 'It's how we've always done it,' I always stop myself or the group and consider what could or should change. Those are triggers in my mind that we have to open our minds to alternatives and possibilities."
- A comprehensive educational approach that includes multiple strategies to move the organization forward has a positive impact on a Founder's situation and likely the most beneficial to the educational program as a whole. The long-term solution for moving forward with Founders involves staff members working together with the entire organization in a comprehensive approach of appropriate strategies dictated by the individual situation and persons involved.
- Effective interpersonal relationships, open communication, and strong operational guidelines provide a means for limiting the negative impact of Founders on a program or organization. Working directly with the individuals exhibiting Founder's characteristics has been successful in many cases in implementing positive change, as has limiting the influence of Founders

through bylaw changes, term limits, and the involvement of new people.

- It is important that additional resources are put into place to provide essential skill and knowledge building with all staff and volunteers as they work with people and organizations during times of change. This includes identifying existing resources, providing easy access to resources, developing additional tools as needed, and making workshops available to both staff and volunteers in critical areas of relationship-building and organizational change. Respondents from the Wisconsin survey identified that teaching concepts in the areas of conflict resolution, inclusivity, and communication provided positive outcomes in working with Founders.
- Providing multiple venues for networking and opportunities for both staff and volunteers to learn together will strengthen the competence and confidence of those who work with Founders to create a welcoming environment in 4-H and other organizations for volunteers and members. Respondents reported their greatest source of information on working with Founders came from other colleagues.

References

Block, S. R., & Rosenberg, S. (2002). Toward an understanding of founder's syndrome. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, 12(4), 353-368.

Culp, K., McKee, R. K., & Nestor, P. (2007). Identifying volunteer core competencies: Regional differences. *Journal of Extension*, 43(5) Article 6FEA3. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2007december/a3.php>

Gottlieb, H. (2003). Founder's syndrome? Who me?. Retrieved from: http://www.help4nonprofits.com/PDF_Files/FoundersSyndromeArticle.pdf

Huff, P. R. (2003). Founder's syndrome and 4-H leaders organizations. *Department of Youth Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension*. Retrieved from: <http://4h.uwex.edu/department/viewdocument.cfm?item=ACF4F9F.pdf>

Huff, P. R., & Pleskac, S. (2011). Going forward with founders. Retrieved from: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/4h/resources/mgt/Founders.cfm>

Lewis, H. D. (2002). Founder's syndrome: An affliction for which there is rarely immunity. Retrieved from: http://www.tyc.state.tx.us/archive/programs/vol_newsletter/fall_oct2002/index.html

McNamara, C. (2000). Founder's syndrome: how corporations suffer—and can recover. Retrieved from: www.mapnp.org/library/misc/founders.htm

Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Rubenson, G. C., & Gupta, A. K. (1996). The initial succession: A contingency model of founder tenure. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 21, 21-35.

Senge, P., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R., Roth, G., & Smith, B. (1999). *The dance of change: the challenges of sustaining momentum in learning organizations*. New York: Doubleday/Currency.

The Power of Youth in a Changing World. The National 4-H Strategic Plan, Executive Summary. (2001). Retrieved from: <http://www.national4-headquarters.gov/library/summary.pdf>

Ury, W. (1993). *Getting past no*. New York: Bantam Press.

Wheatley, M. J. (1999). *Leadership and the new science: Discovering order in a chaotic world*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)

© Copyright by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. [Copyright Policy](#)