Founder’s Syndrome and 4-H Leaders Organizations

Philosophical Paper

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The following individuals shared their experiences and observations in the preparation of this paper: Barbara Becker, 4-H Youth Development Agent; Donna Menart Assistant State Program Leader and Northeast District Program Liaison; and Deborah Moellendorf, Northern and Central District Program Liaison.
Founder’s Syndrome is a malady that may hinder progress of an organization through the inability of founding members to adapt to needed change. Founders typically exhibit characteristics that allow them to maintain control of the organization despite pressure to change. Founder’s Syndrome has been observed in 4-H Leaders Associations in Wisconsin, especially in organizations where many of the same members have served in key leadership positions for long periods of time. Factors contributing to the development and maintenance of Founder’s Syndrome within an organization may come from within the Leaders Association, and also from outside the Association. Observations suggest that the most predictive factor in the development of Founder’s Syndrome in 4-H Leaders Associations is staff turnover in county positions. Strategies to minimize the effects of Founder’s Syndrome include recruitment of new members, revised organizational structure, volunteer removal, and county/district level support.
Introduction

Change is a vital part of a dynamic organization. In order for an organization to meet the needs of those it serves, it must be both fluid and reactive (Wheatley, 1999). But organizational change can be a difficult process for those involved. For some members of an organization, the process is not only difficult, it is impossible because of their emotional connection to the organization. These individuals are commonly referred to as “founders”.

Gottlieb (2003) describes a typical founder as an individual who provided decisive leadership at a critical point in an organization's history, but has failed to change with the evolving needs of the organization. The founder's involvement is no longer an asset to the organization, rather it hinders progress and may give rise to an organizational malady labeled “Founder's Syndrome”. McNamara (2000) explains that 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 in an organization without causing a problem. The problem arises when there is a conflict between a “new reality” and the original organization as the founder envisioned it (Lewis, 2002). As long as the organization continues without challenge, there will be no conflict. It is only when founders are directly confronted with the need to change that
conflict arises (Lewis, 2002). And, if a founder is able to impede the progress toward organizational change, that change will not occur even if it is needed (Rubenson and Gupta, 1996).

**Founder Syndrome in 4-H Leaders Associations**

Founder’s Syndrome has been observed in county 4-H volunteer leaders associations in Wisconsin, especially in those organizations that have had many of the same members serving in key leadership positions for long periods of time. The presence of Founder’s Syndrome within the county 4-H program presents organizational challenges not only for volunteers who wish to move the program forward, but also for the staff member who serves in the educational and advisory role at the county level.

**Personal Characteristics of Founders**

Founders may be present in varying degrees in any organization and their personal strategies may differ, but there are some common observable actions that are characteristic of founders. They include the following:

- Resist planning, policies and procedure (McNamara, 2000)
- Handpick board members (McNamara, 2000)
- Make decisions alone; look to others to “rubber-stamp” those decisions (Gottlieb, 2003)
- Promote removal of those who disagree (McNamara, 2000)
• Strongly adhere to past strategies (McNamara, 2000)
• Do not make decisions that are in the best interest of the organization due to their egos (Lewis, 2002)
• Employ management strategies to maintain organizational control (Miller and Simmons, 1992)

At the county level within the 4-H program, founders are likely to be those individuals who have nurtured the program and provided leadership in difficult times. The characteristics that helped them succeed in rescuing or maintaining the program may be the same characteristics that prevent them from creating an atmosphere for change.

Community status may be linked to success as a founder. An individual who is highly regarded in the community is more likely to be a ‘successful’ founder than one who is not. Those with community status are more likely to garner support from local leaders who may unwittingly help the founders in their resistance to change.

Individual founders have been observed using bullying tactics on 4-H leaders and even members, often displaying a lack of healthy interactive skills when dealing with others. In some cases, the power derived from leadership within the organization may fuel these behaviors.
Internal Contributing Factors

Factors within the local 4-H organization may contribute to the development and sustaining of Founder’s Syndrome. Many leaders associations suffering from Founder’s Syndrome face difficulties in recruiting new leaders into their organization. While many founders readily admit that their organization needs new members, their attitude toward those new members often does not foster a cooperative working relationship. Hostilities toward new members-- and the disregard for their ideas—have been observed in county programs. One founder remarked that new members “needed to put in their 20 years before they could have any input into the program”.

In tightly knit rural communities, relationships may foster the continuance of Founder’s Syndrome. The respect for a fellow community member may prevent individuals from taking a stand against a founder. It may not “feel right” to oppose your neighbor, friend, relative, or even your former 4-H leader. Fear of reprisal may also play a role in that decision.

External Contributing Factors

Factors outside of the 4-H Leaders Organization may also contribute to Founder’s Syndrome. Indeed, within Extension’s own history is an example of a contributing factor. In the 1980s, an initiative entitled “Volunteer Force” was implemented to foster ownership of the 4-H program by its volunteers (Gleason et al., 1986). The aim was to position volunteers as middle managers in the 4-
H program. With 4-H volunteers as middle-managers, 4-H staff members were relieved of tasks that could be handled by volunteers. The program may have unwittingly gone beyond its intent to create feelings of power and ownership in the 4-H volunteers and resulted in minimizing volunteers’ understanding of state oversight of the 4-H program.

Staff turnover may be the most predictive element in the development and continuance of Founder’s Syndrome at the county level. In addition to the obvious lack of program continuity produced by rapid turnover, staff change within a county program can also create a situation where the leaders may be obligated to step in and assume the role of program coordinator (either officially or unofficially) in order to keep the program functioning, sometimes for up to a year before the position is filled.

Staff turnover may also create an atmosphere where the volunteers within the program do not expect the staff member to stay in the position. Volunteers simply tolerate new staff and their recommendations, with the expectation that they will be leaving the position soon. In more extreme circumstances, volunteers have created an atmosphere that has led to staff vacating their positions.

However, a lengthy tenure for a staff member may also be a factor contributing to Founder’s Syndrome. On a state and national level, the 4-H program, like
many successful community-based programs, has changed over time. There have been many changes in the program including initiatives for program expansion through outreach, annual financial reporting to Cooperative Extension, an increased emphasis on youth participation in decision-making within the 4-H program at the local level, and an evolution in the role of professional staff. Depending on the staff member and local circumstances, these changes may or may not have been implemented at the local level. If a long-term staff member leaves without having implemented changes, the new staff member may enter the position fortified with what the local 4-H organization perceives as radical changes. The new vision for 4-H may be so different from the founder’s vision of 4-H that it will either be challenged, or rejected as untrue.

A staff member with a higher service orientation toward their position can also be a contributing factor in Founder’s Syndrome. Some staff members may perceive their role as one of carrying out directives from volunteers rather than viewing one’s self as an educational leader for programs.

Lack of support from the County Extension Department Head or County Extension Education Committee can exacerbate situations with founders. For example, the lack of department or county support in implementation of policy and programmatic changes necessary to align local programs with state expectations can lead to mixed messages for the 4-H organization. In addition,
ineffective responses to complaints directed toward the staff person for implementing needed change may also reinforce the behaviors of founders, and ultimately lead to more staff turnover.

**Addressing Founder’s Syndrome**

It is far easier to deal with the prevention of Founder’s Syndrome than to correct a situation in which founders are controlling the organization. Where the founders are in the minority, Lewis (2002) recommends that they be dealt with “quickly and decisively” with a separation that is “total and final”. In 4-H that “total and final” separation may be volunteer removal. However, if the situation does not allow for removal, the organization can take steps to restructure so that Founder’s Syndrome is minimized in the future.

One such step in the prevention of Founder’s Syndrome (or the limitation of its influence) is the development of infrastructure to ensure that the organization can shift and change with the needs of the 4-H community. This infrastructure coupled with a focus on decision-making processes -- while not a guarantee against Founder’s Syndrome -- does allow the organization to grow and operate efficiently (Lewis, 2002). In addition, feedback from stakeholders is vital in the evolution from a founder-driven organization (McNamara, 1998).
Bylaws can provide a critical opportunity to move from a “founder-driven” organization to a “community-driven” organization as described by Gottlieb (2003). Bylaws can be structured so as to encourage the involvement of new people and develop an arena for new ideas to be generated. The following bylaw changes have been useful in Leaders Associations:

- Term limits for board members
- Provision for the removal of board members
- Job descriptions for board members, including a clarification that directors represent specific segments of the membership and communicate with their constituents
- Limitations on the number of committees on which an individual may serve
- Provision for youth membership and leadership roles

In addition, the following have been used successfully in minimizing the effects of Founder’s Syndrome at the county level:

- Department Head support (such as communicating agent role and program responsibilities)
- Extension Education Committee support (especially helpful in ensuring that founder complaints do not undermine the program)
- Youth and new leader involvement on leaders boards
• Annual review of roles (including staff, leaders association, 4-H program) and expectations with board members
• Enlistment of supporters to effect change
• Active recruitment of new leaders, especially if they are respected and/or have a relationship with founder
• Expansion and Review Committee which annually reviews the county 4-H Program with regard to program expansion and opportunities to extend its programming to all available youth
• Staff person establishing a relationship with founder
• Redirection of energies of founders to other areas of the program
• Committee ground rules to help organization monitor its own behavior
• Group planning to help volunteers focus on the “big picture”
• District Director intervention with founder, as needed, when local intervention is unsuccessful
• Direct discussions with leaders organizations prior to new staff member assuming job duties. These discussions have included roles and expectations for staff and volunteers, and a message that volunteers are expected to support new staff member.
• External program review that brings in external staff, volunteers and youth to critically assess the situation.

Actions taken at the state level to support volunteer management include Youth Protection training, policy on Volunteer Dismissal and Removal, and a
recent update of the Volunteer Behavior Agreement with a directive that it be signed annually.

**Summary**

The presence of Founder’s Syndrome within 4-H leaders associations in Wisconsin has not been an isolated event. Founder’s Syndrome is present (or has been present) in varying degrees in numerous leaders associations throughout the state. Taking measures to ensure that it does not occur is important for a successful transition for a new agent in the county, as are steps to minimize its influence, if it is present.

The appointment of a new staff person to a county 4-H Youth Development position may trigger development of Founder’s Syndrome within a county program. With the arrival of a new staff person, it is likely that a founder may well be confronted with change. Prior to the staff person assuming their county position, it would be of value to assess the county in terms of its alignment to state policies and the scope of the 4-H Youth Development program through an external program review. The review could serve as a starting point for developing a county plan for implementing any necessary changes within the local 4-H program, and its leaders association.
Literature Cited


