

## **On the Frontlines**

### **Knowing When to Let Go**

**Charles Lewis on how a founder says goodbye to donors and staff**

As told to Sheila Kaplan

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## Knowing When to Let Go

*Charles Lewis on how a founder says goodbye to donors and staff*

When I first thought about stepping down, I wasn't sure who could come in and take over for me. Or, more relevant, who would want to. It is a pretty intense gig, directing a staff of 40 people, raising \$5 million a year, being threatened with lawsuits occasionally, stepping on powerful toes from presidents to multibillion-dollar corporations. Furthermore, there are a lot of quality journalists but few who have those credentials and who have also raised – or there is reason to suspect they can raise – millions of dollars annually. And then there's a whole public-presence issue. Can they speak on behalf of the organization in a credible and persuasive way on a wide range of subjects? Those kinds of people don't grow on trees.

When I started off, I hadn't done all those things. I had never been anything more than a reporter. But it's different starting something out of your house or being a one-employee operation than it is when it's 40. The bigger the center became, the bar and the standard became higher.

Part of the equation about leaving and timing is about the momentum of the organization, how well it's doing at the moment, how well it's perceived, the level of respect, the public reputation. If the organization looks to be anemic, the staff is unimpressive, there's been lots of discord, if there has been employee-related liti-

gation or internal strife, it makes the founder's leaving even more difficult.

This is a good time to go. Certain markers had occurred – we have written 275 reports, won 28 national awards, and we'd been over the \$4 million fundraising threshold for several years. Perhaps most importantly, we'd begun an endowment and legal



defense fund and had \$4 million in it. It was the first time the Center for Public Integrity actually had any appreciable reserves to speak of – the equivalent of one year of operating expenses.

I also felt secure that we had the infrastructure in place to allow my successor to succeed. Cutting-edge people are managing the editorial process, maintaining a sheen of the highest possible quality. The develop-

ment director is terrific and has been there for eight years, the second-longest serving employee after myself. Our communications department was reaching more people every year. There's a lot of fantastic karma. My successor, Roberta Baskin, will benefit from the goodwill and 15 years of high energy and accomplishments of the organization.

And then, for me personally, at some point you don't want to feel you're doing the same thing every year. I'd won the MacArthur award, I had raised roughly \$30 million over 15 years, published 14 books and 275 reports. Then, there was a human stamina question – exhaustion and burnout. And having turned 50, there also was a bit of a restlessness – looking at the hourglass. I had the sense that if I stayed at the center I would never leave. I was afraid of the founder syndrome. Particularly in Washington, there are an awful lot of crusty, old, increasingly curmudgeonly founders who basically become insufferable know-it-alls in their silos, and their organizations are the only ones who know anything and everybody else are basically idiots. They won't talk to other people; they have an informal enemies list of people that they can't stand, don't want to talk to, and don't want to work with. I was afraid that the longer I stayed I would become one of those people. I'm a person who's full of ideas and I always like the excitement and the spontaneity of the moment. I like thinking about this and that and being positive

despite the grim reaper nature of this dark investigative work we do, and I didn't want to become some bitter, calcified pain in the ass.

We were concerned about how to break the news to our big donors. Fundraising is very personal and people often give money if they believe in someone's personal vision and if the exuberance and enthusiasm of that person are infectious. There's a personal connection there, so this is a very delicate thing for the founder or the head of a group to leave after many years, because all the donors have had hours and hours of face time with the founder and executive director. And the executive director, as the founder, has a bit more moral authority when people know that this person is not just someone who got the job, but that they had the idea for the place and made it happen. As the group becomes more successful, that person's stature and credibility with donors, as well as in the public and maybe other places, rises. So the act of a founder – under those circumstances – leaving, is a jolt to everyone. It's a rejection, it's a stunning thing. In the case of the center, I was seen as the center by many people.

We did several things to try to reassure donors. The first thing was that I called many of them person-

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ally. The longest-serving, most dedicated donors and also the most generous donors are the ones that you want to explain it to as fully and as sensitively as you can individually. The major donors were informed days or hours before the public was.

There was only one donor who was very upset. They felt that I had made a mistake and I shouldn't step down, and were highly irritated that I didn't inform them prior to the time I told them. As I pointed out to them, "What do you expect me to do, tell you before the board of directors, including the co-founder?" The experienced nonprofit people instantly understood: "My God, you've been on the frontlines for 15 years. I'm amazed you're still standing. Good luck to you and I'll help you any way I can."

The initial reaction by a lot of people was: "Why are you leaving? Are you sick? Is your health OK? Did something piss you off? Is there something we don't know?" No one was nicer to me or more understanding than Hodding Carter of the Knight Foundation. The center was right in the middle of a \$2 million grant proposal. The timing couldn't have been worse. Hodding called me and said: "I just heard the news. Holy cow, I can't say I'm thrilled." I said, "I totally understand, Hodding," and I

tried to explain it to him. In true inimitable Hodding fashion, he said to me, "I've got to ask you – is there a backstory I should know about?"

For some, there was an Oliver Stone kind of question. There was a shock. Grieving came later and then there was an intense curiosity as to the why. I think people assumed I would do this another 10 or 15 years. They probably assumed I would die with my boots on, sitting at the word processor.

After people were satisfied by my reasons for leaving, they then became curious as to who would replace me. The board of directors for the center was desperately curious, as they have every right to be, about who the successor would be. We felt that it was extremely important that there be a public process by a professional head-hunting firm. That may sound like a no-brainer, but some of our board members initially wanted to save money and they also thought that investigative reporting is such a quirky world that we know who all the good people are and we don't need some suit to come in and tell us. But we had a board member who was, to his credit, vociferous in insisting that we had to have a headhunter and went so far as to put up the money to pay for most of the fees. He felt that if it was a public process, if it was a legitimate professional enterprise, done by a first-rate expert, that there would be buy-in, not only by the donors, but also by the staff, the board of directors, the advisory board, and the entire center community.

The recruiting was a six- or seven-month process and we initially contacted 150 people that we narrowed down to three candidates. The three finalists had five interviews, twice with the search committee, once with the full board of directors, and also



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meetings with the staff and the senior staff. It was an elaborate and difficult process. There was some blood on the floor; there were different perceptions about what kind of person should be brought in. It was really one of the best things we could have done to hire an outside firm. If it was seen as some sort of wink-wink, closed door, everyone waiting to see smoke signals from the roof about who's been chosen, it wouldn't be the same.

Our ability to recruit highly qualified candidates, as well as other talented people, to the center is helped by the fact that we pay them well and treat them well. I'm a firm believer in "quality begets quality." Nonprofits sometimes have this hair-shirt mentality that I've got to sacrifice and if my hands don't bleed when I'm writing on the word processor and if I haven't worked 14 hours every single day the last three weeks without weekends, then somehow I'm not worthy. At the Center for Public Integrity, we have three weeks minimum paid vacation. Starting salary is \$30,000 plus benefits, including dental. You do little things to be nice to your people because they're killing themselves otherwise. Besides being the right thing to do, they'll be less prone to make mistakes and you'll have a more professional workplace and higher quality output. You'll engender goodwill in your existing staff, and continue to attract better people.

I announced in April 2004 that I was stepping down at the end of the year, and we had the best year in the center's history fundraising-wise and raised more than \$2 million in new grants – new funding, new donors discovering us for the first time, knowing I was leaving but loving the center. I'm assisting as a consultant and I'm heading up the support organization that we've created – the Fund for Independence in Journal-

## A Board Member's Perspective

I first learned that Chuck wanted to step down at a board meeting in January 2003. Chuck announced before the usual status report, "Well, I guess there is something I need to tell you guys," in his wonderfully shy and self-effacing way.

As a friend, my reaction was, "This is the best thing," because the schedule that he had been maintaining was unsustainable by anyone's standards, even his superhuman ones. And he was looking so tired and so stressed.

As a board member, it was a bit of a shock because he was so inextricably linked to the identity of this organization. (Many of us joked about this being Chuck's excellent adventure.) And so we did not have a succession plan. We had board meetings where we speculated about what to do if Chuck should "get hit by a bus," which demonstrates our incredible naiveté as if an unlikely cataclysm was the only scenario in which we would need a succession plan.

In early conversations, we talked about the executive committee – the board president (Charles Piller), myself (the secretary), and the treasurer (Allen Pusey), and Chuck would be involved in the search. Within a month, we came down to the realization that it was not something that we wanted to do on our own without a headhunter. We all had full-time jobs and recruiting people was not something that easily fit into our schedules.

We knew that we were not going to find a clone of Chuck. This is the founder's organization and Chuck's role was so personal and had evolved over 15 years, his job description was very much a reflection of him. So the headhunter's first job was to write a job description that was more professional and institutional rather than personal. After all, while Chuck had the ability to found an organization and create something amazing, he never needed to follow in some very big footsteps and impose a new vision, building on the strengths of the old, respecting the past, and to a certain extent breaking with it. And that requires is a whole different skill set, one that we needed to reflect in our job description.

The nature of the board has also changed. We have moved from being a founder's board to being more of a governing board. All of us realized that it is time for us to step up to the plate. Not that we were passive, but at the same time, Chuck's driving vision and genius for what to do and how to do it and how to pay for it was something that made us all happy to lend a hand when we could. But in terms of really helping craft a vision, we were less involved in that. The process of finding Chuck's terrific successor also matured us as a board, and I think that will be reflected in the way the organization continues in its next phase.



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ism. I resigned from the board. Having founded the center, I initially thought it would be a good thing to stay on the board, but I came to understand that I'm not doing the center or my successor any favors by staying on the board. I'd be seen as

second-guessing my successor. Also as a founder, I don't really need to be on the board, frankly. I will always have a certain place in the institutional trajectory of the center. □

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