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What Works

Educators With Borders: *Sometimes nonprofit workers have to learn to “just say no”.*

By Alessandra Bianchi

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Educators With Borders

Sometimes nonprofit workers have to learn to “just say no” by *Alessandra Bianchi*

“Joey wants a football.” The woman’s voice on the other end of the line was demanding and unapologetic. It was at this moment that Kristen Haffenreffer Moran knew that things had gotten out of hand. As executive director of Rhode Islanders Sponsoring Education (RISE), a Providence-based nonprofit that gives educational scholarships and mentoring to the children of incarcerated women, Moran had grown accustomed to edgy situations. After all, visiting correctional facilities and interviewing inmates were in her job description.

But fulfilling this particular request from a RISE mother was not in her job description, and Moran wasn’t sure how to explain that – to the mother or to herself. Moran had been involved with RISE since its inception in 1997, when two Brown University physicians decided that the best way to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and violence was to educate the children of imprisoned women. Moran, a Providence native and mother of two, was eager to get involved. “I quickly latched on to the notion that if you put in enough time and worked hard enough, you could save anybody,” she recalls.

At first, her “never-say-no” approach worked beautifully. When she found herself sweeping a floor, helping an illiterate father fill out a financial aid form, or negotiating to get a RISE family’s lights turned back on, it was easy for Moran to tell herself, “I’m doing these things for the kids.”

But as RISE grew in size over its next three years, Moran’s all-inclusive approach became less feasible. In its early years, RISE’s lean staff of only 2.5 employees served approximately 25 students and their families. As RISE expanded to serve 123 children, their 104 sponsors, their 70 mentors, and 25 board members, it did not expand its program staff. Staff members could no longer satisfy all of the constituents’ requests and still ensure the program’s quality and longevity. “RISE couldn’t get away with being the cute new kid on the block anymore,” said Moran. “It was time to grow up.”

The Meaning of “Growing Up”

Moran, her staffers, and RISE board members discovered that “growing up” can mean radically different things to different people. “Some board members felt that we should inflate the program,” said Moran, “that the more you let in,



RISE gives educational aid to kids like Shaelon F. (center), pictured with her mother (left) and a RISE mentor.

the more you help.” To these board members, growing up meant growing out and expanding the client base.

On the other hand, Moran and her staff keenly felt the challenges that came with unbridled growth. They yearned for the order and structure that typify more established agencies. At the same time, they didn’t want to jeopardize RISE’s personal, flexible style by instituting rigid policies and procedures. “Growing up” to Moran and her staff therefore meant setting responsible goals and establishing reasonable boundaries.

RISE’s staffers, board members, and founders (who also were board members at the time) debated their competing visions for several months, but to no avail. Finally, RISE formed a long-range planning committee in the winter of 2004 to force a resolution.

The committee was made up of eight of RISE’s 25 board members, including its two founders. The committee first revisited RISE’s mission, vision statement, and goals so that everyone would be on the same page for the intense planning ahead. In the course of one meeting-heavy month, the committee next outlined a long-range plan, replete with specific goals, objectives, and action plans for RISE’s future finances, public relations, staff and board structure, evaluation strategies, and role in the greater nonprofit community.

The committee then presented its outline to RISE’s full board, which spent the next four months crafting a six-page long-range plan. The plan reflected compromise between the advocates of increase vs. the advocates of maturity: Go ahead and grow, it said, but with care and control. For example, the plan ties the number of students allowed into the program each year to the amount of money it secures from



sponsors. This contrasts with past practice, when RISE would accept students and count on raising funds later.

The long-range plan also clarified what RISE's core services would and would not be. In the past, RISE staffers had tried to address most of the many peripheral issues that might affect a child's education, including unstable housing, low English proficiency, and parental unemployment. With its long-range plan, the board made a conscious decision to focus solely on the provision of academic support to the children, and to leave the other challenges to existing Providence agencies and community groups.

With Change Comes Controversy

In addition to compromise, the long-range plan also introduced controversy. The most prickly issue was whether the founders should retain their seats. Nearly eight years old, RISE still deferred to its founders. "People really buckled when the founders spoke," explained Moran. A consensus emerged that in order for the organization to mature and to avoid what she called the classic "founders' trap," it should cultivate independence. "It's important for any organization to get on its own legs and find its own opinions, without the influence of the founders," Moran said.

After some discussion, the board elected to introduce term limits for all of its members. Now, board members may serve two back-to-back three-year terms. After that time, they must rotate off for at least one year. The board also decided that the founders should be in the first group of members to rotate off. To the founders' credit, they thought it was a healthy sign that their program was ready to survive without them. The setting of term limits marked another milestone as well: RISE was now established enough to set boundaries in order to ensure its viability over time.

A second ticklish topic was whether to keep a social worker on the staff. The social worker had traditionally responded to families' needs regardless of their immediate relevance to the child's education. The board decided that it was best not to dilute RISE's educational mission with social work, and so the

staff position disappeared. In its place, RISE created an associate director position and filled it with a Salvation Army veteran who had extensive organizational experience. This staff member has now put in place systems and procedures that have professionalized RISE. For example, new phone protocols keep Moran from fielding questions about footballs.

Patrolling New Borders

Adapting to the long-range plan has not been easy, since many of its provisions require RISE to just say "no." For example, RISE has narrowed its focus to students in grades 5-8, no longer guarantees students' siblings automatic admission into the program, and has set new fundraising requirements for board members. The new regime requires discipline, "emotionally withdrawing to keep systems and controls in place, and keeping your eye on the prize," said Moran.

The recommendations and policies of RISE's long-range plan will remain in effect until 2007, when the organization will repeat the entire self-evaluation process. Although their recent foray into self-reflection was both painstaking and, at times, painful, Moran said the process taught her, the board, and the staff that they cannot afford not to explore their disagreements. RISE has now emerged from the process a stronger organization, with a more focused staff, firmer policies, and clearer procedures. "Pulling back and offering better-quality services was the right thing to do," she said. "We actually serve families in a more comprehensive way." For example, Moran pointed out that RISE has better surveillance of its students' education. "We also have better tutors and a better eighth-grade high school prep program," she added.

Board member Dan Corley, who is headmaster and founder of Community Prep, one of RISE's partner schools, concurred. "One of the beautiful things about RISE is that it doesn't try to be all things to all people," he said.

Injecting more rigor and self-discipline into RISE also taught Moran and her colleagues that "when you expect more, you get more." Before RISE's reevaluation, "We took a lot of calls from abusive, demanding parents," she said. "Now there is a culture of courtesy among all of us."

Moran is still not fond of saying "no." "Whenever I do it sticks with me," she admitted. Yet she and RISE have learned that, ironically, setting boundaries may be the best way for their organization to grow. □

THE OLD RISE

Tried to fix everything
Coped with the short-term
Had too few procedures and systems
Gave board members unlimited tenure
Improvised
Grew at all costs

THE NEW RISE

Focuses on education
Plans for the long-term
"Has just enough bureaucracy," said Moran
Set term limits for board members
Undergoes self-evaluation every few months
Grows in a controlled and responsible way