

***Sponsored Supplement***  
**When to Lead, Follow, and Let Go**  
By Lois Mitchell

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Fall 2015

Copyright © 2015 by Leland Stanford Jr. University  
All Rights Reserved

# When to Lead, Follow, and Let Go

The “servant’s heart” knows how roles must evolve in strong partnerships.

BY LOIS MITCHELL

One of the hardest questions a funder could ask when faced with a contentious relationship is this: Am I the problem? Often, foundations that instigate a partnership cling to leadership roles. This is a comfortable choice for grant makers who believe their funds entitle them to direct the activities of grantees. To “dictate with dollars,” however, may blind us to the novel ideas and unique experiences for which we chose partners in the first place.

So let us begin with a confession: Sometimes we were the problem. A second confession: Sometimes we *wanted* to be. Why? Because a contentious *relationship* isn’t necessarily a problem *partnership*. Here’s an example: When Paul Orfalea stood before the County Board of Supervisors, offered a \$2 million contribution for an Emergency Operations Center, but said, “This train is leaving the station. You have to decide now,” we saw it as bringing out the best in a partner. The board of supervisors undoubtedly saw it differently. But they agreed and, with partner funders, built a state-of-the-art emergency operations center.

Here’s another example: To exist at all, the Aware & Prepare disaster readiness initiative needed an authoritative leader to create an environment where diverse stakeholders with varying points of view and different objectives could take small steps on common ground. So The Orfalea Fund took on that role. We nudged, prodded, and pushed. We were a pain. But as trust grew and the common ground expanded, we slowly—and sometimes clumsily—eased out of our leadership role to provide financial and logistical support to the increasingly self-governed organization. First we led, then we followed, and now, as the fund sunsets, we will let go altogether.

Likewise, in early childhood education and school food reform, we strove to build a strong partnership, and then create a culture that would not need us. Changing a culture requires tough love at times.

LOIS MITCHELL is president of the Orfalea Foundation.

We were not shy about volunteering our vision, or suggesting how to tackle an issue. We were not afraid of a scuffle, we loved new challenges, we reveled in taking risks and inviting others to join us on the journey. A lot of entrepreneurs thrive on conflict—but conflict should never be an end in itself. So we established rules of engagement for partnerships. Could we see ourselves clearly enough to apply our own criteria? Not always.

As we mentioned earlier in this supplement, one of a leader’s chief responsibilities is the development of leadership in others, especially when there are multiple partners and a goal to establish independence and sustainability. Innovation may spring from an individual, but sustainability is an act of community—an act of partnership. To

a useful question: If we know that good partners must be both leaders and followers, what is the most important trait common to both?

We contend that it is “the servant’s heart.” A strong leader continuously asks how she might serve her followers. A good follower is likewise driven by a desire to be of use. In the social sector, strong goal alignment brings leaders and followers together—as servants to a common mission.

Perhaps this makes clear when to let go: When you cannot elevate the shared vision, you have no rightful place in the partnership. If you can neither lead nor follow with passion, enthusiasm, and purpose, you must let go.

We experienced this in partnership with another foundation. The two of us struggled for years to refine an already active busi-

*A strong leader continuously asks how she might serve her followers. A good follower is likewise driven by a desire to be of use.*

ness-giving program, until we recognized that our goals were not sufficiently aligned. We could not serve one another’s true interests, and the partnership dissolved—for the better of all concerned.

It was definitely not in the fund’s nature to follow, yet our business roots and tenets guided us to increasingly appreciate our partners and their positions—to watch, listen, and question those on the ground, working day-to-day with students, health-care workers, teachers, first responders, and others. This path of inquiry helped us build reverence and respect for those working in our fields of interest. It helped us learn to follow and support them.

In this series of articles on the power and challenges of partnership, we have seen that each partner’s role can change many times over the course of a program or project. A definitive position on when to lead, when to follow, and when to let go is therefore an attempt to lasso smoke—we cannot do it. Yet we can ask

ness-giving program—until we recognized that our goals were not sufficiently aligned. We could not serve one another’s true interests, and the partnership dissolved—for the better of all concerned.

The social sector is, by definition, social. Everything we achieve, we accomplish through partnership. Self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and transparency all contribute to the quest for effective philanthropic partnerships, and to the fulfillment of our dream of a community and citizens that thrive. As we conclude this phase of our philanthropic adventure, we cannot say we always know when to lead, when to follow, and when to let go, but we will always stand beside our partners and work together to figure it out. However great the challenge, we in the social sector stand together at the gates of hope. ☘