Sponsored Supplement
When to Lead, Follow, and Let Go
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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.

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 become a better partner, we had to learn to move out of the way and let others lead.

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, healthcare 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 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 cannot 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 business—

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