

Who's In Charge?

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Is your association embroiled in conflict over micromanagement, strategic direction, or accountability issues? You might just be paying the price for avoiding a more important conversation—the difficult discussion about who's really in charge.

Given that associations are not vehicles in any way, shape, or form, it is interesting that we discuss so frequently who or what is driving them. Member driven, staff driven, mission driven, data driven—the list goes on.

You would think that conversations about who or what drives the association would be specific and concrete—after all, it sounds rather cause-and-effect oriented—yet instead these discussions drift toward the theoretical, hypothetical, and structural. We talk about why the members must come first or the appropriate division of labor between volunteers and staff. We talk about the board's responsibility for setting strategy and the staff's responsibility for implementing it. We talk about governance models that generate the most effective level of member input and executive decision making.

What we rarely talk about, however, is who is really in charge. That question underlies all of these discussions, yet associations and their related organizations frequently operate for years, even decades, without confronting the issue directly. They may debate the theoretical macro level of who is in charge (“this is a member-driven organization,” “we have a flat organizational structure”), but they don't address the actual exercise of power, control, and decision making in the system.

The reason we avoid “who's in charge” conversations is simple: They are uncomfortable. They make conflict between powerful entities visible and active.

They require discipline and choice. They frequently involve confronting hard truths or, as Jim Collins would put it, the “brutal facts.”

Choosing to go down these paths is hard work. We are all pressed for time and attention, so avoidance seems to make sense. It’s a grand rationalization: Let’s just keep the conversation at a high level, so we can focus our energy and attention on the “real work” of the association. After all, we can always come back to the “who’s in charge” conversation later if things get out of hand, right?

Well, sort of. You can address it later, but there is a price. Except in rare cases, delaying these conversations makes matters worse. Lack of clarity about who is in charge allows the different parts of a system to invent their own story about who is in charge. Not only is this natural, by the way, it is also unavoidable. Our brains are hardwired to fill in our knowledge gaps with assumptions and stories. We must have a coherent picture of the world, so our brains rely on those assumptions and stories to maintain that coherence.

The problem is that when we never have the conversations where we might resolve discrepancies or test assumptions, the differences among the stories tend to grow—sometimes at an exponential rate. By the time things get out of hand, the amount of work required to rectify the situation is several times what it would have taken had we confronted the situation initially.

The impact can be disastrous. I have seen internal staff turnover rates upward of 75 percent due to lack of clarity about power, control, and decision making. I have seen CEOs quit and get fired, and I have seen associations and affiliates drain value from each other for decades based on unresolved conflict about the power relations between the two organizations.

Of course, by the time they reach out to a consultant to help them out of their predicament, the issue of “who is in charge” has been buried. Now they are trying to solve seemingly more pressing problems: How do I hold the other side accountable? What is the best reporting structure to maximize efficiency? How do I prevent them from micromanaging us? These issues, while important, are merely symptoms, and focusing on the symptoms guarantees the problems will persist. But if we can shift the conversation back to its origin—who is in charge—we have an opportunity to break out of the destructive cycle.

The following three cases are examples of associations confronting central who's-in-charge questions. They illustrate the power of debunking distracting stories, acknowledging difficult truths, and staying with these conversations over the long term.

No Respect

Communication between the board and the senior staff had completely broken down at one national association. Trust between the two groups was low, and, over time, all communication had been rerouted through the CEO. Conflict came to a head in the form of a memo from the executive committee to the CEO, directing her and the staff to accomplish 22 specific items in the coming year. Senior staff were angered by this “micromanaging”—but the memo had apparently emerged from the board’s frustration with the staff’s “culture of no” when it came to board suggestions and ideas. Each side felt the other side did not respect their knowledge and expertise.

“Micromanaging” and “culture of no” are the result of stories. For years the board and senior staff had not been clear about their roles. They may have known their roles at a high level (the board sets direction for the organization and the staff manages the implementation), but when they were actually doing the work, it wasn’t that clear. A proposed new program may make sense for the profession but could create impediments on the business side. Whose domain is that? Similarly, the staff’s focus on current resource restrictions could easily prevent them from seeing the value of moving in a new direction. When would that be addressed?

These are difficult conversations without easy answers. Therefore, each side chose to avoid them—and in their absence tended to remember the negative examples as they crafted their “story” about the other side. For instance, the staff may have observed board members making a few unrealistic suggestions, but over time this evolved into a more generalized “you may know your profession, but you don’t know associations” assumption.

Stories have an impact on our behavior. Because the board didn’t “know associations,” the staff’s default reaction would frequently be to deflect their

suggestions, hoping to wait them out rather than confront them with the conclusion that their expertise was not relevant to the decision at hand. This simply fueled the board's negative story about the staff—that they were blind to the needs of the profession and arrogant about their ability to run the organization. The stories became self-fulfilling prophecies, and because the stories were in conflict, communication between board and staff became testy. Once again choosing avoidance, they channeled their communication through the CEO, but this made things worse. In the absence of direct communication, the stories multiplied.

When they finally scheduled a special half-day meeting between the board and the senior staff to confront the issue, they ended up revealing and debunking (partially) the stories that had evolved. After a little venting of frustration, each side did acknowledge the other's expertise, which relieved feelings of disrespect. They also, however, explored the parts of the stories that were true. Many board members admitted that they knew less about running the business side of the association and were unsure how to evaluate those issues; staff acknowledged their lack of connection with the profession. The solutions they developed all revolved around increased communication and opportunities to educate each other.

They didn't resolve who was in charge, in the sense that they did not identify specific criteria for who gets to make what decisions, but they resolved to explore it more by trial and error—to increase discussion and try to pull out of their experience a clearer picture of each group's responsibilities. Putting the stories out on the table enabled them to finally move forward.

An Inconvenient Truth

A national association had developed a serious conflict with its 501(c)(3) foundation over the years, to the point where stakeholders were grumbling about splitting the two organizations apart. The costs of this “nuclear” option were apparent to all—the financial resources needed to create an independent organization were daunting—but the division was deep enough that this choice was on the table.

The difference of opinion resided at the board level. The board of the foundation felt their mission was to support the entire field, not just the members of the association. The board of the association did not disagree, necessarily, but they felt that since they provided more than half of the foundation's annual funding, they had a say in how that money was spent. The foundation resented this attempt at "control," particularly since the foundation focused on the research aspects of the field, which wasn't the focus of the association's board members. Meanwhile, the association resented the "arrogance" of the foundation, which seemed to want large sums of money without accountability for how it was spent.

As in all these examples, the issue stemmed from an initial avoidance of the who's-in-charge conversation. When the foundation had been created 12 years earlier, the high-level conversations about the relationship between the two organizations were positive, encouraging, and woefully nonspecific. The foundation was created to advance the profession through research and, because the association provided funds, staff, and office space for the foundation, the two boards would be overlapping and coordinated. However, inadequate communication led to the development of hurtful stories: The foundation board felt the association only used the foundation to raise funds, and the association board felt the foundation resisted being accountable for the money.

Like most stories, they contained some grains of truth, but the picture was far from complete. Through a series of facilitated discussions among representatives from both boards and the senior staff at the association (which the two organizations shared), they were able to clarify parts of these stories and gain a better understanding of the commitment on both sides to the success, independence, and accountability of the foundation.

A key element of their success was discovering an important truth that no one was acknowledging. While the two organizations were separate legal entities, they by necessity shared a single staff. The association was large enough to dedicate one full-time staffer to the foundation and provide as-needed support from other departments as well. The CEO of the association was also the CEO of the foundation, although everyone understood that the CEO devoted only a small percentage of his time to foundation affairs.

In all nonprofit organizations, the board hires and fires the CEO, who is then responsible for directing the activities of the staff. For years, the foundation's board members were operating based on the assumption of this "best practice" without acknowledging the fact that such a relationship did not exist for them. Much of the frustration that developed was based on the foundation's perception of a CEO who was unresponsive to its board. But the CEO did not have a typical relationship with the foundation board, so the standard measures of responsiveness were simply not appropriate. As you might expect, none of these important issues was discussed explicitly.

Acknowledging that the foundation board simply did not have the power to hire and fire the CEO opened up the opportunities for real problem solving. Together the two organizations changed the CEO's review process to include input from the foundation board. They also institutionalized much closer communication between the leaders of the two boards to strengthen accountability and understanding in both directions. By moving the conversation away from high-level principles toward a more practical negotiation of power and control, they were able to design a more effective relationship. But a key piece of the shift was confronting a truth that was not necessarily comfortable.

Beyond the Conversation

Who's-in-charge conversations are not necessarily about boards and governance. In one small association with a staff of 15, a very deep conflict had developed between the executive director and nearly all of her staff. Again, "micromanaging" was presented as a primary issue. The staff felt that the executive director too often made decisions that should have been within their realm of responsibility. In conversation, it became clear that the executive director was continuing to operate based on the rules of a previous era in the organization.

When the association was founded, there were only two staff: the founder and the (now) executive director. In those days, the executive director was responsible for the implementation of everything. Over time, the association grew, yet the executive director frequently fell back on her default settings and directed her attention to details in every single department, frustrating the staff.

During a facilitated session, the organization became much clearer on the role of the executive director and the importance of letting experienced staff people make decisions in their areas. They were able to move past the stories they had been telling and make clear agreements about the future.

There was just one problem: It didn't work. Within days, the executive director simply returned to those default settings, much to staff's dismay.

The lesson here is important: One conversation is not enough. Although it can be incredibly difficult to find the courage to have a clear discussion about who is in charge, you should prepare yourself to do it repeatedly. Working past the stories to create a new agreement about how to work together is just the first step. In most cases, these new agreements will be violated along the way, and how you respond to these violations is crucial. Unfortunately, the typical response is to let the stories come rushing back: "There he goes again, micromanaging!"

You must resist this temptation. When you develop new agreements about how to work together, specifically discuss how you will address violations. Build in mechanisms for feedback. Practice conversations where someone has violated the agreement. People often resist this, because they feel talking about future violations detracts from the positive energy of coming to agreement. But this step is critical.

In this case, the executive director herself suggested that ongoing executive coaching for her and other staff be built into the follow-up from the work. There are many ways to ensure agreements stick, but you must identify them explicitly, rather than assuming or hoping they will emerge.

One Foot in Front of the Other

Unless your association was formed within the last few months, you are probably faced with a situation like the associations in these examples. The who's-in-charge conversation has been avoided over the years, and some pretty solid stories have been developed on each side of the power fault lines. You might even have developed impressive rationalizations for why it is better to put off this difficult conversation.

To quote the self-help books: Every journey begins with a single step. You do not have to start by convening the entire board and staff to have a grand conversation about who is in charge. Start in small groups formed around small issues. Gather a few people to talk explicitly about the stories you have about other groups in the organization. Then expand those conversations to include people from those other groups. If you can consciously create small, safer areas to test this conversation, you can build momentum for the big conversation down the line.

And remember the three lessons highlighted in the examples above. You will need to expose both the truth and the lies of the stories that have developed over the years if you are going to make any progress. You will particularly need to confront some of the more brutal facts. And you must engage in a series of ongoing conversations to discover the efficiency and effectiveness of an organization that really knows who is in charge.

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