



A Call Taken to Heart

The Entrepreneurial Behavior of Nonprofit Arts Founders

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Introduction

Five years ago, after more than twenty years as a nonprofit management consultant, I went back to the classroom to pursue a doctoral degree in organizational behavior. Although personal renewal was my primary goal, I was also eager to put a set of theoretical legs under two decades of consulting practice.

As the time came to choose my dissertation topic, I found myself gravitating to one of the most complex subjects in my consulting practice – the behavior of nonprofit founders.

I went first to the literature and discovered that the nonprofit sector grew by about six percent between 1999 and 2000 – that's 80,000 new nonprofits with an equal number of founders coming on board that year. I also discovered that there is remarkably little empirical research about nonprofit founders, despite the volumes of research conducted on small business entrepreneurs throughout the 1980s and '90s.

So I set out to take an inside look at the lived experience of nonprofit founders with the premise that nonprofit founders have much in common with entrepreneurs and should be treated and regarded similarly. Because what has been written about nonprofit founders tends to focus on a stereotypical "founder syndrome," I tried to capture founders' experiences in their own voice, in the hope that by chronicling their "inside" experiences, other founders might recognize themselves and gain useful insight from the experience of other founders.

My formal doctoral study consisted of thirteen qualitative research interviews with nonprofit arts founders, and I have since added twenty-two additional interviews to this base. Beyond the interviews, I administered to all thirty-five a twelve-question survey based on self-descriptive entrepreneurial traits and attributes identified in the theoretical and empirical findings of those who have studied business entrepreneurs. The founders in my research base ranged in age from thirty-nine to seventy-one, and their founding tenures spanned four to thirty-two years. More than half of them are still active in their

founding organizations. They are nearly equally divided between men and women, and about 40 percent are founders of color.

Although my taped transcriptions and research now fill an entire book case in my office, my findings cannot be generalized to the entire universe of nonprofit founders, or even arts founders. Nonetheless, as I have begun to present my research in various venues on nonprofit founders, the response has been universal: "It's as if you are describing me." The opportunity for founders to see themselves and be able to learn from the experience of their founder peers was exactly the response I was hoping for when I embarked on my study.

The nonprofit founders in my studies share many psycho-social traits with other entrepreneurs – feeling "more optimistic than most people," having a "high tolerance for ambiguity," feeling "stifled by organizational structure," and creating their new venture as an "act of rebellion."

So with sincerest acknowledgement to the founders who so willingly (and confidentially) shared their founding journeys hoping that others might gain from their experience, I present this highly condensed summary of ten key findings from my study. As you read these findings, and possibly find yourself at odds with

various founders' perceptions, remember that changes in behavior come about from within. Thus, to help a founder, or anyone for that matter, effect a change in their self-perception or behavior, we must first understand their motivations and perceptions. It is these insights into patterns of founder motivation, influence, and perception I present for your consideration.

Pattern 1

Nonprofit arts founders share similar bio-psycho-social patterns with other entrepreneurs.

The nonprofit founders in my studies shared many of the psycho-social traits identified through research on other entrepreneurs: traits such as feeling "more optimistic than most people," having a "high tolerance for ambiguity," feeling "stifled by organizational structure," and creating their new ventures (their "venture creation," to use business-world jargon) as an "act of rebellion."

Likewise, the majority of the founders in my survey were first-born or only children, again mirroring the findings of earlier research on male and female entrepreneurs. Most of the women in my study described stable early home lives; while many (but not all) of the male founders had absent fathers or negative experiences with their parents. Whether raised in one or two parent homes, most founders credited their sense of self-direction to their

mothers, and viewed their own actions and behaviors as “self-determined” rather than heavily influenced by powerful others.

Pattern 2

Early family experiences create an “inner script” for later founder behavior.

Kets de Vries, Loper and Doyle (1994) believe our “inner scripts” make up our future character and thus affect how we will interact with the organizations in which we later work. One founder, an editor, credits her father’s love for books as a predictor for her future business; other founders cite their parents’ love for music and art as among their founding motivations. More poignantly, a founder of more than twenty-five years describes being fired by the board. “I guess I felt I deserved to be fired in some obscure way, although I didn’t know what I had done to disappoint people. To this day, I have no idea why. It just seemed that they didn’t want me.” This same founder’s father had abandoned his family when the founder was a child, “the reason for which, to this day, I never really understood.”

Many founders in my study also reported that, even as adults, their parents never came to understand their achievements, or, at best, took their talents for granted. “Quite often when you are gifted, people tend not to be concerned with it. It wasn’t until I began to get paid for playing in church, and could bring money home to help support the family, that my parents started to recognize the value of my talent.” Another founder described working in property management to support himself as a musician. When his dad saw the multiple buildings he managed, he said proudly, “You’re over all of this?” “But being a musician,” said the founder, “I thought ‘this is nothing!’ But that was a really big deal for my dad.”

For most founders it was only when they later received some external, tangible, acknowledgement of their work, that a “light bulb went on” for their parents. “My mother never understood how I managed [to live as an artist and single mother]. It wasn’t until I was on the stage receiving an award at Lincoln Center where she had taken me as a child, that I think she got it.”

Pattern 3

The values nonprofit founders bring to “venture creation” reflect the social times in which they were raised.

More than a third of the founders in my study were teenagers or young adults in the 1960s and ‘70s, an era that witnessed civil unrest as well as rebellion against authority and status-quo politics. It was also a time of

possibility and opportunity that produced many dedicated nonprofit founders who started organizations based on a desire for social change.

“We started for one reason only: to turn upside down the corporate world of the ‘70s. It was an activist thing … a social and political statement.” Or another, “Going to Mississippi and teaching in a Civil Rights Freedom School, made me realize that change was possible, and we had to make it work for others.”

Yet participation in the Civil Rights movement in particular also taught founders of that era a few hard lessons about management and succession. “We went out, and then went back home to families and jobs, but did not teach others how to maintain what had been achieved. One day we all looked up and wondered, ‘who will carry this on?’ We haven’t brought along the second and third generation.”

Indeed, concern about the successor generation is shared across many segments of the nonprofit sector as nonprofit founders who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s begin to reach or near retirement age. These founders worry that their successors and their boards won’t get the “why” of what the organization is all about. “I have begun grooming people, but they are all under thirty. I actually think I could create processes and structures that these bright young folks could carry on, but who would perpetuate the vision? It isn’t my board. Sometimes I think I should tell them I am considering leaving just so they might begin to think what would happen without me. They all understand our art, but I am not sure anyone knows that what we’re really about is changing society.”

Pattern 4

Nonprofit founders describe early experiences of hard work and premature responsibility.

Nearly all founders in my study talked about early experiences with hard work in a way that undoubtedly played a formative role in their later status as “chief cook and bottle-washer,” a phrase used time and again by multiple founders.

Founders described being “one of those three-paper-route kids;” or “working from the time I was thirteen.” Another founder hauled steel as a young man noting that “once you’ve done hard work like that, nothing seems like work.” One could surmise that this spirit of hard work in some ways foreshadowed the ventures these founders would later create.

For other founders, work was less about early entrepreneurship and more about being thrust into premature responsibility. Indeed, this theme of super-responsibility

was one of the most frequent keywords that emerged from my data compilation.

Founders describe their experiences with responsibility this way. "I was never a kid. I always saw myself as an adult. When I look at pictures of myself as a kid, I look at them as if they are someone else. I was never little, I was never a little boy. I was always the same man I am now." And another: "My parents divorced ... there were four kids in the family raised by a single mother. She worked like a dog. I was the oldest so they turned me into the responsible one in the family." Yet another attributes his "responsibility complex" to his dad's alcoholism. "There were times when dad was just over the edge, and someone had to help mom. My brothers were gone, and I was the only left to help my mom."

These descriptions of hard work and early responsibility fit Robinson's (1998) description of "parentification" or "little adults with big burdens." The result, according to Robinson, is that children become little adults, both emotionally and mentally, and miss the developmental tasks of childhood altogether. Their care-taking role requires them to become overly responsible at a young age before they have fully constructed themselves. To survive psychologically and physically these children cling to what Robinson calls the "life raft of control" to take charge of their life, which they perceive to be crumbling around them.

One founder sums it up this way: "It's a long time before you can admit that you had it rough. But the thing is that things don't get me down like they do others. I've learned that I have to be sensitive to other people, their capacity for tolerating is less than mine. This doesn't make me arrogant or anything because I wouldn't wish [what I went through as a kid] on anybody. However, it's a great ability to have when you're trying to start and run something."

Pattern 5

Nonprofit founders create organizations reflective of their own inner makeup and familial experiences.

All organizations reflect a set of norms, values, attitudes, and hidden assumptions that together form its corporate culture. It is in the creation of that initial culture, Kets de Vries and Balazs (2000) say, that the founder's values get incorporated. In an earlier essay on leadership, Kets de Vries, et al. (1994) argue also for the importance of helping organizational leaders understand how their "deeply rooted" behaviors and "inner scripts" affect the culture and behavior of their organizations. These statements might have been written specifically about the early influences of the founders in my study.

One founder views his company as "very family-oriented. I set it up so that I was the dad and everyone else was the kids, and I could make it, not what I grew up with, but make it absolutely different." Yet another founder said, "this place is like a family for me. I never married or had children. I am now of an age where I have made peace with that. I have given fifty-sixty hours a week toward this baby I created, and to my staff who are like family for me, or maybe like having children."

Conversely, another founder "sometimes joking, but mostly not," describes his organization as founded on a "personality defect," a "personal void that is part of my makeup."

One might think that the more self aware founders are of their own shortcomings or early deprivation, the more likely they might be to conduct themselves differently. That was not always the case in my interviews. For some, self-knowledge stayed just that. The root void (family deprivation, abandonment, isolation, life-raft control) was never worked through nor communicated to others in the organization. Thus, the founder's personality or familial voids became transferred to his or her entrepreneurial venture, much like unresolved troubles pass from parent to child.

When founders operate out of unresolved and unfulfilled voids, they appear to accept things as they are, no matter how troubling, rather than seek something better. As one founder put it, "I don't need it to be perfect, especially with my background. A little perfect is really nice."

Pattern 6

There is an incontrovertible tension between nonprofit founders as entrepreneurs and founders as managers.

Jelinik and Literer (1995) state that "the very term 'entrepreneurial organization' seems contradictory and problematic. 'Entrepreneurs' do new things and make waves, while 'organization' signals control, order and stable replication of the past. *Entrepreneurial activity* and *organizations* appear to have little in common."

This management tension, so perfectly described by the authors, is reflected over and over again in the experiences of the founders in my study. In fact, second only to the stories of those with difficult childhoods, management tension, experienced either internally as a self-struggle or externally at odds with others, was perhaps the largest single cause of personal tension mentioned throughout the interviews.

"Of course what we failed to realize was that we were starting a business. It was total non-recognition. If we had

realized we were creating a business, we would never have done it."

It is not just the business side of the enterprise that poses a problem. For many founders the process of raising money to support their ventures also takes a toll. "We have had a number of bad times, but they've all been about the same thing, that is, how can a business that is founded on such a crazy structure, financially succeed?"

Many of the organizations created by the men and women in my study were also the first organizations of their kind and thus were started without the benefit of others' experience. "Here's what I resent: the implication that I am holding my organization

back, that somehow I am stopping it from growing. I'm the one who had to do things without models, to learn nearly everything without a mentor."

Hiring and retaining staff was another management tension. New staff, whether they come on earlier or later, are not as likely to share the intensity of the mission as the founder. What for founders is a vocation, for staff may be just a job. One founder describes a situation where her board hired a managing director to balance her own position as artistic director. "Not only was she the wrong person philosophically, she also had unaddressed mental health problems. She was hired on the same level as me and almost brought the organization to its knees. But because I didn't hire her, I couldn't fire her."

These are the types of stories that provide fodder for those who write about the "founder syndrome." What at first might seem a simple and straight-forward hiring process, actually sets a complex set of mental dynamics into play for the founder. In addition to gaining a group of organizational partners, the process of hiring staff and delegating work to them triggers a new and profound moment in the founder's life. For the first time, there is someone else to share the load.

Pattern 7

As the organization evolves, the founder's role and personal identity shifts as well.

No matter how strong the desire for "help," the path is seldom smooth as founders move from being "the one" to a position that is now "one-of." What the founder gains in help and assistance, generally comes with a loss of sole psychic-ownership, and may also be accompanied by a shift in identity as well.

To successfully bring on the right second and third people, founders need to share responsibility with their new partners. "As soon as you can, you delegate to people who can do that job better than you. The ideal situation is that you get people who are talented and trained in the functions that are appropriate to them and you don't try to second-guess them. You allow their expertise to make the organization successful. For us, it meant hiring an executive director, which I felt was great because my skills were not strong enough to do the kind of job I wanted done for the organization."

Some founders are more intentional about the implications of the delegation process than others. "The point came when I had to realize I needed help. This was bigger than me. I actually had to decide that I was incapable. It had outgrown me, and I was being dwarfed by my own baby. I just couldn't keep up the pace."

A founder's ability to share both mission and institutional

ownership with those who come after is at the heart of an organization's successful evolution beyond its founding. It seems important for a founder to understand that the only reason to take on the trappings of nonprofit organizational structure is to have a platform, and a set of allies, to help exercise his or her call. This evolution actually begins the day the first staff are hired and the first board recruited. "For more than ten years, not with great deliberation, but with some thoughtfulness, I just slowly and methodically created an infrastructure that could make myself dispensable rather than being identified solely with the organization and the organization with me. I tried to have a real separation of identities. And this wasn't hard for me because I didn't start this organization as a function of my ego. It really was because I felt that the artists I worked with were worthy of respect from the community in which they lived and that all too often they were considered to be marginal personalities, or loafers, or worse. So the idea really was to provide them with income for their work, and contact with audiences and a mutual respect and understanding of gifts."

But other founders spoke to another side of the process of separating identities, describing a "paranoia" that accompanied their organization's evolving professionalism. They described the need to "guard certain elements" so that "our audience would feel the same comfort they did when things were less formalized."

Although these examples may seem to describe the "founder syndrome," we misunderstand many founders'

inner-drivers if we dismiss these words simply as expressions of personal ego or a desire to control. In fact – and this was one of the most important insights I gained from my research – most of the founders studied voiced little pride in their ongoing institutional roles. Instead, their satisfaction came from their “calling,” from believing they were “changing lives for the better by doing work that no one else was doing.” Theirs is a “gift that was not mine to keep.”

So, behavior that non-founders might view as evidence of the “syndrome,” in the minds of many of my founders is a “need to guard their call” – the voice of vocation sounding through.

Pattern 8

Nonprofit founders need boards of directors who support the organization’s mission and understand its developmental lifecycle.

The subject of nonprofit boards is among the most widely discussed concepts in nonprofit management literature. However, most of this literature discusses protocols for mature organizations that have made transitions from their initial founders. The founders in my study voiced several themes around the board’s role in a founder-led organization.

The first theme relates to the importance of continual communication with the board as “an essential part of my job.”

Nonprofit arts founders also view their boards of directors as another set of advocates for the institutional mission. “I know now that this organization would go on if I were to ‘kick the bucket.’ The board is strong enough that it would go on. They know the right questions to ask, they understand the *raison d’être*, they would stick to their guns about what this is because it’s deep in the organization.” And another: “For me as founder, it is so good to have the board *get* the mission. Yes, it is rewarding to come into board meetings and they’re saying things that sound just like me. It does work out. You think as a founder, ‘God these people are going to come in here and muck it up.’ And they do, and then you think, ‘I brought these people on?’ But in the end, we depend on each other.”

The “muck it up factor” provides the third theme concerning founders’ relationships with their boards. Although every nonprofit needs a board of directors for tax-law compliance, boards that do not understand the fundamental mission and developmental challenges of the organization are wasting an opportunity to be helpful. This founder’s experience gets to the heart of the dilemma: “You get a board, but often they don’t know any more than you do. The board needs to be people, especially in

the beginning, who can help the founder move the organization through where it is now, and take it to the next level.”

The board’s dependence on the founder is a fourth theme. One founder with a tenure of twenty-plus years had a very successful relationship with her board, but realized in retrospect, that the board had never done a performance evaluation of her work. Consequently, they never understood the volume of work she did; nor, as her story unfolds, were they successful in hiring her successor. The same sentiment held true for another founder who, as she was leaving, was troubled that she let her board “rely on her” for so long. She now believes that, upon her departure “there [was] something amiss there, something about the board that just [wasn’t] right.” What these founders are describing is a board that depended on them rather than the other way around.

Pattern 9

Founders have a personal radar system that tells them when it is time to leave.

Knowing “when to go” was on the mind of many nonprofit founders in my study, no matter what their age. Some established their end-date in advance, tying it to a self-imposed time period. “Early on I had a general sense that ten-years was about the right amount of time to stay since your good stuff gets out early and your bad stuff creeps up later.”

Others coupled their notion of the “right time” with other motivations. “I knew we needed a new vision and I thought I was not going to have it. It was time for me, after thirty years, to move on.” For other founders the exit motive began more subtly. It started with a “nagging thought,” a certain weariness from “having to tell people the same thing over and over again,” or the “desire to be whole and not to be pulled apart.” Some worry they are no longer living up to their own expectations. “I could have stayed longer if I could have just been the artistic person, but since that function has become increasingly diluted by my involvement in fundraising, I feel that I’ve moved away from what I started to do. I don’t like to do things that I’m not really good at. It hurts me to do an inferior job.”

Another founder describes “losing patience” as his warning sign to leave. “About year six or seven, I began to notice that I was losing a bit of patience with the conversation about how to do things, because we had had it so many times by now.” Another founder acknowledges that once the hard work of designing the place had been done he became aware of needing to “shift into more of a

maintaining role, tinkering rather than creating. I didn't want to do that."

Another founder at the helm for more than thirty years describes what it feels like to feel "old" at his job. "What is happening to me now is that I start talking and I can see people go 'click.' I can just watch it. It's like they're pulling down a shade, I let them go and make mistakes because it's just not worth it to get into everything. You have to pick your battles. All of a sudden, there is just a big difference between me and them."

However, for most founders in my study, the motive to leave, although self-imposed, was framed less in reference to their own needs, and more for the sake of the ongoing success of their organizations, which they perceived to demand something they could no longer give.

More than one founder in my study wound up leaving at the request of others and not at all of their own volition. And yet, even these founders describe "deep down," personal experiences in which their "internal radar systems" had begun to go off long ago, telling them they should leave. They just hadn't acted on it.

There is an ultimate irony in the fact that despite all their reputation for ego and control, many founders fail to invest in their own personal development or stay in touch with their own needs. This omission can dramatically affect the founder's decision to move on once their radar has gone off. "For the past twenty-two years, this place has been on my mind day and night. I really have not had time to think about what's next, so for the first part [of my retirement], I'd like the opportunity to interrogate myself and I never have time to do that." For yet another founder "parting was not all together easy. At the same time I knew that if I didn't leave, I would never, never, write another word. I now need to decide how to figure out what I will do next."

In addition to retiring or resigning from their organizations, these founders are also terminating a *life structure* – the underlying pattern that shapes a person's life for a given time. (Levinson, 1996) The role as nonprofit founder formed the basis of their personal and professional identity and stability for, in some cases, up to three decades. It only makes sense that the longer a person has stayed in the same structure, the more profound will be the grief and loss she or he will experience when leaving it. Terminating the founding relationship triggers a *structure-changing* period and creates the possibility for a new one. If approached intentionally, this transition can be a time of promise, of hope and potential for a better future; but it can also be a time of separation and loss. (Levinson, 1996)

The importance of personal growth and renewal opportunities to the development of a founder's own lifecycle is one of those between-the-lines observations that seems critically linked to later recognition of the right time to leave.

Pattern 10

The legacy of nonprofit founders is consistent with the values that inspired their call.

As baby-boomer-era founders approach retirement, words like "exit strategy" and "succession planning" are making their way into the vocabulary of more and more nonprofit boards. As important as succession planning is to the organization, it is only half the equation for those whose founders are still at the helm. What founders are equally concerned about is their legacy.

Founders in my study want to be remembered as "a visionary who brought love to others and who built something that made a difference;" or as "someone who really respected artists and art, and held the idea of art up above everything else." Or, in the words of a third founder: "When people look back on my work, and I genuinely hope they do, I don't want them to remember me for building an institution. The last thing this society needs is one more institution. For me it's never been about a job. It's about being involved in the moment, about creating change. That's been my life's work."

Yet the hope for a legacy in voices of these three founders who have not yet left their institutions does not reflect the actual experience of several other founders who, having either retired or resigned, "simply don't feel welcome" in their prior organizations or feel that their successors have tried to "eradicate" their existence. One of the most poignant reflections comes from a founder whom I asked to participate in my study but who declined because "a revisit into a world to which I gave so much, but in the end shunned me, would not be good for my spirit, right now."

One founder provides a helpful suggestion to other founders and board members on this subject: "I think it's appropriate for an organization if they value what the founder has done to find a way to honor that. List the founder on the letterhead, along with the board of directors. Maybe, though our culture just isn't that way, honoring the elders that have come before you, having a sense of where you came from – that would help bring closure."

Implications of the Findings

My study of nonprofit founders is an attempt to illuminate the experience of founders in a manner helpful, first,

to other founders and, secondarily, to the various partners who invest in a founder's vision. The findings from my research suggest at least four potential field-wide applications, some of which require future research, while others could be put to use immediately.

First, and of most significance, is the need for more primary research on nonprofit founders. Especially if nonprofit corporations continue to develop at the current pace, the sector will need a positive intellectual framework from which to understand the dynamic of nonprofit founding. Likewise, as a field, we need to generate primary research on founders of color and women founders. Distinctions based on gender and race were evident throughout my interviews, as well as in several responses to the quantitative data. As the United States continues to become home for more immigrant populations, we should also consider studying the characteristics, motivations, and contextual and environmental influences of first-generation nonprofit founders as well.

By design, my study sought to capture the experience of nonprofit founders only, thus leaving a follow-up opportunity for counterbalancing research on second-stage successors.

A second application speaks to the need for a "Founder Academy" that incorporates the rudiments of starting and leading a nonprofit corporation, supplemented by a personal development curriculum. The voices of the founders in my study are clear. They may lead by establishing a mission, but they make no bones about saying they feel like novices in running their organizations. Most had no prior organizational experience and, in fact, often pioneered an entire field in addition to the single organization they created. Yet, somehow, we have come to believe that, by virtue of artistic or mission-related leadership, a founder will be equally capable, without training, of managing an organization. Because of their charisma, the nature of their call, and possibly even their birth-order, founders tend to attract a following that relies on them. However, if the nonprofit sector values the creation of new nonprofit entities as a crucial component of societal effectiveness, then we must create a platform of education and renewal for nonprofit founders before habits become entrenched.

Recognizing the relationship of each founder's "inner script" to his or her subsequent organizational performance is a third outcome of my research. Each of the men and women I studied, whether loved and nurtured as children, or thrust onto Robinson's (1998) "life-raft of control," was formatively influenced by early family experiences. The inner scripts that founders bring to venture creation need to be understood by the boards and

staff they later attract since these inner scripts, in one way or another, will affect their organizations.

A final application focuses on the dichotomy between founders as "called" leaders and founders as "managers." Since the 1980s, we have embraced a set of management systems and protocols that in some cases may be at odds with personal leadership and vocation. As a management consultant myself, I am not suggesting that we throw out expectations of sound managerial practice. I am persuaded though from my own experience and that of other founders, that we can't expect the same kind of management performance from a first-generation founder as from a third- or fourth-generation organizational manager. To do so is neither appropriate for the organization, nor for the founder.

Indeed, I came away from my study with a belief that the most effective organizational structure for a founder-run organization is one that encourages the founder to "lead and seed" rather than "manage and run" their organizations. By partnering with mission-related board members and managing partners, founders can more fully exercise the call they have taken to heart.

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