

TAKING A NON-PROFIT FROM INCORPORATION TO SUSTAINABILITY

HOW LEADERSHIP APPLIED TO THE FORMATION, PLANNING, AND INITIAL  
OPERATIVE STAGES OF THE OMIA FOUNDATION

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## INTRODUCTION

The stage of a non-profit organization's life that carries with it the greatest number of decisions, situations, and causes for action has to be the creation stage. In the initial development of a non-profit organization, certain decisions are made such as choosing a mission, setting a direction, and creating the first strategic action plan. I am currently involved in the formation of a non-profit organization whose mission is to "enhance the lives of students by expanding the scope of learning." (OMIA, 2007) This broad mission statement is more focused within the function of the organization: activities that bring outside music inside Michigan's K-12 classrooms. This is the first way that this new organization, the OMIA Foundation, seeks to carry out its mission. However, the OMIA Foundation is not solely driven by its mission statement or its founder (me, the author).

This paper describes various steps that I will take as Chairman of this newly created non-profit. I will address the leadership decisions that I faced from the inception of the organization until it was steadily up and running. This is an actual account of the past several months, a reflection paper, and concludes in the present day. There is no better way to witness leadership happening than to create situations that call for it.

## INITIAL LEADERSHIP: THE FORMATION

Like any other up and coming non-profit, the OMIA Foundation is shaped and molded at the outset by the first decisions that have to be made, the first critical situations it encounters, and the actions taken by its first Board of Directors during the organization's initial stages. These first steps are crucial in how the foundation will function throughout its entire life and will determine its future success. For example, the articles of incorporation will follow the non-profit until its dissolution. Also, the method

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of dissolution is written in the foundation's original documents. Needless to say, the first days, months, and year of the foundation's existence are of great importance.

If the preceding statements are true, that the first stage of formation is so critical, then the Board of Directors must be keenly aware of what decisions, situations, and actions lie before it from the outset. In order to best tackle these elements and best approach them, it is a common belief that defining terms is a premier objective. Just as Northouse (2004) does in his first chapter, I as founder must define leadership if I am going to lead the Board of Directors effectively as Chair.

Rather than look at a dictionary's three word fragmented sentence of a definition, Northouse (2004) defines leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal." (p. 3) It is surprising how close Northouse gets to the activities that occurred in the beginning stages of the OMIA Foundation. The creation of a non-profit was definitely a process for me, the foundation's leader by default. The founder, the one who possessed the original idea and drive, first had to recruit three other interested parties to draft and sign articles of incorporation. This was no easy task, to move from solitary ambition to spreading the excitement to others through influence.

### FOSTERING COLLABORATION: ASSEMBLING THE CORE

During the assembly of incorporators, certain individuals were easier to influence than others. My best friend, for example, simply asked "Where do I sign?" He has complete trust in me. He did not ask many questions about my actions because he knew my heart, drive, vision, and he understood how I utilize those intrinsic elements. I recall him asking another question, "Is there any risk?" and with a brief "No" from me he had

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signed as an incorporator of the OMIA Foundation. I believe that the second question actually exemplified more of his trust in me than had he withheld it. He trusted me a great deal that there was no risk. I gave him little evidence other than my word.

My little brother, all eighteen years of him, was a tougher sell. He posed approximately twenty questions to me that all had the gist of "What is the risk?" What is ironic about his line of questioning is that he has the least to lose, financially or otherwise. Perhaps it is his cynical view on life or maybe he has seen me falter in the past. I believe in the former. What is important is that this follower of mine has a different outlook on the process. He is more skeptical and pessimistic. As the foundation's leader, I will have to accommodate, understand, and influence both attitudes.

#### FOSTERING COLLABORATION: ENABLING OTHERS TO ACT

After incorporating, a Board of Directors had to be elected and the mission had to be clearer than it was in the incorporating documents. This is my first time trying to assemble a productive team in a business setting and also my first time forming an organization. There are certain things that must be kept in the front of my mind when considering prospective Board members. Of course, the organization is most important and the Board members must reflect the mission of it. In their eBook about "How to Achieve More Accountability," Hoover and DiSilvestro (2005) reminded leaders like myself to remember that the "organization stands for something. Whether you have ever paused to contemplate it, your team members, your peers, your bosses, and the community you serve can all describe their piece of the organizational identity if asked. In other words, they can all tell you what the organization means to them and how it fits into their lives" (p. 63). With this in mind, it would be a greater benefit to myself and the

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organization to seek a Board whose members are from a variety of backgrounds, have different outlooks, and can shed their own unique insight and lend their own direction to this endeavor.

Maybe it would be okay to elect a group of my friends as long as they could add different things to the organization. I will later discover whether the focus on variety, and perhaps the omission of outside influence, will for better or worse serve the organization.

### DEFINING PARTICIPANTS' ROLES

With that balance of risks and benefits apparent, I did go ahead and assemble the foundation's first Board of Directors with a couple friends and relatives. Each was given a clearly defined role, a key step that is encouraged by many authorities on leadership and initiating change. Quinn and Cameron (2005) expressed that notion by encouraging leaders to "clarify the roles that each team member should play. Pay attention to task roles, process monitoring roles, integrator roles, and so on. Identify the resources each team member brings to the group, and help make those resources available to all team members" (p. 198). The simplest way to define roles is to give each Board Member a title.

Four titles were distributed at the first meeting: Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer. These four roles are common to almost every Board and are nothing new or ground-breaking. At the first Board meeting I was thrilled at the turn-out which was one hundred percent of the incorporators. We were well on our way to success and we were moving in the right direction.

This optimistic sentiment carried over to the second Board meeting that had more

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attendees than the first. At the second meeting there were guests, and although one Board member was absent, another was elected during the second meeting. So, mathematically speaking, each meeting had the same number of Board members in attendance. The guests' attendance was also encouraging because the Board felt a sense of communally spreading spirit.

The forum was also different during this second meeting, as it was held online in a chat-room setting. This change of forum allowed our meeting to include cross-country attendees. The organization was growing, spreading out, and catching on with others. The group felt good and we all saw a bright future, both near-sighted and long lasting.

### DEALING WITH A QUICK DOWNTURN

After two Board meetings and three months of existence, the organization had a website and looked official but had not really done anything. Although young, the organization had yet to undertake any activity that furthered the mission to "enhance the lives of students by expanding the scope of learning." There was no enhancement of anything but the website and it was difficult to see how the website expanded the scope of learning. Our Board seemed anxious at first to do something but the initial excitement was now stalling out. Was it them or was it me, the leader? I needed to determine the problem before I could find a way to solve it.

Although the roles were clearly defined, they were not specific enough. The Secretary had nothing to do but record the minutes of the Board meetings. I hinted that he should take initiative and create but I was failing to give him any idea of what needed to be created. I was avoiding the delegation of duties. "Perhaps the biggest mistake made in the planning process is setting goals, strategies, and objectives, but not taking the

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final step—assigning specific action steps" (Lysakowski, 2007, pg. 81). I, myself, had developed a finely tuned and forward-moving machine but the organization was running out of what fueled it: action. Lysakowski continued that idea by explaining how "many organizations think that if they establish the goals, strategies, and objectives, they've done a plan. This false thinking has caused many organizations to wonder later why their plan has been sitting on a shelf."

### MAKING THE NECESSARY CHANGES

We had reached stagnancy. According to Pike Place Fish (2007) we should have already bought into the visionary creed to commit and be it. Pike's simplistic approach was too complicated for us to understand. In our situation, I had forgotten one piece of Pike's triad. The leader was floundering. I was not "coaching it." It was time for me to specifically instruct my team as to how they were going to contribute to the operation of the organization. First, I encouraged the organization's Librarian Jake Boyd, an English professor at Arizona State University, to help develop a set of lesson plans that would be vital to the actions of the organization. He obliged and the lesson development began and is continuing. (Author's note: It is at this point that this paper shifts to the present. Currently, all the following mentioned activities are ongoing and presently occurring.)

I also determined how the goals of the organization could be split into specific actions between me and other actors. For example, the organization needs to connect with as many K-12 teachers as can be managed. I divided this goal into two parts. First, I will have another person make initial contact while assembling a list of individuals. Then, I will personally contact the list of teachers myself to pitch the program. This

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splitting of the duties is a better approach than just one person making the original contact, pitching, then following up.

I have to initiate incremental steps and small wins. It is not a realistic goal to assemble a contact list of hundreds of teachers. It is best to break it down individually and get precise with the movements of the organization. One person will submit the name of one teacher, a second person will contact that teacher, and a third will follow-up. On the other hand, the material to present will be created by a fourth. Because each participator now has a more clearly defined role, things will start moving forward. The "sophomore slump" that developed after the first pair of Board meetings has been extinguished. We are moving forward now.

### THE NEXT STEP: AVOIDING OBSTACLES & PLOTTING ONWARD

In order for our group to remain on the right course, as a whole we must realize obstacles immediately and address them appropriately. The vision of the organization must be seen through the eyes of each individual participant and that vision must be collective. As we look at the organization with the same vision we must individually watch out for any obstacles. It is not the sole job of the leader to point out obstacles like lackadaisical board members, but it is the role of the entire group. The group must communicate any obstacles to the leader. Then, it is the duty of the leader to be decisive and facilitate any change necessary to avoid trouble.

As the leader of the organization, I must model the way by setting a good example. My actions do not necessarily have to mirror what I want to see out of the team members. For example, I do not have to create an equal number of lesson plans as the Librarian. However, I have to develop a plan through which I can enable the Librarian to

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get more done with less preparation. The same holds true for the rest of the team and our collective actions. We must be supportive of one another. My support of group members' ideas is an appropriate example to set. For example, when one member suggested a group of teachers to target, I was all for it.

I must also be decisive. As a leader, I have to take into account the future of the organization and make tough but fair decisions when it comes to the direction that we take. I have to be adaptive and realize that sometimes someone else might have a better idea than me. I must be a force that enhances the performance of all team members. Likewise, I expect each team member to be an equally driving force. We must assemble our differences to contribute to one clearly defined goal to start with: get outside music in K-12 classrooms.

### CONCLUSION

A good leader helps realize many goals along the path to success. One element of leadership is that it is a process. That concept must be maintained as I lead our team through the life of an organization, a journey that is a process in and of itself. I must bear in mind that a well-developed plan will set up the organization for success, but the success cannot be realized until the plan is enacted upon. A good plan has enough malleability in it to allow the leader to make decisions that will avoid obstacles.

I must be prepared to encounter obstacles and the team must have enough faith in me that they trust I will make the right decision. That trust does not come on a whim, but it is developed from day one. Individually, I build integrity through my actions. Collectively, our actions will build a successful organization. If we steady the course, we can achieve our vision because our vision was created to be attainable.

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