



Why Organizations Thrive – Lesson 15: Give Away Your Power
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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Thrive*. The article details fifteen lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),¹ buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

Collectively, I believe these lessons are a very useful set of principles that any Executive Director can use to improve their organization's capacity to fulfill its mission.

Lesson 15 is: Give Away Your Power

Organizations that thrive are usually headed by leaders, not those who are merely good at exercising power. Indeed, giving away your power and leading through other means is a key to organizational success.

What do I mean by this?

Some Executive Directors lead via decision-making. The way to ensure that organizational decisions are 100% in alignment with the Executive Director is for the Executive Director to call the shots.

As staff are hired, Executive Directors with this mindset tend to prioritize hiring competent administrators or managers, not others who may be future Executive Directors.

Such Executive Directors also tend to treat their board as a resource, not as a true partner in creating and shaping their organization vision and strategy. These Executive Directors manipulate their boards to make only the minor decisions or by presenting their boards with only one viable option.

In his monograph, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, Jim Collins discusses at length the difference between leadership skills, in particular the importance of Level 5 leadership. He refers to the difference between executive power (the power to make right decisions) and legislative power ("which relies more upon persuasion, political currency, and shared interests to create the conditions for the right decisions to happen.").

¹ I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around \$200,000 to more than \$1 million.

In Collins view, legislative-type leadership is critical for successful nonprofits. But this doesn't mean Level 5 leaders simply go along with whatever all the stakeholders want.

“Level 5 leadership is not about being soft or nice or purely inclusive or consensus building. The whole point of Level 5 is to make sure the right decision happens – no matter how difficult or painful – for the long-term greatness of the institution and the achievement of its mission, independent of consensus or popularity.”

It's just that the means by which a Level 5 leader makes this happen isn't by executive fiat.

There are other, less abstract reason, that thriving nonprofits are headed by those who seek to give up their decision-making power and exercise other forms of leadership. Two rise to the top.

First, a leadership style that focuses on creating a shared vision is far more likely to generate a sense of shared “ownership” that motivates employees and board members to stretch beyond their comfort zones. It will be more likely to retain excellent staff for the long-run. It will also be more likely to lead to the types of vigorous internal debates about strategy that lead to sound decisions taking into account a variety of perspectives and the collective wisdom.

Second, thriving nonprofits inherently involve the Executive Director hiring more and more staff. With each hire, the Executive Director should be giving up some of their responsibility, so that in the long run their job consists almost entirely of fundraising, board management, financial oversight, and high-level programmatic vision/strategy. This is only possible when the Executive Director has the mentality of letting go of programmatic day-to-day decision-making.

In the end, there are many nonprofits who do good for the community led by strong-willed executives with a vision, who corral resources and get the job done.

But for the most part, the organizations that really shine – that make a more profound difference – tend to be led by executives who lead more by creating a shared vision.

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