



Why Organizations Go Off Course Lesson 11: Focus on the Team
March 2014

By Jonathan Poisner, www.poisner.com

I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Go Off Course*. The article details a series of lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),¹ buttressed by my observations of dozens of other organizations in Oregon and across the country.

This series offers a counterpoint to the lessons in another series: *Why Organizations Thrive*.

Why Organizations Go Off Course Lesson Eleven is: Focus on the Team.

This lesson is best begun via a story.

An Executive Director I knew was launching a new fundraising event for a small organization that had been around quite a few years. I asked: "Are you using an Event Committee to recruit event and table sponsors?" The reply: "I discussed it with my event consultant and we decided that it would take more work calling and arranging meetings of the committee, so we'll instead just work with individual volunteers one-on-one to enlist their help."

Two months later the same Executive Director was complaining that they're doing all the work recruiting sponsors. The volunteers just weren't coming through.

I wasn't surprised.

Too often, new Executive Directors calculate that easiest way to do something is to "just do it." "I can do it myself in a day, so why should I spend a day recruiting and training and cajoling others to do it, and then maybe they won't."

I don't want to suggest you should never make this calculation. But by and large, doing so on a regular basis inevitably robs your organization of one attribute absolutely essential: teamwork.

Effective leaders create a shared vision and rally people around achieving that vision via a team mentality.

While leaders can recruit and engage volunteers one-on-one (and should!), the magic of teamwork requires some number of people more than two.

When people get together in a well-run meeting, lots of benefits flow:

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.

- Individuals feed off of each other’s ideas. In the fundraising event example, if John mentions a potential table sponsor during a meeting (“Sam Jones would be a great person to ask”), it often will trigger ideas of other potential sponsors (“Sam’s friends with Rachel, and she can do her own table”) from those around the table that just won’t be generated via one-on-one conversations with the Executive Director. Having all the conversations happen with the Executive Director as hub and individual board and volunteers as spokes on a wheel limits idea-generation to interactions with the Executive Director.
- Individuals feed off each other’s energy. People pick up on the energy of those around them. If there is an upbeat, positive orientation to the meeting (“together, we’re going to put on a great event!”), that energy is often contagious in a way that can’t be duplicated in one-on-one conversations.
- Individuals hold each other accountable to the team. If a volunteer commits to call three potential sponsors in a conversation with the Executive Director, they may be willing to face the consequence of having to tell the E.D. two weeks later that they haven’t gotten around to it. It becomes harder if they’ve made the commitment in a meeting in front of a half-dozen others and they know they’ll have to report back on progress to the whole team. Time and again, I’ve found higher degrees of follow-through by volunteers when commitments are taken on in meetings where their peers are present.
- If the personal relationships between and among individuals involved with an organization is thought of as a hammock, a teamwork approach will yield a stronger hammock with more “ties that bind.” In *Why Organizations Thrive Lesson 2: Relentlessly Focus on Relationships*, I wrote about the importance of an Executive Director building relationships with the people that matter most. But it can’t all just be about the Executive Director’s relationships. The value of relationships as an organizational asset multiplies dramatically if an organization’s supporters get to know each other as individuals while successfully doing something together (like a fundraising event).

In *Why Organizations Thrive Lesson 15: Give Away Your Power*, I advised organizations to pay attention to what Jim Collins refers to as “Level 5 Leadership.” Level 5 Leaders exercise legislative power more than executive – building a shared vision via persuasion and effective decision-making processes rather than via executive fiat. By being willing to risk a wrong decision sometimes being made via a more collaborative approach, the Level 5 Leader builds teamwork that generates benefits that far outweigh the risks and costs.

Just as an organization fails to thrive if the Executive Director holds onto all the power, organizations tend to go off course if the Executive Director fails to embrace teamwork.

How does this manifest itself?

- Too much dependence on key staff (usually the Executive Director), limiting both the number of volunteers, their enthusiasm, and their follow-through.

- Failure to consider a range of opinions necessary to formulating good strategy.
- Magnified danger to the organization when an Executive leadership transition occurs (as eventually happens in any organization).

So the next time you're tempted to "just do it myself," ask yourself whether this time you should opt for a team approach.

Jonathan Poisner is an independent management consultant who helps organizations thrive through coaching, consulting, and training. His services include strategic planning, evaluation, coalition building, fundraising, and communications. He can be reached at jonathan@poisner.com.