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## **On the Frontlines**

### **Knowing When to Let Go**

**Charles Lewis on how a founder says goodbye to donors and staff**

As told to Shelia Kaplan

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## Knowing When to Let Go

*Charles Lewis on how a founder says goodbye to donors and staff*

When I first thought about stepping down, I wasn't sure who could come in and take over for me. Or, more relevant, who would want to. It is a pretty intense gig, directing a staff of 40 people, raising \$5 million a year, being threatened with lawsuits occasionally, stepping on powerful toes from presidents to multibillion-dollar corporations. Furthermore, there are a lot of quality journalists but few who have those credentials and who have also raised – or there is reason to suspect they can raise – millions of dollars annually. And then there's a whole public-presence issue. Can they speak on behalf of the organization in a credible and persuasive way on a wide range of subjects? Those kinds of people don't grow on trees.

When I started off, I hadn't done all those things. I had never been anything more than a reporter. But it's different starting something out of your house or being a one-employee operation than it is when it's 40. The bigger the center became, the bar and the standard became higher.

Part of the equation about leaving and timing is about the momentum of the organization, how well it's doing at the moment, how well it's perceived, the level of respect, the public reputation. If the organization looks to be anemic, the staff is unimpressive, there's been lots of discord, if there has been employee-related liti-

gation or internal strife, it makes the founder's leaving even more difficult.

This is a good time to go. Certain markers had occurred – we have written 275 reports, won 28 national awards, and we'd been over the \$4 million fundraising threshold for several years. Perhaps most importantly, we'd begun an endowment and legal



defense fund and had \$4 million in it. It was the first time the Center for Public Integrity actually had any appreciable reserves to speak of – the equivalent of one year of operating expenses.

I also felt secure that we had the infrastructure in place to allow my successor to succeed. Cutting-edge people are managing the editorial process, maintaining a sheen of the highest possible quality. The develop-

ment director is terrific and has been there for eight years, the second-longest serving employee after myself. Our communications department was reaching more people every year. There's a lot of fantastic karma. My successor, Roberta Baskin, will benefit from the goodwill and 15 years of high energy and accomplishments of the organization.

And then, for me personally, at some point you don't want to feel you're doing the same thing every year. I'd won the MacArthur award, I had raised roughly \$30 million over 15 years, published 14 books and 275 reports. Then, there was a human stamina question – exhaustion and burnout. And having turned 50, there also was a bit of a restlessness – looking at the hourglass. I had the sense that if I stayed at the center I would never leave. I was afraid of the founder syndrome. Particularly in Washington, there are an awful lot of crusty, old, increasingly curmudgeonly founders who basically become insufferable know-it-alls in their silos, and their organizations are the only ones who know anything and everybody else are basically idiots. They won't talk to other people; they have an informal enemies list of people that they can't stand, don't want to talk to, and don't want to work with. I was afraid that the longer I stayed I would become one of those people. I'm a person who's full of ideas and I always like the excitement and the spontaneity of the moment. I like thinking about this and that and being positive

despite the grim reaper nature of this dark investigative work we do, and I didn't want to become some bitter, calcified pain in the ass.

We were concerned about how to break the news to our big donors. Fundraising is very personal and people often give money if they believe in someone's personal vision and if the exuberance and enthusiasm of that person are infectious. There's a personal connection there, so this is a very delicate thing for the founder or the head of a group to leave after many years, because all the donors have had hours and hours of face time with the founder and executive director. And the executive director, as the founder, has a bit more moral authority when people know that this person is not just someone who got the job, but that they had the idea for the place and made it happen. As the group becomes more successful, that person's stature and credibility with donors, as well as in the public and maybe other places, rises. So the act of a founder – under those circumstances – leaving, is a jolt to everyone. It's a rejection, it's a stunning thing. In the case of the center, I was seen as the center by many people.

We did several things to try to reassure donors. The first thing was that I called many of them person-

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ally. The longest-serving, most dedicated donors and also the most generous donors are the ones that you want to explain it to as fully and as sensitively as you can individually. The major donors were informed days or hours before the public was.

There was only one donor who was very upset. They felt that I had made a mistake and I shouldn't step down, and were highly irritated that I didn't inform them prior to the time I told them. As I pointed out to them, “What do you expect me to do, tell you before the board of directors, including the co-founder?” The experienced nonprofit people instantly understood: “My God, you've been on the frontlines for 15 years. I'm amazed you're still standing. Good luck to you and I'll help you any way I can.”

The initial reaction by a lot of people was: “Why are you leaving? Are you sick? Is your health OK? Did something piss you off? Is there something we don't know?” No one was nicer to me or more understanding than Hodding Carter of the Knight Foundation. The center was right in the middle of a \$2 million grant proposal. The timing couldn't have been worse. Hodding called me and said: “I just heard the news. Holy cow, I can't say I'm thrilled.” I said, “I totally understand, Hodding,” and I

tried to explain it to him. In true inimitable Hodding fashion, he said to me, “I've got to ask you – is there a backstory I should know about?”

For some, there was an Oliver Stone kind of question. There was a shock. Grieving came later and then there was an intense curiosity as to the why. I think people assumed I would do this another 10 or 15 years. They probably assumed I would die with my boots on, sitting at the word processor.

After people were satisfied by my reasons for leaving, they then became curious as to who would replace me. The board of directors for the center was desperately curious, as they have every right to be, about who the successor would be. We felt that it was extremely important that there be a public process by a professional head-hunting firm. That may sound like a no-brainer, but some of our board members initially wanted to save money and they also thought that investigative reporting is such a quirky world that we know who all the good people are and we don't need some suit to come in and tell us. But we had a board member who was, to his credit, vociferous in insisting that we had to have a headhunter and went so far as to put up the money to pay for most of the fees. He felt that if it was a public process, if it was a legitimate professional enterprise, done by a first-rate expert, that there would be buy-in, not only by the donors, but also by the staff, the board of directors, the advisory board, and the entire center community.

The recruiting was a six- or seven-month process and we initially contacted 150 people that we narrowed down to three candidates. The three finalists had five interviews, twice with the search committee, once with the full board of directors, and also



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