



Why do voluntary organisations fail?

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In order that this article should have any credibility, I need to make my credentials clear. I am a teacher in adult, further, and higher education with forty years experience. This has been often within the voluntary sector. I have also been a volunteer, in one form or another, throughout most of my working life. I have also founded and led third sector bodies.

It's not surprising then that I'm experientially interested in how voluntary organisations operate, especially with reference to why they get into trouble. Can I say emphasise that the collapse of any organisation (public, private or third-sector) can easily happen by loss of funding. If that were the only theme of my writing then I could end this polemic right here. Government policy, local authority constraints and the lack of charitable funding options all can contribute to the end of even the most substantial and important bodies. But discussion of why funds become scarce is something I want to avoid, and instead focus on a more 'quasi-suicidal' issue: why apparently successful ventures can die, even when money is still available to them. In a sense, why organisations sabotage themselves.

To answer that question, one needs to be clear about the differentiation of voluntary organisations from public and private bodies. Public bodies are agents or adjuncts of the state; either local or national; They can collapse, of course, but though institutions may come and go (and change their names), essentially they are 'too big to fail', and are kept afloat by government will. Private bodies (companies, corporations, multinationals, etc.) follow the road of profit, and hence are highly dependent on their financial performance to keep going. Why they fail may ostensibly be for other reasons. Loss of reputation with the public perhaps, or a change of resource availability, or lack of suitable staff, etc. But at root, it's the movement of money that can be their downfall.

Problem One: Dealing with evolving needs

Voluntary organisations are a different kind of fish. By their nature they (at least to begin with) are concerned with people committing unpaid work to a cause they have some empathy with. In a great many cases, voluntary bodies are founded to deal with a cause that has been ignored by government or is not profitable for the private sector. Sometimes they are companions to major national and international needs (e.g. food aid, disaster rescue, emergency help, etc.) or are focused on bringing and particular issue to the public's attention.

If an organisation is successful, and its work grows in size, then it may need to expand into being one where paid staff are needed. Specialists may well be available to work unpaid, but in the long-term a paid worker may well be the only answer to development. At this point, the voluntary body transitions to become an employer, and this disrupts the very careful power structures within body.

It's not surprising that paid members of staff want to retain their jobs and income. In doing so, they may be in conflict with the needs of unpaid volunteers who may form the organisational core of original body. There is a requirement for very careful balancing between paid-professional power (via the organisations increasing dependency on it staff), and voluntary direction of the cause for which they give their time. Getting this balance right requires a culture of openness and understanding within the organisation. When this is not available (perhaps because of fears of victimisation), then conflicts can lead to industrial conflict, or the marginalisation of the voluntary element. In the latter case, the volunteers still function, but instead of them being the *raison d'être* for the organisation's existence, they instead become a useful resource that has little control over its own working methods or capacity to direct the organisation's destiny. Volunteers grow disgruntled and leave. The news of how the organisation has changed may get out into the wider community, but what is more likely is that incoming new volunteers have no history of how their organisation evolved, or where power used to lie. They settle into a relatively subservient role, becoming clients to paid staff. Because of dissatisfaction, there is high volunteer turnover; and the voluntary contribution shrinks in size,

Given enough time, volunteering then becomes a cynical matter of exploitation instead of empowerment, which eventually destroys the credibility and effectiveness of the organisation... from whence, its death is only a matter of time.

Problem Two: Centralisation and the rise of technocracy

Another serious matter is the distance of power centres from those working in 'the field'. As organisations grow larger, they tend to centralise their management systems for the sake of greater efficiency and to cut regional costs. Before anyone realises, contacting those who are decision-makers (key staff, either paid or otherwise) becomes a problematic matter of emails and phone calls, when in the past it was face-to-face. The personal nature of communication is lost as the size of the communicative audience grows. Layers of bureaucracy grow up to handle communications from the periphery (and to defend senior staff from being overwhelmed), which in turn limits the range of potential active decision-making, as those handling comm's don't have the authority to provide solutions to problems. Issues that local workers consider serious are left unsolved. They fester in local teams and voluntary groups resulting in hostility to the centralised system.

The chances of a collapse is enhanced by lack of faith in the implementation of the organisation's cause. All it takes is one serious financial crisis or work-related scandal, and the whole edifice implodes. The moral? Lack of supporter confidence makes an organisation fragile, even at a time where it may seem most successful.

Problem Three: Proprietary dictatorships

The last, and perhaps the most serious problem faced by some organisations (especially smaller ones) is proprietoriness. This is particularly problematic during the early stages of organisational growth. Those that have founded an organisation naturally invest a lot of time, emotional effort, and physical labour in setting up their cause into a formal body. This is a little like bringing up a child. The founder(s) makes this organisation possible, nurtures it, exercises authority over it, and encourages others to take part. But as the organisation gets above its initial core size (perhaps five or six people), then the demands of incoming members can supersede the authority of the founder. Their need for democracy (having an influence over the work they do in return for the time they invest) can sideline the initial sources of power, causing a backlash of authoritarianism. Factionalisation takes place, entrenched positions fracture the capacity to manage. If the original founders expel the supposedly disconcerting 'rebels' then they face becoming a static clique that only attracts newcomers who agree with their position (and 'look' like they do).

Such exclusory practices, whilst they may seem satisfying from inside the clique, are in fact fatal to the capacity of an organisation to respond to socio-political change, stymie innovation, and produce entrenched belief systems that repel all those who might wish to take part. Once again, organisational collapse is on the cards.

So how do we avoid these issues (and others... I'm sure you can think of similar threats)? There are some key themes running throughout all of these problems, most of which concern the management of organisational culture. By culture, I mean the underlying beliefs and standards that a group of people work by, how they pass these beliefs on, and how their beliefs respond to changes in society. Developing a culture can often be invisible to those centrally involved in a cause, and even when outsiders make it plain that a negative culture exists, can either deny any problem, or actively seek to silence any just criticism. I would assert that this state of denial does not defend an organisation, but instead corrupts its values, and damages its sense of confidence in itself. It's not that an organisation needs to be constantly living in a state of cultural paranoia, but that it needs to go through genuine 'health checks' every so often, as to its beliefs and consequent practices. Such informal discussion (and it should be informal so as to avoid dialogic group-think) needs to be serious and open, perhaps focussed around some of the following considerations:

1. **Are we a truly democratic organisation?** *Does everyone who contributes to our work have a stake in the governance and decision-making process? Is this real, balanced power? Are we sincere in supporting democratic practices throughout what we do? Do we have a written Declaration of Volunteer Rights? Does ethics inform our work? Do we exercise authority with thought, kindness and respect?*
2. **Do we welcome those who do not look, speak, or think like 'we' do?** *Are we open to all positive contributions? Do we need to overcome our stereotypes and prejudices? Do we change our practices to help with accessibility? Do we check everyone feels welcome?*
3. **Do we share a common history and pass it on to newcomers?** *Do the principles and concepts upon which we were founded still have life in future generations?*

4. **Do we value and recognise all contributions?** *Do we make sure that thanks are sincerely given? That the humanity of all our colleagues is recognised? That we celebrate achievement and life events? That we support those with problems and care what happens to them? That we don't just induct people, but take special care to consider them when they leave? Do we treat people as ends and not means?*
5. **Is our organisation safe?** *Can people speak out about their hopes and fears? Can they report worrying issues? Are they encouraged to whistle-blow? Do they know they won't be victimised? Is everyone free of bullying or harassment? Can every member speak out?*
6. **Are we equitable in our practices?** *Do we give credit where credit is due? Do we avoid Cults of Personality? Do we give aid when it is needed? Do we encourage people to grow? Do we facilitate learning relevant to the needs of our staff and volunteers?*
7. **Are we outward-facing?** *Do we take an interest in current events? Do we link with other bodies for mutual assistance? Do we enthusiastically seek to give support to all members of our community?*
8. **Are we competent but not technocratic?** *Do we take everyone with us as change happens? Do we use technology when its needed, but not simply because it's there? Do we encourage our colleagues to have freedom as to how they do their work?*

...and above all:

9. **Is our community of practice a place where we all feel at home?**

Please add your own extra item to this list, relevant to your organisation.

