U.S. Department of Education ■ Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools
Mentoring Resource Center

Case Studies in Youth Mentoring:
Why Don't We Like To Change?

Helping Organizations Chart a New Course for Future Success

by Craig Bowman, July 2009

"Change is hard."

You've heard that before.

And as clichéd as that phrase may sound—even in these challenging times when it seems as if huge change is just part of everyday life—it's never been more true.

I've been working as a change consultant with mentoring and other social profit[1] organizations for almost 20 years—working directly or indirectly with hundreds of individuals and agencies from all over the world. In the role of consultant, my job is almost always about finding ways to improve an organization's ability to achieve mission-critical goals.

My job—the job of any good technical assistance provider—is to precipitate helpful change.

But, I've also been on the other side as the executive director of three social profit organizations since 1990. In that role, change was never so easy. In fact, as the person in charge of an organization and its many stakeholders—even if I might have wanted to make a big change—the pressure to hold on to "tried and true" approaches was strong. At least, that was what I told myself.

[1] The term social profit, rather than nonprofit, will be used throughout this piece to emphasize the importance of this sector. The work actively creates benefits for society, generates a new kind of profit, and adds value. This language better captures the essence of the work being done and it often resonates well with constituents and stakeholders.

Editor's Note: *This MRC Case Study takes a slightly different approach than previous editions, examining not only how a local mentoring program overcame a challenge, but also the role that an outside catalyst—in this case an MRC consultant—played in helping the program recognize a problem and make needed changes.*

In a way, this is a case study demonstrating how technical assistance focused on facilitating meaningful change can help improve a program's circumstances for the better, and how the leadership at a mentoring program can use such outside support to make tough decisions and rise to the challenge of setting a new course.

We have kept the organization Craig profiles anonymous so that we can share more details about the issues and decisions that can face a mentoring program in the midst of significant struggle. Organizations of all types and sizes can learn from this first-person account of the change process in action.

The Mentoring Resource Center hopes that all of you who have engaged Craig and the many other MRC staff members and consultants over the course of your OSDFS-funded projects have found our services to be valuable in facilitating and supporting meaningful improvements in the work you do with our nation's young people.

Most real-world decisions have a status quo option—a choice that means doing nothing and/or maintaining a current or previous decision. And the truth is, according to the experts, most of us prefer that option—even when it is no longer in our interests.

"To do nothing is within the power of all men."

– Samuel Johnson

Decades of social science research have identified a cognitive bias, which leads people to prefer that things stay the same, or that things change as little as possible, if they absolutely must be altered. We call this the status quo bias.

Noted writer and blogger S.E. Smith believes that "this cognitive bias plays a role in a number of fields, including economics, political science, sociology, and psychology, and numerous studies have been conducted on the status quo bias to look at ways in which this bias influences human behavior."

Craig Bowman

"This cognitive bias," Smith argues[2], "plays a very important role in decision making, because under the status quo bias, people will make the choice which is least likely to cause a change ... [This] inability to be flexible can cause people to become stressed or upset when a situation forces them to make a choice, and [ultimately] may close their eyes to potential opportunities."

In fact, my experience as both consultant and social profit director reinforce that point and suggest that, in the words of Marcia Drew Hohn, writing for the journal Focus on Basics, "The greatest barrier to organizational change has to do with the operating paradigm, or mind set, of the individuals and groups that make up an organization[3]."

If all this is true, what can we do to create the ideal set of circumstances for encouraging leaders to embrace organizational change strategies?

And perhaps more important, how can we get ourselves to consider making tough decisions before the organization starts to falter or ultimately fails?

Case in Point

In this case study, we'll look at the challenges faced by a local mentoring program whose leadership requested help in changing direction, was offered strategic advice, but failed to act on that advice for more than a year—risking their very survival. This example illustrates how and why organizations can fail to embrace change, as well as the circumstances that those of us who provide technical assistance can face as we work with clients in the field.

Fortunately, the organization did survive and now seems to be thriving. But it wasn't easy. What did it take for them to finally embrace the idea of change? And how can those lessons help your mentoring program change its own future?

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[2] Smith, S.E. *What Is the Status Quo Bias?* (http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-status-quo-bias.htm)

[3] Hohn, M.D. (1998). Why is change so hard? Theories and thoughts about the organizational change process. Focus on Basics, 2, pp. 1–8.

The mentoring program we are profiling here was launched in 2001, later becoming a grantee of the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Student Mentoring program. Working in a major U.S. city, the program provides intensive mentoring for boys in the city's foster care system. Most mentees live in neighborhoods with high rates of poverty, unemployment, crime, and low academic achievement. Youth in the program are at high risk of academic failure and truancy.

When they enter the program, many are withdrawn, reluctant to trust, and unable to relate to peers and adults appropriately. The program pairs these youth with carefully selected adults who create and sustain positive and nurturing relationships to help these children:

- Build caring, trusting relationships with adult role models
- Enhance their leadership, socialization, and teamwork abilities
- Take part in positive educational activities outside their high-risk neighborhoods
- Significantly improve academic and social skills
- Envision paths toward postsecondary education, sustained employment, and productive community involvement

When volunteers become mentors in the program, they make a serious commitment. Each mentor agrees to spend at least 10 hours per month with his mentee for at least two years; and they commit to weekly contact to build stability in the unstable lives of their mentees. They enhance child outcomes significantly by starting at age nine, working closely with teachers, and organizing structured, monthly peer group activities.

"We Need a Plan for Raising More Money"

That's what the leadership of the program said in early 2008 when they approached the Mentoring Resource Center for help sustaining services past the end of the ED grant. And this was the goal in mind when the MRC and the U.S. Department of Education approved and funded in-depth technical assistance (TA) to the site.

I should note that not all programs we work with as TA providers need as much intensive assistance as this program did. Sometimes programs just need to solve a specific problem or improve a small piece of what they do. That type of small-scale support happens all the time. But when programs are reluctant to try innovative things and evolve over time, they can wind up in serious situations that threaten their long-term viability. In those circumstances, a more intensive TA process, such as that described here, may be needed.

The on-site technical assistance provided by the MRC is always grounded in building a relationship with clients, and taking the time to understand their needs and history before offering any type of solution. Thus, at the outset of the TA intervention, I implemented my S.T.A.R.T. (Strategy, Action, & Results) Process[4], designed to help organizations move their efforts to ensure organizational viability and sustainability forward. The S.T.A.R.T. Process was originally developed as part of my primary work at Common Ground Consulting, but it has proven to be very useful in serving local mentoring programs, including ED grantees.

My approach to this type of organizational development work demands taking the time to build a high-trust relationship between myself (the consultant) and the organization's leaders (those who asked for the help). Once we are on that path, the process begins with a comprehensive document review (strategic plans, financial documents, grant proposals, evaluation data, audits,

[4] ™ Common Ground Consulting LLC. (http://commongroundconsulting.org/method/strategic.cfm)

etc.). This is followed by on-site interviews with key stakeholders (at every level of the organization), designed to uncover and discover those areas in which the organization is excelling, as well as those areas in which change is prudent and necessary, but where the pathways to that positive change may be blocked.

This "appreciative inquiry[5]" approach leads to a written assessment of an organization's strengths, challenges, and current needs, including concrete recommendations with clear examples, followed up with short-term action steps. Whenever possible, the assessment also includes ideas for additional funding sources and a set of recommended resources and instructions for accessing them.

Change requires destroying and then replacing old ways of thinking or acting.

If moving forward with strategic changes can benefit the organization, our S.T.A.R.T. Report offers an assessment of the changes I believe will improve the organization's mission-critical goals while also nurturing key relationships, developing infrastructure, encouraging planning, and ensuring long-term sustainability. Working closely with us, clients are expected to review the recommendations and discuss them with the appropriate stakeholders (staff, board members, funders)—actively engaging with both the opportunities and risks inherent in any change process.

I am very clear with clients that change requires destroying and then replacing old ways of thinking or acting; replacing fear with hope; and taking responsibility for the hard work that will be necessary to improve the way the organization works. In our process, I must often remind clients that change requires risk and is rarely easy.

What follows is a small part of what we concluded in our report to the mentoring program described above:

"Organizationally, the founder and current Board chair is also the part-time salaried executive director of [the organization], a situation rare among mentoring programs beyond the start-up phase. Decision-making power finally lies with him in most instances, which exacerbates tensions and uncertainty among the staff—two full-time people and one intern. The vacancy left by an office manager has yet to be filled, and there are no firm plans for hiring new staff. Fundraising activities are minimal, with neither the executive director nor director of operations responsible for leading fundraising efforts. The Board is clearly invested in the organization and their attention to and interest in programmatic affairs is laudable; however, as a result, the Board's financial oversight function seems to be only secondary.

"[The organization] has approximately $250,000 in the bank, which is enough to remain in operation at current levels until near the end of 2008. However, the organization must find a way to replace $200,000 in annual funding provided by a Department of Education startup grant. There is currently no development or fund-raising plan, no person charged with its creation, no

[5] This concept is based on the work of D.L. Cooperrider: "Appreciative Inquiry is about the coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives 'life' to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential." (1986). Appreciative inquiry: Toward a methodology for understanding and enhancing organizational innovation. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.

fully developed or approved budget for FY08, and no strategic plan.

"Many issues need attention. It is a critical time for the board members to step into their roles and for the organization to make important decisions about the mission, management, and sustainability plan for [the organization]. The executive director and board need to be completely clear with each other about the parameters of the current situation. The mission and strategic vision for the organization needs to drive the conversation at the outset, taking into consideration the fundraising and hiring/structural decisions that must follow soon thereafter.

"The Board has no formal giving requirement, and members indicate they have not received training related to their roles and responsibilities generally or fundraising specifically. The Board has not conducted an annual performance review of the executive director and has not evaluated its own performance; nor has it discussed options to expand capacity [or] created a clear organizational chart."

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You can see from my assessment that, for the sake of its own survival, the program needed to make some changes right away. They had probably needed to make them for some time. I provided them with 17 specific recommendations (several of which are discussed later in this study), a rationale for each recommendation, and a series of short-term action steps intended to jump-start their change process. Because of the parameters of the Department of Education's support, and the scope of the MRC's mandate to assist programs, it was then up to the organization to take the next steps and decide whether to act on the recommendations.

Unfortunately, over the next 12 months, the leadership opted to maintain the status quo, losing key staff members and running out of money along the way. When I spoke to the staff again late last winter, the situation had become dire. Only then, and really because they had no other choices at that point, were they forced to consider more radical changes. Still, four more months passed before any real change took root.

Where Did This Go Wrong?

It's fair to say that this organization is not so unusual in having voiced the desire to make changes in how they operate, yet failed to act when those opportunities for change became manifest. I've worked with many organizations struggling to overcome this hurdle, and it's something commonly encountered across in-depth technical assistance projects, such as the MRC. I think there are three interconnected reasons why this stagnation occurs.

First, leaders believe in themselves. And while most of the time we view that as a good thing, sometimes—especially in organizations where the leaders are also the founders, or their public personas are powerfully tied to the organizations they represent, or when the organization is small and the stakeholders are all friends—that belief in oneself can become blinding. I call it ego dominance syndrome. It often leads to control issues. It blurs the lines of responsibility and authority. It confuses decision making around role and task.

In social profit organizations, it is not unusual to find executive directors with these ego dominance (better known as "control freak") tendencies. In fact, it's probably the norm, rather than the exception. It was certainly true for me when I was in that role. When you are the boss, it is easy to convince yourself that ultimately the success or the failure of the organization is your responsibility alone; and paradoxically, if you manage to be successful, the situation gets even worse. Then others—especially board members—often fail to fully take up their roles,

believing that the executive director has everything under control, leading to a kind of vicious circle.

When we don't recognize that we are suffering from ego dominance syndrome, almost any change process comes to represent a loss of power, authority, and control, feeding fear of change.

This certainly happened with our case study example. For many years, the program enjoyed a significant measure of success and the founder/executive director's passion, experience, and insight meant that he was always in charge. The staff deferred to him and the board never challenged him, even as the organization sank deeper into dysfunction.

When leadership fails to embrace change strategies, it is often out of a misguided belief that somehow the ship will right itself.

Ultimately, boards of directors carry much of the blame. Few members fully understand the awesome responsibility that they assume when they join a board; and fewer still have any tools for carrying out their critical roles. Lately, I've worked with several organizations whose boards were impotent when it came to pushing a change agenda. I've seen boards who borrowed tens of thousands of dollars from their executive directors to meet financial obligations; boards who failed to act when they discovered malfeasance; boards with members who were considering legal action against their colleagues; and boards who had no idea about the level of risk they were exposing themselves to whenever their program was in operation.

A second reason is that leadership is afraid. We can't always know why, but often leaders are afraid that they don't have the skills or experience to implement changes. Sometimes they are afraid that they might have to compromise their values; or that recommendations may go too far or not far enough. They may be afraid that they will get into trouble or offend a key constituency. Or, most likely and most important, leaders are afraid they will fail.

Fear is a powerful motivator—even of inaction. It often inspires our status quo bias, anchoring us to a familiar course of action despite strong evidence suggesting that a particular approach is failing. Somehow, we find a measure of relief in this paralysis. It's like buying a lottery ticket and then not checking the numbers after they've been drawn. The possibility that we might have won is comforting, inspiring even. It gives us hope, despite the fact that we know the chances of winning—or in the case of our social profit, stopping a downward spiral—are slim to none.

When leadership fails to embrace change strategies, it is often out of a misguided belief that somehow the ship will right itself. "It's always worked before," we tell ourselves. At least by doing it the way it's always been done, we know what to expect. We know how to respond. "Our work is too important," we argue. "Eventually people (read funders) will see that they have to support us."

If only that were true.

Regardless of the reason for postponing or avoiding change, leaders develop powerful coping mechanisms that lead to ever-increasing tolerances for painful dysfunction—an immunity of sorts that offers a false sense of security and reinforces the status quo option.

Psychologists define coping as a way of managing difficult situations by working to master, minimize, reduce, or tolerate stress or conflict. It is a reasonable and normal reaction for most people when times get tough. The problem is that social profit leaders can often get pretty skilled at coping, constantly resetting the bar when it comes to an organization's tolerance for stress, conflict, or dysfunction. Often this works for the leader, but not so well for everyone else.

Finally, and perhaps the main reason why our case study organization failed to move forward before they ran out of options, is that **often leaders don't know how to manage the change process on their own**. A transition from one way of doing things to another is never easy, and often occurs without relevant precedent. It will probably mean that some people will like the change and others won't. If the change is big enough (or affects a lot of people) it will probably be dramatic—with an emphasis on the "drama."

I believe that the social profit sector, as a whole, deserves a failing grade for our inability to prepare leaders for their difficult jobs. Of course I'm talking about skills development, management tools, and the like; but more important, I'm talking about helping leaders understand that they have to inspire their organizations to greatness. They need help crafting the messages and acknowledging where the change will be difficult, taking time to explain the context, and then offering a powerful, hopeful, passionate blueprint for the future.

And before doing any of that, they need to know how to ask for help.

In my role these days as a consultant and TA provider, the hardest part of the change process isn't diagnosing the problem (though when I was immersed in the day-to-day as an executive director, getting to the root of a problem wasn't so easy). The hardest part is helping an organization's leadership create and walk the bridge between the old and the new. It's about the journey. Effective technical assistance interventions must focus on both identifying a problem and offering paths to real solutions—a process that requires the cooperation and commitment of staff and stakeholders at every step.

What Happened to That Case Study?

Well, 16 months and about 20 hours of aggressive "discussions" (read arguments) later, the organization fired its last underperforming staff member (the program director), made significant budget cuts, hired an acting executive director with a clear set of performance goals, stopped pursuing poor fund-raising strategies, and started to redefine roles and responsibilities at the board level and with key stakeholders.

By staying in touch and offering my help, the founding executive director started to trust me a little more. As that relationship deepened, I pushed harder, focusing on those areas where change was critical. I felt obliged to talk about potential risks to the kids and mentors in the program if the staffing and supervision didn't improve. I reviewed the financial situation and asked if board members understood that they were personally responsible for the organization's debts. I questioned some decisions from an ethical standpoint.

This wasn't easy, especially for someone like me who believes that change should be positive and powerful. I was conscious of not trying to leverage fear, but to find those areas that were out of alignment with the values of the people who built and lead the organization. As painful as this can be, it seems fair to me. Frankly, as a TA provider, I don't enjoy pushing leaders to accept responsibility for their failures, make tough decisions like firing someone, eliminating a program, or stepping down themselves; but I really don't like it when critical programs supported by public funds have to close their doors for preventable reasons.

Fortunately, this program won't be closing their doors anytime soon. They still slide backward from time to time, but they recognize it now, and they're asking for help, and they've put good people with strong skills in the right jobs. They've built a bridge to that next level, and they aren't as afraid of the unknown.

What Can We Learn?

Perhaps the most important thing to understand about change is that it is rarely, if ever, a simple event. Change is a process fraught with risk and conflict, and marked more often than not by one step forward and two steps back. It is difficult and it takes time. But it's necessary if social profits are going to survive and thrive. And it always starts with a single step.

It may be useful to look to other fields for insights into the change process. In addition to my work for the MRC, I do a significant amount of risk management work around the world with young people—much of it focused on decision making related to their physical and mental health. I've learned a few things in that work that have relevance to the change process many mentoring and other social profit organizations go through. In that work, I use a model for influencing health-related behavior change that can be applied to other social profit contexts.

The oft-cited "Stages of Change" model[6] suggests that for most of us, a change in behavior occurs gradually, with people [or in our case, organizational leadership] moving from being uninterested, unaware, or unwilling to make a change (pre-contemplation), to considering a change (contemplation), to deciding and preparing to make a change. Real and focused actions are taken and then over time efforts to maintain the new behavior occur. Setbacks are almost inevitable and become part of the process of working toward sustainable change.

Stage in the Model of Change	Leadership Behaviors at This Stage
Pre-contemplation	Not thinking about change. May be resigned. Feeling of no control. Denial: does not believe it applies to self. Believes consequences are not serious.
Contemplation	Weighing benefits and costs of behavior, proposed change.
Preparation	Experimenting with small changes.
Action	Taking a definitive action to change.
Maintenance	Maintaining new behavior over time.
Relapse	Experiencing normal part of process of change. Usually feels demoralized.

If changes in the personal health context—stopping smoking, getting more exercise, using condoms, limiting alcohol consumption—can mean the difference between life and death and yet

[6] Prochaska, J.O., DiClemente, C.C., & Norcross, J.C. (1992). In search of how people change. American Psychologist, 47(9), 1102–1114.

people still fail to change more often than they succeed, how can we even imagine implementing change strategies in the social profit organization context?

First, we have to accept that change is not easy and then we have to decide to do it anyway. We have to get over our fears and we have to let go of our egos. In a social profit organization, it can't be about just one person.

We have to begin to really look at what is happening in our organizations and we have to be willing to see how we as leaders are contributing to dysfunction.

Our belief in the work of our organization should cause us to fight against the powerful status quo bias, at least long enough to consider whether change is necessary and in the interests of the people who depend upon our organization.

Second, we have to accept that we can't do it alone. Get help. Hire a coach. Call your TA provider. Surround yourself with people who will speak the truth to you in a supportive way, but won't get caught up in the "spin" that so many of us as leaders do so well. These conversations will be very difficult, so choose people carefully. You're not looking for people who will just yell at you or make you feel bad—it isn't about flagellation. You want to cultivate high-trust relationships with people who will help you see what you can't because you're simply too close—people who are connected and invested, but not personally involved. You want them to:

- Provide an objective and confidential ear
- Help you reflect on practice
- Push you to be accountable
- Provide assistance with balancing work/life issues
- Help you accelerate the pace of change within your organization

I am constantly surprised by the number of organizations that fail to use the support mechanisms that have been created to help them. Technical assistance providers such as the MRC, state mentoring partnerships, and other intermediary organizations are there to provide advice and support for meeting organizational challenges. The mentoring field has invested considerable resources into these service providers, so please access them and get the help you need.

Third, don't beat yourself up too much when you fall back into old patterns, but don't make excuses about it either. Winston Churchill said "I am always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught." I think this is true for most of us. You'll have setbacks and make mistakes and you'll need to develop a thick enough skin so that people you bring in to help you can point out when you're sliding backward.

These days, I carry a card in my wallet that reminds me to "Always make new mistakes." It's good advice on its face and it is a lot more fun to make new mistakes than the same ones over and over again.

Finally, remember to breathe. This is hard work. The human bias for maintaining the status quo is profound; the research on this is clear and, more important, our own experiences reinforce the point. The key to moving forward is in being able to recognize the courage it takes to challenge the status quo and to make an informed decision about whether change is necessary or warranted. Most people never take that first step.

BE A CHANGE AGENT

- Change Agents live in the future, not in the present and have a dream or a vision that drives their actions.
- Change Agents are fueled by passion and inspire passion in others.
- Change Agents have the ability to motivate themselves to work harder even as others are slow to recognize the possibilities for change.
- Change Agents understand that real change almost always involves conflict and difficult conversations; and that real change is never sustainable without honesty and trust.
- Change Agents aren't looking for glory, or affirmation, or praise.
- Change Agents understand that it isn't about them or their own self-interest.
- Change Agents live in the world of "what's possible?" and "what if?"
- Change Agents never stop, never give up, and never give in.

If you have questions about the training and technical assistance services of the Mentoring Resource Center, and how we strive to help programs overcome challenges and create positive change, please see our Web site at http://www.edmentoring.org or e-mail us at edmentoring@emt.org.

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For 19 years, Craig Bowman and Common Ground Consulting LLC™ have been providing world-class consulting services for community based, national, and international nonprofit/NGO (social profit) organizations. As a leading social sector futurist, Craig has spent his career developing a philosophy of leadership that harnesses passion and trust as a bridge between human potential and social responsibility. On the Web at http://commongroundconsulting.org/.

This publication was funded by the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools at the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED04CO0091/0001 with EMT Associates, Inc. The contracting officer's representative was Bryan Williams. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government. This publication also contains hyperlinks and URLs for information created and maintained by private organizations. This information is provided for the reader's convenience. The U.S. Department of Education is not responsible for controlling or guaranteeing the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this outside information. Further, the inclusion of information or a hyperlink or URL does not reflect the importance of the organization, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered.