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THE SURVIVABILITY FACTOR: RESEARCH ON THE CLOSURE OF NONPROFIT ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

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In the past twenty years, scholars have increased their efforts to explain birth, growth, decline, and death in populations of organizations. A growing body of work focuses on the survival of nonprofit organizations, and seeks to explain why some organizations grow and thrive in a particular area while others do not. This monograph highlights one research project that focused on nonprofit organizations in Minnesota. The author gives particular attention to nonprofit arts organizations and the reasons why they closed.

The research described in this Monograph is drawn from an in-depth study of the growth and decline of nonprofit organizations in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area of Minnesota. The research project began in 1980 with a survey of 229 nonprofits there. At that time, the researchers did not intend to address the question of why organizations close. However, by the end of the study period in the mid-1990's, over 15 percent of the organizations had closed their doors. On the other hand, a large number of organizations were still going strong. What was the difference? What factors separated the "dead" organizations from the "live" ones?

When people think of the closure of organizations, their minds usually leap to factors such as bad management, poor board oversight, or other organizational shortcomings. While interviews with organizational managers reveal that people are quick to assign blame when things go wrong, managers who have been aboard a sinking ship realize that the stories are often more complicated than that. Often, the ultimate success or failure of organizations is due to external factors beyond a manager's control. The nonprofit sector has faced cutbacks in public expenditures and culture wars during the Reagan administration, continued low levels of public expenditure during the Bush Administration, and recessions in both the early 1980's and 1990's. During this time some major institutional funders have reevaluated and changed their funding priorities. These kinds of *external* sources of organizational turmoil have the ability to overwhelm nonprofit organizations despite the best intentions and efforts of their managers.

Academics who seek to explain *why* organizations close place as much emphasis on these kinds of system-wide factors as they do on the skills of executives, staff, and board members. The organization science literature also pays more attention to the liabilities of the youth and small size of organizations, changes in the demand for goods and services, and the way that the organization is perceived by people *outside* the organization, such as funders, donors, audiences, and community elites. A great danger to the mental health of CEOs is the tendency to take too much blame or credit for institutional and environmental forces that may well be outside their control. This is not to say that effective management and good leadership are not important. Often, it is the way that organizational leaders *react* to adversity in environmental conditions that determines the future of their organization. At the end of the Monograph, you'll find a list of factors that managers and board members *can* control to improve the health of their organizations.

SCALING DOWN IN LEAN TIMES

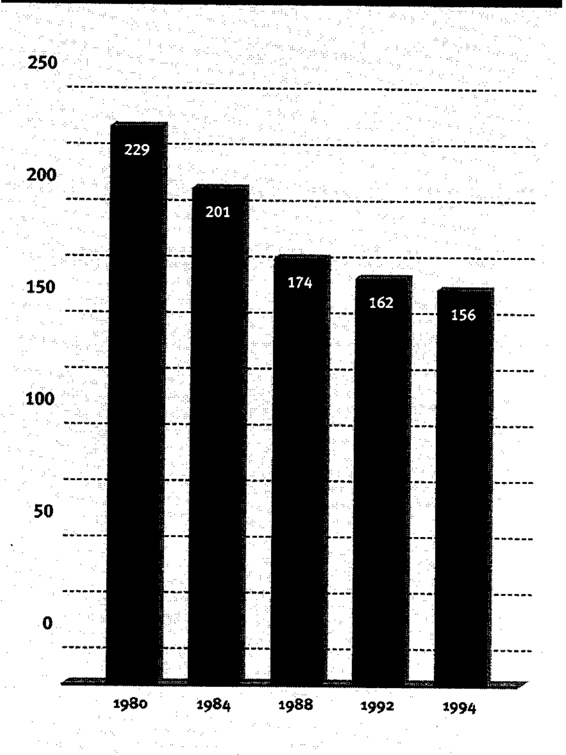
When businesses face a hostile environment, they have the option of either scaling down or moving to a different niche where they might be more competitive. David Whetten has observed that nonprofit organizations, on the other hand, are unlikely to move or change their mission when faced with a hostile environment. Consequently, the only option left to them is to scale down.

David A. Whetten, 1980. "Sources, Responses, and Effects of Organizational Decline." Pp. 342-374 in *Organizational Life Cycles*, edited by J. Kimberly and R. Miles. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

A STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONAL CLOSURE

As noted above, these observations about the success and failure of nonprofits comes from research conducted in Minneapolis-St. Paul. The research began in 1980 with a detailed survey of 229 nonprofit organizations. Organizations represented in the study were drawn randomly from a comprehensive list of nonprofits, so they represent all types and sizes of arts, health, welfare, recreational, and other types of charitable organizations. By the end of the study period in 1994, only 156 organizations were still a going concern. So, out of the 229 organizations interviewed in 1980, 73 (32%) were no longer identified as viable organizations after 14 years. The chart below illustrates the decline in the number of nonprofit organizations in the sample.

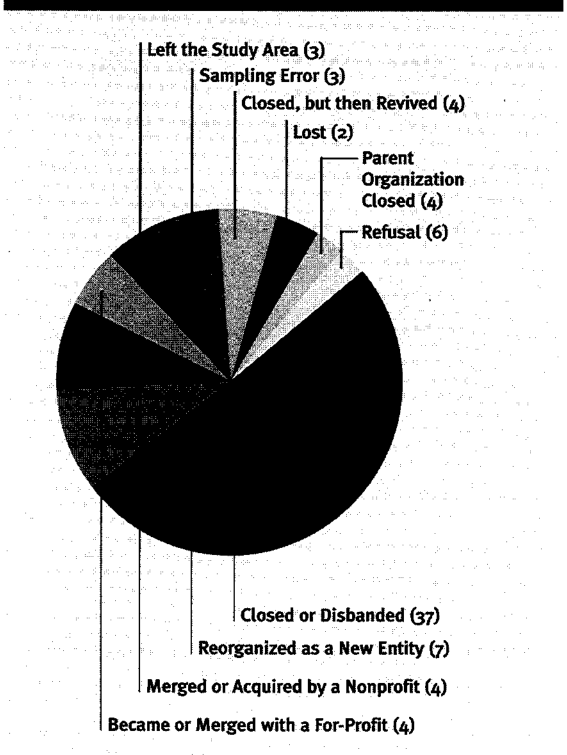
NUMBER OF ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED IN EACH TIME PERIOD



WHAT HAPPENED TO THESE ORGANIZATIONS?

Organizations disappeared from the study in each of the following ways: merger with or acquisition by another nonprofit, change to or merger with a for-profit business, relocation to another area, and closure of a parent or supporting organization. Seven organizations reorganized as a new entity, most often a church or government agency. However, the vast majority of organizations exiting the study did so because of outright closure. Of the 73 organizations not surveyed in 1994, 37 were identified as disbanded, having forfeited their charitable status and board of directors.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE 73 CLOSED ORGANIZATIONS?



FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF THE "DEAD" ORGANIZATIONS

Because researchers had visited these organizations when they were operating, they knew many characteristics of the organizations in the study. These characteristics included how long the organizations had been operating; how large they were; what kind of industry they operated in (e.g., arts, education, or health); and what proportions of their revenues were derived from private sources (individual donations, corporate gifts and grants, special fund-raising events, etc.), public sources (grants and contracts from governmental sources) and fees (program service revenues, membership dues, and sale of unrelated services). Since the project had recorded this kind of information for the organizations that thrived as well as for those that closed, the researchers were able to compare survivors to closers to see where the differences were.

4 RISK FACTORS OF ORGANIZATIONAL FAILURE

1. **Small:** Cannot take advantage of opportunities that larger organizations can.
2. **Young:** Have not established routines, competencies, legitimacy, or an audience.
3. **Reliance on single sources of income:** Cannot take up the slack in other areas when funding runs dry.
4. **Arts?** Arts organizations have higher failure rates than other types of organizations.

1. Youth.

Researchers found that younger organizations are more likely to close than the older ones—a finding consistent with most studies done in this area. The common wisdom is that younger organizations have to overcome several key liabilities before they become viable: lack of experience, fewer resources, a limited time that staff has been able to work together, and fewer contacts with clients or customers. Many organizations cannot overcome these early liabilities, and end up closing before they become truly established. As activities in organizations become more "routine," the organization becomes more legitimate and likely to survive. Whatever the explanation, this research found that the older organizations were more likely to survive the 20-year study period.

2. Small Size.

Research on the survivability of organizations often finds small size is also a liability. Smaller organizations have a harder time establishing their legitimacy among donors, often cannot attract the most talented personnel, and may lack the staff necessary to deal with environmental demands like changes in laws and changes in the rigors of funder guidelines. Consistent with this argument, this research found that organizations with smaller annual revenues were at greater risk of closure than the larger organizations.

3. Reliance on Private Sources of Income.

Organizations that rely heavily on private streams of income were less likely to survive the study period than nonprofits that had less reliance on these kinds of sources. That is, a higher reliance on public and fee-based income, or a mix of a variety of income streams, is beneficial to nonprofits. (Private income sources include individual donations, corporate and foundation grants, trusts and bequests, fund-raising events, and grants from federated funders.)

4. Arts Organizations.

When researchers compared arts to non-arts organizations, they found that while age and size are generally considered protective factors for nonprofits overall, it may not be so for the arts organizations. Arts and culture organizations were less likely to survive the study period than other types of nonprofits, when taking into account the age and size of organizations. While only seven of the 37 arts and culture organizations studied exited the sample, these tended to be older or larger organizations than those nonprofits closing in other industries. That is, age and large size does not protect arts organizations in the same way they protect other nonprofits.

THE THREAT-RIGIDITY RESPONSE

In 1981, Barry Staw and his colleagues studied the behavior of organizations that were exposed to some kind of threat to their well being. They observed that most managers tended to freeze up, resulting in less effort to weather the crisis. They labeled this tendency the "threat-rigidity response."

Barry M. Staw, Lance E. Sandelands and Jane E. Dutton. 1981. "Threat-Rigidity Effects in Organizational Behavior: A Multilevel Analysis." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 26: 501-524.

WHAT DO EXECUTIVES AND BOARD MEMBERS SAY ABOUT THEIR OWN FAILED NONPROFITS?

The factors listed above do not tell us much about why executives and board members of nonprofits felt that their organizations closed. Consequently, at the end of the study period, researchers tracked down representatives from as many of the "dead" organizations as possible so they could talk to them about what had happened to the organizations. The researchers conducted interviews with approximately three-quarters of the organizations that did not survive the study period. The analysis of the factors influencing the demise of the organizations are divided into two different kinds of influences: internal and external.

★ ***Internal factors* are characteristics of the organization (like its age and size) or events or competencies that are typically located within the boundaries of the organization (like goal changes and staff conflict).**

★ ***External factors* are events in or characteristics of the organization's environment (like regulation by business or government, or loss of key funders).**

Three internal factors were particularly important to the executives or board members interviewed in the study:

1. Respondents most often noted that financial difficulties contributed directly to the decision to close, change, or merge the organization.
2. Almost as important was the claim that the organization was "too small," and did not have enough space, resources, or personnel to carry out its goals.
3. Respondents frequently noted problems associated with personnel loss and turnover. This was particularly a problem for small organizations, where the loss of a founding director or a key staff member or volunteer could result in real hardship for the organization.

Three external factors were also cited frequently:

1. The most cited external factor influencing the closure of nonprofits was that the organization was not perceived as an important entity, limiting its ability to mobilize community support.
2. Respondents indicated that the number of major funders available to the nonprofit had decreased over time, increasing competition for the dollars that remained available.
3. Executives and board members attributed the death of their nonprofit to a decrease in the demand for their services, resulting in fewer consumers of services and decreased program service revenues. Most of the respondents did not see this as an issue that resulted from mismanagement of the nonprofit, but rather one stemming from the changing nature of the service environment.

CLOSURE—NOT FAILURE

Interestingly, many of the executives rejected the suggestion that the closure of their organization represented some kind of "failure." While most cases could indeed point to problems resulting in the unhappy demise of their organizations, some organizations closed once they had completed their mission. That is, some organizations close due to *success* rather than *failure*. Once the project researchers absorbed this important lesson, they began to think about the project as a study of organizational *closure* rather than a study of organizational *failure*.

CLOSURE DOES NOT ALWAYS MEAN FAILURE

Glenn Carroll and Jacques Delacroix caution their readers not to equate *closure* with *failure*. They note that many successful organizations become targets for acquisition or merger. Such organizations may disappear after a merger or acquisition, but they did not *fail*.

Glenn R. Carroll, and Jacques Delacroix. 1982. "Organizational Mortality in the Newspaper Industries of Argentina and Ireland: An Ecological Approach." ***Administrative Science Quarterly*** **27: 169-198.**

WHAT ABOUT THE ARTS ORGANIZATIONS SPECIFICALLY?

Of the 229 organizations in the study, 37 fell into the "arts and culture" category. Of these, seven organizations did not survive the length of the study, including four performing arts organizations, a media-oriented educational organization, a visual arts organization, and a film-making organization. What specifically happened that caused these organizations to close? Answering this kind of question is difficult since one can rarely point to a "silver bullet" that caused an organization to close. The stories were frequently complicated, and always multi-faceted. The following are four brief examples that illustrate how various factors interact to cause arts organizations to close.

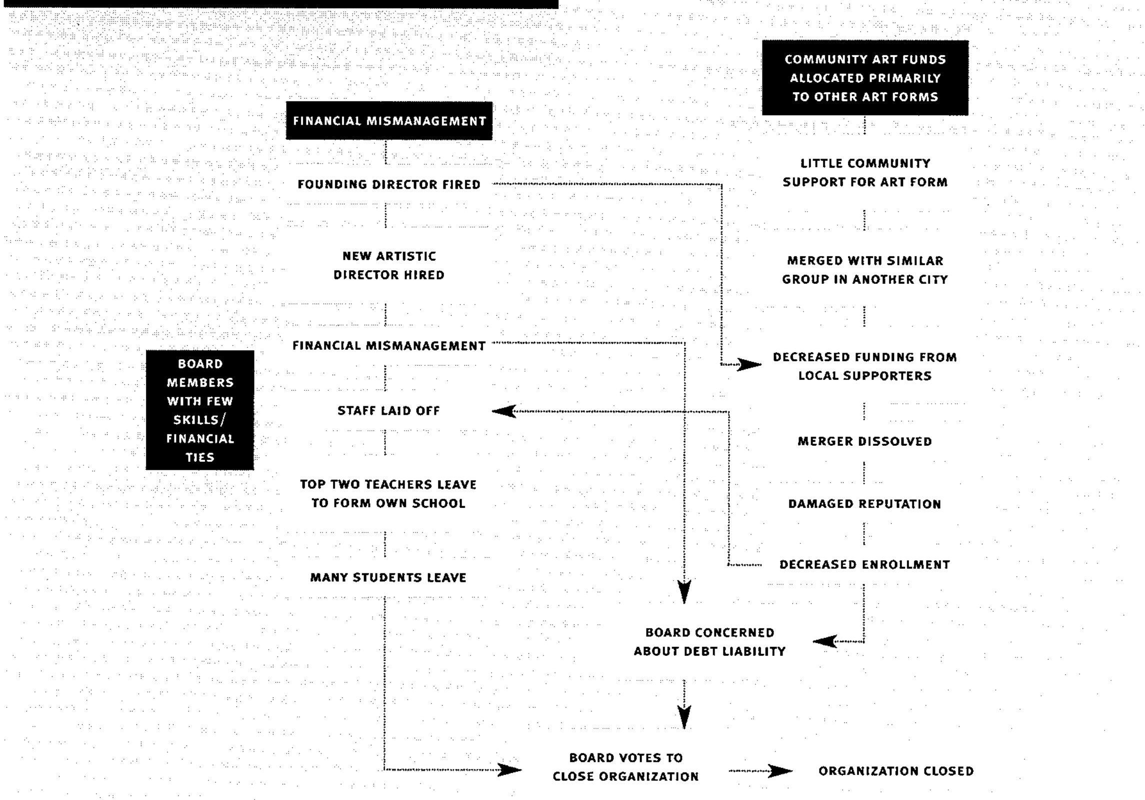
1. FINANCIAL PROBLEMS—BOTH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL

Founded in the late 1950's, Arts Nonprofit A was a performing arts organization that ultimately closed due to financial problems. However, as indicated in the sequence of events illustrated below, the story is more complicated than a mere lack of funds. Both internal and external elements conspired to end Arts Nonprofit A, beginning with both a decrease in funding availability from the local community and inabilities to handle the existing funds internally. These factors led to changes in key staff, a merger attempt, and further decreases in local funding support. The board members did not have the skills to turn the organization around, so Arts Nonprofit A continued downhill until the board had no choice but to close the organization. The decline of Arts Nonprofit A happened over a painful two-year period.

2. CAN SUCCESSFUL GRANTWRITING OR GROWTH BE A BAD THING?

Arts Nonprofit B had a similar mission to Arts Nonprofit A, but the conditions leading to its demise are quite different. While Arts Nonprofit A's demise began with decreases in funding availability, Arts

TERMINAL EVENTS AT ARTS NONPROFIT A



WARNING SIGNS FOR ORGANIZATION A

★ Founding director did not have good business sense. Visionary leaders don't always make the best managers.

★ The organization had a hard time competing with other arts organizations of the same type. "Second place" organizations have to work harder to be recognized.

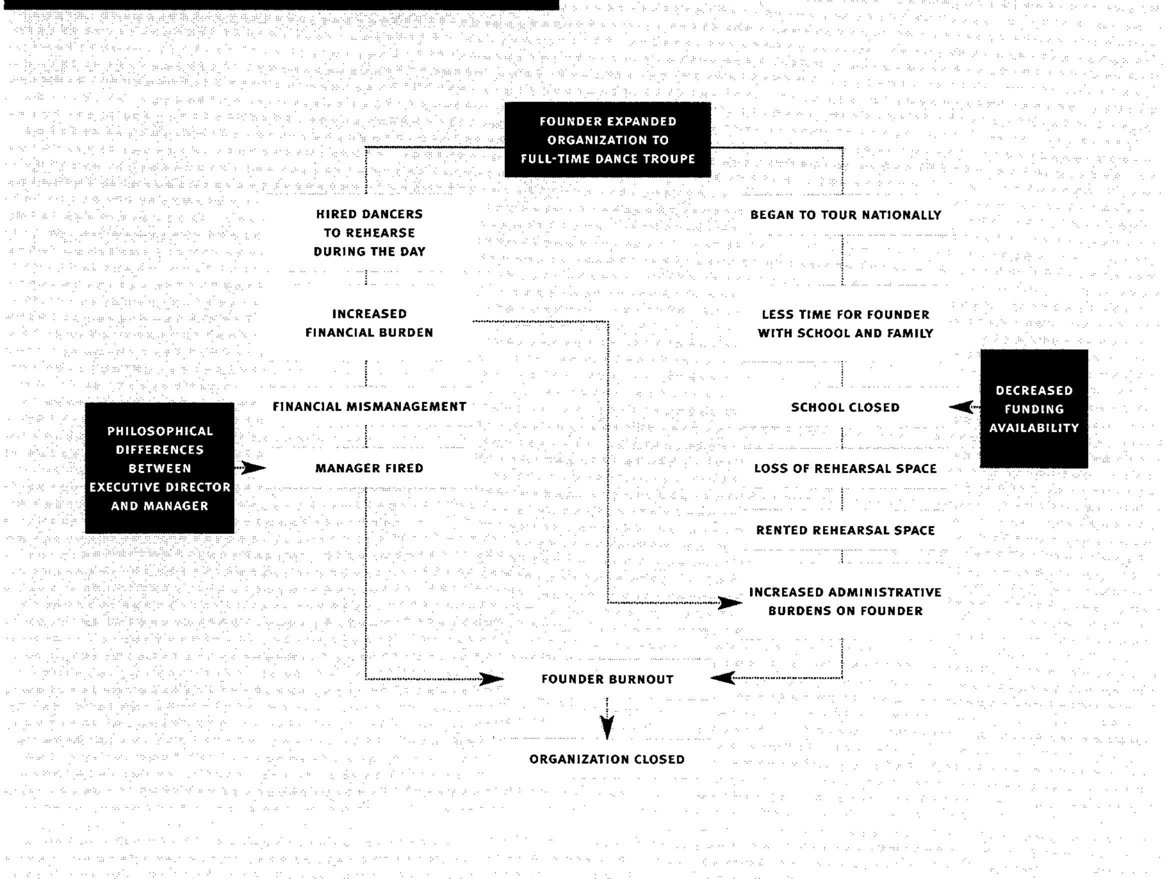
★ Board members did not have the skills needed to guide the organization. An effective board needs to be able to shore-up its weaknesses with new blood or outside consultants.

Nonprofit B's demise began with *increased* funding. For most of its history, Arts Nonprofit B relied on part-time dancers and a local audience. However, when it received funding to hire full-time dancers and initiate a national tour, the troubles began. The expansion strategy took its toll on both the finances of the organization and the time that managers had to devote to the new efforts. An unforeseen consequence of spending more time with the dance troupe was that the executive director could no longer train dancers in her school, resulting in the closure of the school and the loss of rehearsal space for the dance troupe.

At the same time, financial mismanagement and staff disputes resulted in turnover and additional increased burden on the executive director. "Financial mismanagement" takes a lot of different forms; in this case, the financial manager simply failed to properly track organizational expenses.

Finally, the strain was too much to bear. The executive gave up her efforts, dissolved the dance troupe, and found a new job. The decline period or Arts Nonprofit B was very short, with the organization going from boom to bust in a little over one year.

TERMINAL EVENTS AT ARTS NONPROFIT B



WARNING SIGNS FOR ORGANIZATION B

★ Sudden expansion. Sure, money and growth are nice—but is your organization ready for prosperity? Growth takes a special kind of management and leadership.

★ Conflicts between senior members of the staff. Conflict *can* be healthy in organizations, but it is usually debilitating.

★ Decline in the availability of the "usual" funds. Organizations must be ready to diversify their funding base, or face the consequences.

3. AS THE FOUNDING DIRECTOR GOES, SO GOES ARTS NONPROFIT C

A third performing arts organization, Arts Nonprofit C, had one of the simplest closure stories in the entire study. Arts Nonprofit C had a small staff, and focused on the performances of its students. In the words of the interviewee, "The two founding directors were [spouse name] and myself, and we were married at the time. We dissolved our marriage and [s]he went on to a different career and I went my separate way and there really weren't individuals with either the expertise or the interest in maintaining [Arts Nonprofit C]."

Several prompts revealed a few additional details, but these added little to this simple story. For example, the interviewee reported that the directors maintained the organization with little activity for a while, in case either of them wanted to use it to further his or her own individual work. However, when the interviewee's ex-spouse left the Twin Cities, the organization was terminated.

4. MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!

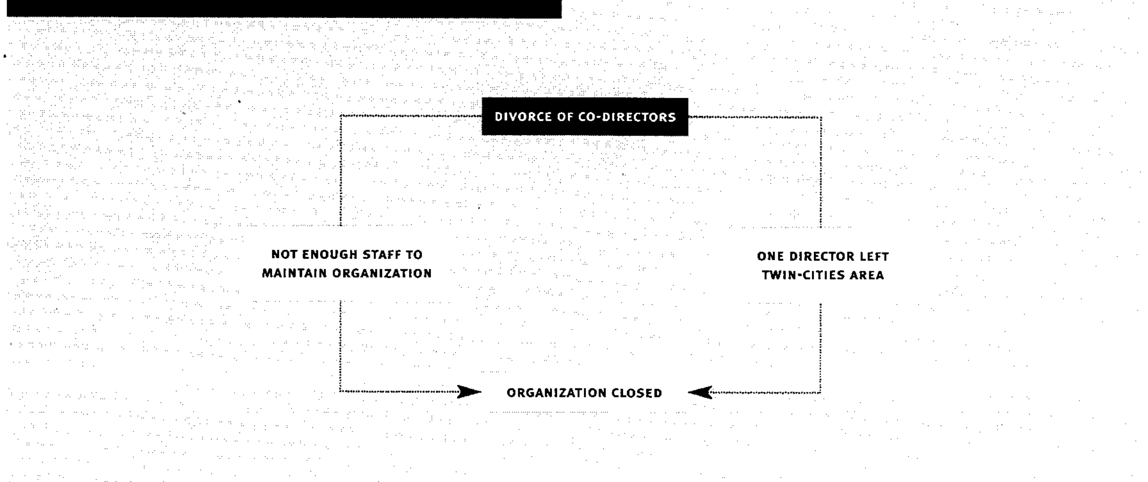
The conditions surrounding the closure of Arts Nonprofit D are fundamentally different from those surrounding the closure of the other arts organizations. In a success-driven culture, we are conditioned to equate *closure* with *failure*. That is, when we hear that an organization closed, we tend to presume that the organization failed in some way, or is otherwise faulty. However, as noted earlier, the research uncovered a number of nonprofits that closed after successfully completing the missions they were founded to complete. Arts Nonprofit D is one of those. Founded in the late 1970's, the mission of Arts Nonprofit D was to produce and distribute a documentary on an historical figure. The organization members completed the film. Then, following the successful distribution of the film into an easily saturated market, the organization disbanded. Mission accomplished. The lesson: Closure need not always mean failure.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION COUNTS

Jitendra Singh and his colleagues studied public service organizations in Canada. They found that organizations that were perceived as more "legitimate" had higher survival chances. Nonprofits become legitimate when their name and mission are well known among community members, when community members trust that the organization is capable of carrying out its service mission, or when the organization is perceived to be essential or has outstanding achievements.

Jitendra V. Singh, David J. Tucker and Robert J. House. 1986. "Organizational Legitimacy and the Liability of Newness." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 31: 171-193.

TERMINAL EVENTS AT ARTS NONPROFIT C



WARNING SIGNS FOR ORGANIZATION C

★ Feuding among organizational leaders. Personal conflicts can spill over into organizational operations.

CONCLUSION

Stories of mismanagement and poor board-executive relationships are common in the popular literature. Indeed, the most sensationalized cases of organizational decline and failure are usually associated with juicy stories about graft or conflict. The research reported here suggests, however, that this is not the norm, and that individual decisions are parts of complex relationships between idiosyncratic events that influence the ultimate fate of nonprofit organizations. That is, strategic planning, executive-staff and executive-board relationships, and organizational assessment interact with environmental forces outside the control of managers to determine whether the organization will survive. Nothing can kill an organization like lousy management, but the death of an organization does not always signal that the CEO, staff, or board did something to kill it.

RESOURCES

Books

Tracy Daniel Conners, *The Nonprofit Management Handbook: Operating Policies and Procedures.*

Robert H. Wilbur, Susan K. Finn, Carolyn Freeland, *The Complete Guide to Nonprofit Management.*

William Bowen, *Inside the Boardroom: Governance by Directors and Trustees.*

John Carver, *Boards that Make a Difference.*

Barry J. McLeisch, *Successful Marketing Strategies for Nonprofit Organizations.*

Susan Golden, *Secrets of Successful Grantsmanship.*

Douglas E. White, *The Art of Planned Giving: Understanding Donors and the Culture of Giving.*

Fisher Howe, *The Board Member's Guide to Strategic Planning.*

Timothy Nolan, Leonard Goodstein, J. Willima, *Plan or Die! 10 Keys to Organizational Success.*

Websites

Nonprofit Nuts and Bolts Online:
http://www.nutsbolts.com/

Alliance for Nonprofit Management:
http://www.allianceonline.org/

The Learning Institute for Nonprofit Organizations:
http://www.uwex.edu/li/

The Beacon Project: http://www.beaconproject.org/

The Society for Nonprofit Organizations:
http://danenet.wicip.org/snpo/

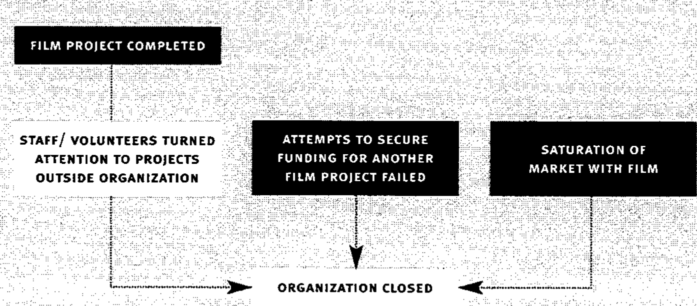
Independent Sector:
http://www.independentsector.org/

THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIP

Organizations involved in partnerships with other organizations tend to survive longer than organizations not involved in partnerships. Galaskiewicz and Bielefeld argue that networking provides critical information about prospective donors, clients, volunteers, and employees, and can aid in solicitation and recruitment.

Joseph Galaskiewicsz, and Wolfgang Bielefeld. 1998. *Nonprofit Organizations in an Age of Uncertainty: A Study of Organizational Change.* Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

TERMINAL EVENTS AT ARTS NONPROFIT D



WARNING SIGNS FOR ORGANIZATION D

★ While cause for celebration, fulfilling an organization's mission can be an ideal time to sunset an organization.

★ Failure at "mission succession." Following completion of the original mission, the organization was unable to establish compelling new goals.

Portions of this Monograph are drawn from work previously published in Nonprofit World (written by Lilya Wagner and Mark Hager), American Behavioral Scientist (written by Mark Hager, Joseph Galaskiewicz, Wolfgang Bielefeld, and Joel Pins), and The Not-For-Profit CEO Monthly Letter, as well as Hager's doctoral dissertation, "Explaining Demise among Nonprofit Organizations." The research was funded with a grant from the Nonprofit Sector Research Fund.

The principal investigator for the Minnesota Nonprofits research project is Joseph Galaskiewicz.

TEN SYMPTOMS OF A DYSFUNCTIONAL ORGANIZATION	TEN WAYS TO HALT ORGANIZATIONAL DECLINE
1. **Lack of a Strategic Plan** Without a strategic plan, there is no way for the board to monitor the organization. Plans generated by staff may be rubber-stamped by board members, with little meaningful input.	1. **Create a Strategic Plan** Gather key staff, board members, and constituents for a retreat to fashion a strategic plan with action steps – get some outside help if necessary. Have the board see to it that the plan is implemented.
2. **A Narrow Fundraising Base** The organization draws on few sources of income. Board members are not involved in fundraising. Some board members don't donate their own money to the organization, which may be a sign of apathy or lack of buy-in.	2. **Get Involved with Fundraising** Insist that all board members help raise funds and donate their own money to the organization. Encourage the organization to diversify its funding sources as much as possible.
3. **Productivity Slowdown** Goals are not being met. Little is accomplished on projects, or performances are poor. Reports are too optimistic, lack supporting data, and show the same results time after time.	3. **Empower People** Let everyone in your organization make decisions. Be sure the executive director and other top managers are well educated on (and use!) shared-leadership techniques.
4. **Staff-Board Breakdown** Staff members no longer ask board committees to meet with them. There is little communication between members of a board committee and the staff member(s) assigned to it.	4. **Open Lines of Communication** Encourage group activities that include both board and staff members. If you're a board member, make sure that the executive director isn't just telling you what you want to hear. Get involved.
5. **Fear of Change** Staff, board members, and volunteers are reluctant of change. The organization takes no risks, and undertakes no innovations.	5. **Commit to Change** Help create an environment where innovation is encouraged and rewarded. Make sure that staff and board members have opportunities to have opportunities to create change together.
6. **Poor Communication** Staff members feel that they can't speak out in meetings and therefore congregate in small groups afterward. They don't understand how and why decisions are made. They feel left out and unable to answer board, constituent, or media questions.	6. **Prepare a Communications Policy** Collaborate with staff to create a communications policy that opens up opportunities for expression. Clarify expectations so that all board and staff members understand what's expected of them and they feel they are using their talents constructively.
7. **Declining Morale** Staff members break into cliques, and trust between staff members declines. Conflict and hostility flourish, complaints become common, and people jump to unwarranted conclusions.	7. **Promote Teams** Team-building is one of the best ways to improve morale, commitment, and the sense that everyone is working together for the same cause. Team-building skills will help board and staff confront conflict and discuss problems openly.
8. **Financial Instability** Budget problems become more frequent and explanations more vague. The organization falls behind in its financial obligations.	8. **Review Finances** Review the organization's budget, financial policies, and cash flow position. Find experts to help you chart a solid financial course for the organization.
9. **Unhappy Audiences and Clients** Constituents begin to complain about poor products and services, rude staff, unreturned phone calls, and unfulfilled promises.	9. **Survey your Audience** Take a careful look at the organization from the point of view of your public. Conduct a survey, and then develop a marketing plan to meet the audience needs identified by the survey.
10. **Loss of Key People** Staff members depart. Board vacancies are difficult to fill. Volunteers do not want to donate their time to the organization.	10. **Take a Flexible Approach to Staffing** Encourage creative personnel ideas, such as part-time, flextime, and teleworking arrangements. Work toward breaking down old, rigid barriers between positions. The more flexibility, autonomy, and feeling of accomplishment people have in their jobs—this goes for board members and volunteers, too—the more likely they are to stay and work hard for the organization.

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