

# Founder syndrome medicine – readily available and quite tasty too

**It happened 20 years ago but feels as if it was just yesterday. ‘Of the three chief executives who have come along since I left, not one has bothered to contact me. I put my heart and soul and all hours of the day into it and then pow, I’m gone and out of sight.’ And out of mind.**



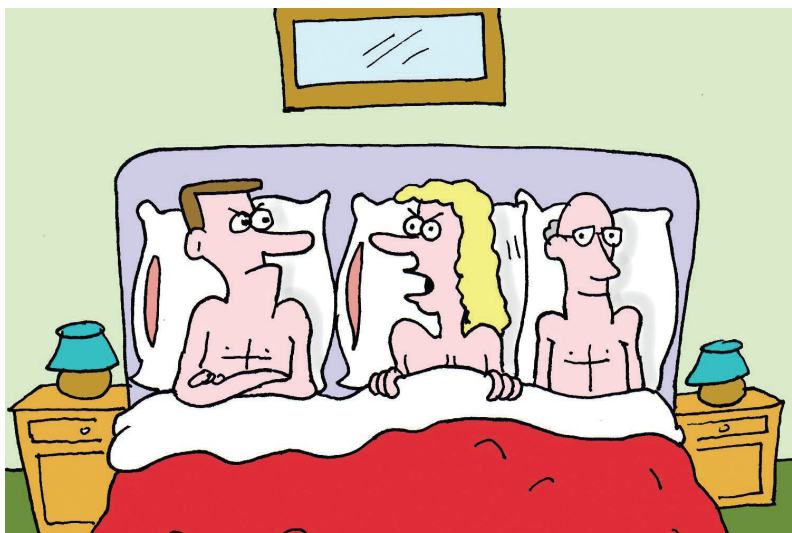
The pain of the founder is matched only by the discomfiture of those to whom it falls to continue the work, who may well find themselves troubled and fearful of the onset of the much-trumpeted ‘founder syndrome’.

It is indeed a terrible affliction which can show up in the form of unpredictable meddling and misplaced rash comments. Indeed the rash comments can spread fast and get everyone scratching. Because this is an ailment not, as popularly imagined, carried by the founder alone but by all.

So you may see it also showing up in a less immediately visible but no less pernicious form – the loss of the unique contribution which a founder can continue to make. A reservoir of goodwill and energy gone to waste.

Well here’s the good news: there is a readily available and quite acceptably tasting medicine – which (although it can still work after many years) is most effective if taken before, during and after the critical time of transition to the founder’s successor.

*“Does your founder have to get involved in everything that you do?”*



This founder syndrome medicine comes in a bottle labelled ‘Drink me’.

- A wise founder will decide to disappear off the scene for a while – a trip across Africa for example or immersion in a new cause. In any event, get out of the way for six months to give the new torch-bearer a chance to get their hands on the torch.
- It’s hard for a founder, whose life and identity has been completely wrapped up in a cause, and a new chief executive who is keen to make their own mark, to have an uncluttered and straightforward conversation. So don’t leave it to them to flounder – this is a perfect role for a trustee to initiate and host their conversations.
- Out of these conversations may come a plan for a clear role for the founder – not a made-up-just-to-keep-them-quiet project but a real one which draws on their skills and special position. Their involvement was 100 per cent and it’s a waste to let it crash to zero per cent.
- Making sure the medicine is taken is the province of leading trustees. This is the time for the chair and vice chair to be visible and to model the patience and generosity which will help it slip down nice’n’easy.
- Consider honouring the founder and indeed others who may have been around him or her who also put their heart and soul into it with symbolic positions. ‘Founding ambassador’ may go down well and respects their contribution forever.

Honour the past and plan for the future. This is a medicine for the whole charity to take, not just the founder, as it is the whole organisation which is afflicted. Drinking it will help everyone grow bigger and stronger. ●

**Martin Farrell**  
 Chair, Read International  
[martin.farrell@get2thepoint.org](mailto:martin.farrell@get2thepoint.org)