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How Does Founder Syndrome Affect Makerspaces?

Mark Randall Havens △ The Empathic Technologist · 5 min read · Mar 8, 2022

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A makerspace that doesn't work towards its overall mission operates based on the personality of a highly invested prominent person in the organization, such as the founder, the board chair/president, or some other key influential member of the space.

The syndrome is more an organizational problem than a problem with the highly invested person. Makerspaces must go through a life-cycle change to stay relevant. There may be a shift from do-cratic, entrepreneurial growth to well planned, managed growth.

This development must, however, be preceded by the establishment of a stable administrative infrastructure. In order to build this infrastructure, the highly invested influential person often has to change from a reactive, individualistic style of leadership to a more proactive, consensus-oriented style.

Many people cannot make this transition. As a result, the makerspace can remain in a state of ego-driven, reactionary management, and not in a manner that provides a stable community or a desirable place to make things. The culture of the makerspace can take on a spirit of paranoia, engage in foolish rivalries, and even escalate to fraud, frivolous lawsuits, slander, libel, schoolyard namecalling, and even the incitement of uninformed bystanders against innocent victims.

Founder Syndrome doesn't just happen with makerspaces. It happens with virtually all organizations. And again, a company combatting Founder Syndrome need not be at the mercy of a founder. It can be any highly

invested person within the organization that has the means to influence change.

CASE STUDY: The LeCody Anti-Pattern

Between 2011 and 2016, Andrew LeCody (a.k.a. aceat64) served as President of Dallas Makerspace. His appointment as president was uncontested, and he was well trusted by the membership at the time. He stayed as president for five years. In those years, he formed a lot of the daily management policy, and a lot of it stuck for years after he left. LeCody had no notable business management experience before Dallas Makerspace, and when his competence was challenged, he introduced policies meant to eliminate dissenting voices. Abandoning many of the values that made joining Dallas Makerspace a desirable thing, like openness and freedom of expression, he weaponized the rules that were supposed to bring harmony and friendship. He used new and existing rules to punish and push out people he deemed undesirable.

The chairman of a Dallas Makerspace committee once raised concerns about various poor business practices and called Andrew LeCody "incompetent." Despite the chairman's valid concerns, he was swiftly expelled for life by an expulsion campaign led by Andrew LeCody.

Andrew LeCody once filed a frivolous defamation suit against four former board members who had him expelled for interfering with company business. In order to divide loyalties between the former board (which stepped down voluntarily) and a new board, LeCody organized a proxy campaign amidst his expulsion.

In the years that his litigation escalated tensions between the old board and the new, Mr. LeCody ultimately failed to prevail, at least on its face. The real victory was in using frivolous litigation as a strategy to divide the Dallas Makerspace leadership community. This was mostly a revenge-seeking and self-serving act, yet maintained in a shroud of justice in order to gain support. Founder Syndrome is known for its various degrees of Machiavellian viciousness like this. And throughout this tug-of-war for member loyalty, the membership unraveled, destroying innovation and ultimately, the Dallas Makerspace community at large. The egotistical pettiness, narcissistic determination to make false claims about his status and contributions, along with a propaganda campaign meant to maintain some semblance of control over the direction of the organization, all contributed to membership disillusionment of how things should be run. It cost LeCody a lot. It cost Dallas Makerspace a lot. And more than anything else, our community suffered. As a result of claims of fraud, for those in the know, Dallas Makerspace's reputation plummeted to an all-time low. Impropriety became the expected state of affairs for this once proud and

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prominent organization. Members of Dallas Makerspace, once happy and welcomed, became alienated. Hundreds of Dallas Makers scattered throughout the other Makerspaces in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, unable or unwilling to step foot on Dallas Makerspace property ever again.

While not a founder of Dallas Makerspace, Andrew LeCody meets the conditions of having Founder Syndrome. He is highly invested, remaining, to some degree, influential among a small handful of leadership-minded people within the Dallas Makerspace leadership community.

Founders Syndrome is no one's fault–Andrew LeCody did not set out to damage Dallas Makerspace. Those with Founders Syndrome, like Andrew LeCody believe they are trying to protect it. But in reality, they are invested in protecting only their vision and remain blinded to the damage they are doing to the organization they claim to love.

Eventually, other stakeholders should confront the person responsible for these types of recurring problems. Often, this person will become increasingly anxious, defensive, and paranoid. They may resort to blaming board members, former leadership, volunteers, or even outside parties. Without constructive coaching or support, it's likely that such a person will need to be removed from influence, or else the makerspace will become nonviable for retaining membership and will ultimately fold.

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Tell me what you think. What is your take on makerspace Founder Syndrome? What do you think can be done to mitigate Founder Syndrome at a makerspace?

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Mark Havens is the Founder and Executive Director of Dallas Maker Community (DMC), a nonprofit organized to bootstrap Dallas Makerspace, the largest all-volunteer makerspace in the United States. DMC continues reformed efforts to provide maker-focused marketing and makerspace leadership education to other maker-centric organizations throughout North Texas.

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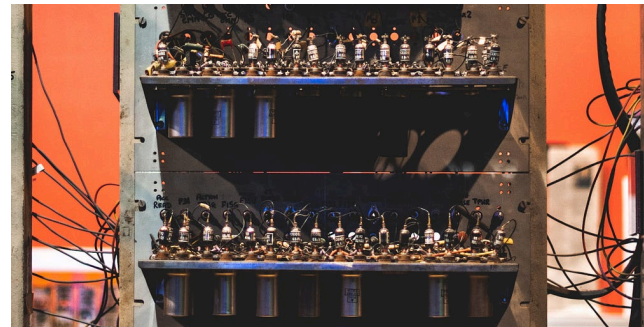
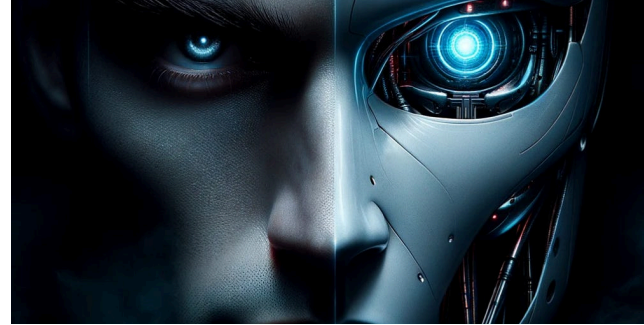## Programming in the 1950s: A Look at the Most Popular Languages

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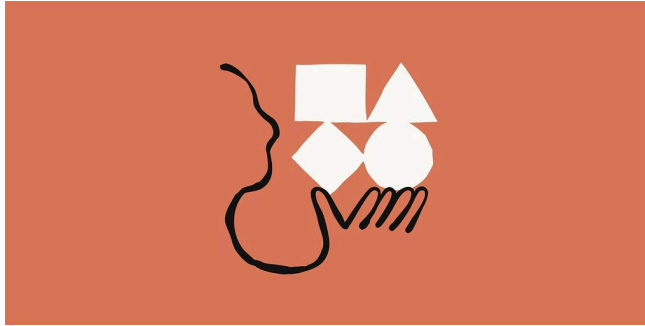
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