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# Hope for the Future

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## Abstract

Jan often thinks about the professional development meeting she attended in 2005 when she and a group of fellow teachers learned about the extent of poverty and homelessness in their school district. They were all shocked to learn that in their community of 26,000 people, 21 were homeless. Students in the community were reaching out to teachers and cafeteria workers for basic necessities like winter coats and extra food to take home for the weekend so they didn't go hungry. "This is unacceptable. We have to do something about it," Jan, a long time high school English teacher, shared with her coworkers.

## Keywords

Transformational leadership, grassroots leadership, grassroots organizations, bonafide group perspective, and recruiting and socialization

## Disciplines

Educational Leadership | Educational Sociology | Family, Life Course, and Society

## Comments

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## **Hope for the Future\***

By

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Jan often thinks about the professional development meeting she attended in 2005 when she and a group of fellow teachers learned about the extent of poverty and homelessness in their school district. They were all shocked to learn that in their community of 26,000 people, 21 were homeless. Students in the community were reaching out to teachers and cafeteria workers for basic necessities like winter coats and extra food to take home for the weekend so they didn't go hungry. "This is unacceptable. We have to do something about it," Jan, a long time high school English teacher, shared with her coworkers.

Her friend, Nancy, was sympathetic, "I agree with you but we're already strapped for time as it is. I know you are the champion of good causes but honestly what can *we* do?" That night Jan went home and spent a sleepless night pondering just that question.

### **Creation of the Hope Foundation**

The next day in the break room, Jan approached a few co-workers with her idea. "I couldn't sleep last night because all I could think about were the homeless students we have in our school," Jan started. "I just don't understand how we didn't know how much some of the families in our district are struggling. But I came up with a plan. We will organize a silent auction of donated gift baskets. For example, someone could donate a "Tea Time" basket complete with various varieties of tea, mugs, and a kettle. All of the proceeds will go to help families in our community. When teachers recognize a student need, they will come to one of us to nominate them for help. Families cannot ask us directly for help; they have to be nominated

by a member of the school staff. We will be the board. Ultimately, we will provide one-time help to families in need. I would like to have our event right around Christmas time so people can purchase the baskets for holiday gifts. That leaves us a little over a month to make it happen. So, who is with me?"

Nancy and Claire both agreed to help. "It will be difficult, but it might also be really fun," Nancy said.

### **Growing Hope**

Jan and the teachers of Glenview Community School formed what they eventually called the Hope Foundation. The first year they had a goal of raising \$1,000 to help students and their families. Instead, they were able to raise almost \$15,000, and they helped about 30 families. Now, almost ten years later, with the help of other teachers and community members, they have given away roughly \$280,000, and they help over 100 families each year. The mission of the Hope Foundation is to help struggling families get by and to show them that their educators care about them. To that end, families have received help in the form of gas cards to help absorb the cost of traveling to medical treatments, one-time rent and mortgage payments, utility payments, and groceries, to name just a few.

Over the years, the Foundation has overcome many challenges. At first, people in the community didn't know anything about them or the resources they provided. They had to communicate their mission to the school community, the town, and families who might need assistance. Building community trust was an important part of their growth and success. Part of that trust came from having an established core group involved in organizing the Foundation into a 501(c)(3) organization. Community members knew that the money they donated was being

used to help people in their community instead of going to administrative overhead or being sent to help people outside the community.

Another challenge the Foundation overcame was creating a system that could move quickly so help didn't get tied down in bureaucratic red tape. They recognized that if a child needs a winter coat, she doesn't need it in a few months; she needs it right now. Once a school staff member refers a family to members of the Foundation board, the board generally is able to approve the request and fill the need within 24-48 hours. This quick turnaround is accomplished through meticulous record keeping, frequent face-to-face and email communication between members, and a shared understanding of rules for who they help and how. The Foundation asks teachers and staff to keep their eyes and ears open to student and community needs. For example, if a student didn't complete homework because her electricity was shut off and she didn't have light to read her book, the teacher will tell a board member, and the board will check records and communicate about whether or not to approve the request. Once approved for assistance, a member of the board will contact the utility company for the balance and provide a check directly to the utility company. All members are informed about support provided. If there are any questions about resources or support, members consult with one another so that mutual agreements can be reached.

Although they have experienced quite a bit of turnover for peripheral roles like web designer, most of the original Foundation board has remained intact, even though two of the members, Jan and Nancy, were now retired. Despite these changes and challenges, they have worked well together over the years, and the organization runs smoothly. They believed they work so well together because of their different strengths. Jan always joked that she likes the party, but Nancy and Claire pay attention to the technical elements of the Foundation. Jan

readily told others that she may be the idea person, but without detail-oriented members like Nancy and Claire, they would sink. The board was proud of their accomplishments but also realized that some changes need to be made to strengthen the organization even more, especially as their leadership retires from teaching. They decided to discuss the challenges they were facing at their next meeting.

### **The Meeting**

Jan called their meeting to order and shared their year-end summary. “As you know, last year was one of our best ones yet. We raised almost \$40,000. We had many referrals from teachers and helped 102 families. Overall, I think we had a fantastic year.” Jan paused while they gave each other high fives, and then continued. “We have come so far since our first year of not really knowing what we were doing. Can you imagine trying to get the event off the ground in one month now? Crazy!” Jan exclaimed. “That being said, it’s time to start talking about this year’s Hope Festival,” she continued. “Claire, how are basket sign-ups going?”

“Good overall,” explained Claire, “However, it seems like our donations are down a bit. There have also been fewer people signing up to help on our Google Doc.”

Claire hesitated so Nancy picked up where she trailed off. “Well, I think we need to reorient the teachers about what we do and what we need. We need to work on getting them more involved. They are usually happy to help out, but just like everyone, they are busy so we need to give them a nudge to help each year. I think now that two of us are retired, it does impact our connection to the school just by us not physically being there. I really do.”

“I have thought a lot about that.” Jan sighed. “We are a complex little ‘business.’ If we do transition out of active roles in the Foundation, we have to have people on the board who can maintain our standards of confidentiality. We don’t want someone who will blab about the

families we have helped. We also need people who will stay on for a while. The leadership on the board can't change every year, or there won't be consistency. Our foundation works because the teachers know who to contact if they have a family who needs our help, and they trust us. If people change every year, teachers won't know who to go to, and the organization will suffer.

At the same time, I understand that we can't do this forever. We have been doing this for almost ten years now. Maybe it's time for us to move on. I'm really torn. I love what we have created together and really don't want to see it go up in a puff of smoke, especially when I know how much the Hope Foundation has benefitted our community. Plus, I would miss working with all of you! It's just hard because this is our baby. I realize that my vision might not be the same vision as a new person's vision, but their heart might still be in it just as much. It's just hard to think about someone else raising our baby. Claire, what do you think?"

After a brief pause, Claire started, "I have also sensed a bit of a change since you both retired. Jan, you are so good at getting people involved and motivated to help, so some of that momentum seems to be missing. What we need is another *you* in the school!" Everyone laughed at the idea of another Jan. She really was fearless when it came to asking people for donations or to help with their annual event. Claire continued, "All kidding aside, I cannot imagine the Hope Foundation without all of us together. Plus, I know the community really respects the way we do things, and I would worry that changes might result in a loss of community support. Without that, we would really be in trouble." They all shook their heads in agreement. Over the years the community had shown an outpouring of support. Even though it wasn't a wealthy community, people were more than willing to donate money, gift baskets, supplies, publicity, and other resources.

“No matter what we decide,” Nancy continued, “we have to figure out how to get the teachers more involved this year so we can have another successful event. We spend so much time and effort recruiting volunteers each year. It would be nice if people would just help out each year.”

“I really think a lot of it comes down to teachers being busy already. Let’s face it; we all know firsthand that teachers are constantly being asked to help out in the community on their own time,” Jan shared. “Wow! We have identified some major issues to think about. We are facing a bit of a crossroads. We have been very successful over the past ten years but we need to think about the next ten years. The membership of the board is something we need to explore together to determine what makes the most sense for the organization moving forward. Getting and keeping volunteers is also an issue we need to address. In the interest of time, let’s table our discussion on both of these issues for today, but please do some thinking on these items, and let’s discuss them again at our meeting next month.” They all agreed to discuss it at the next meeting and moved on to discuss their annual event.

### **Changing of the Guard**

Jan left the meeting excited about their upcoming event but also with a bit of a heavy heart. “I know one day I will have to step down from my role in the foundation,” she thought. “But who will replace me? It has to be a certain type of person.” She let out an audible sigh. “Maybe we should ask if anyone is interested in being the leader of the board. Or it might be better to recruit people we think would do a good job. Maybe we could form an advisory board of founding members to oversee the new group. I just hope we find people who want what is best for Hope. It would be a shame for the community to lose such a great resource because we didn’t handle the transition well.”

Ideas and possibilities began to swim around in her head. She was in for another sleepless night pondering how they could sustain the organization they created long into the future.

### **Key Terms**

**Grassroots leadership:** individuals who orchestrate action and change but who don't hold formal roles of power and authority.

**Transformational leader:** courageous, change agents who inspire their followers to achieve organizational goals.

**Grassroots organization:** collection of people who come together at the local level to enact change and/or positively impact their community.

**Bona fide group perspective:** group members belong to multiple groups simultaneously and these memberships influence and shape each other.

### **Discussion Questions**

#### 1. Grassroots Organizations

- a. What kinds of communication strategies are most appropriate for a grassroots organization like the Hope Foundation?
- b. What are the strengths and/or weaknesses of the Hope Foundation as a grassroots organization?

#### 2. Leadership

- a. Is Jan an example of a transformational leader or does she better resemble a founder with a vision? Why or why not?
- b. Does the Hope Foundation need a transformational leader to take it new places once Jan steps down from her leadership role? Why or why not?

### 3. Group Membership

- a. To what extent does the bona fide group perspective help to inform this case?
- b. How should The Hope Foundation handle a possible shift in their board membership?
- c. How should the Hope Foundation address their difficulty with recruiting and keeping volunteers?

### 4. Sustainability

- a. The Hope Foundation has operated for ten years. What recommendations do you have to help them continue to live out their mission for many more years to come?

### Suggested Readings

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## **KEYWORDS**

Transformational leadership, grassroots leadership, grassroots organizations, bonafide group perspective, and recruiting and socialization

\*This case study is based on longitudinal research conducted on an organization created by a group of teachers in a small community to help families in their district. Interviews have taken place over the past three years. The data that informs this case comes from a recent series of interviews with the founders of this organization. See also Marshall, J. M. (2012). Grassroots philanthropy on the prairie. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 93(8), 34-38.