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Feature

Decolonize Your Board

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This article offers nine strategies to liberate board culture and provides a tool that boards may use to reflect on their own behavior and strengthen their culture.

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Illustration by Pierluigi Longo

Plenty of scholarly and research-driven articles have proposed how to develop rigorous systems and processes for effective board governance. However, these systems and processes must rest on a strong foundation of a healthy, productive board culture. Each board culture is uniquely shaped by board members' ideologies and beliefs, as well as their relationships with nonprofit leadership and staff, external partners, and one another. A robust board culture can fuel board effectiveness and help nonprofits achieve their mission in sustainable ways.

This article advocates for a vision of board service that disrupts oppressive mindsets and behaviors, using the concepts of colonization and liberation to improve board culture so that the nonprofits those boards serve can achieve their missions. Certainly, an unavoidable power dynamic exists between a nonprofit's leadership and board. The CEO, after all, reports to the board. However, the distinction I am making concerns *how* that dynamic can play out in a way that does not replicate or perpetuate harmful, discriminatory biases or behaviors.

This article draws from my decade-plus of experience as both a board member and an independent consultant. I have served on several nonprofit boards (often as board chair, officer, or committee chair) and have experienced a variety of board cultures, which have yielded different kinds of successes and challenges. As an independent consultant, I work with many nonprofits to develop their strategic plans and then engage their boards in understanding their role to lead and support those plans.

COLONIZED VS. DECOLONIZED BOARDS

A nonprofit board has two primary roles. First, the board advances the mission, vision, and values of the nonprofit it serves, in strategic partnership with the leadership team. In this role, the board focuses on the nonprofit's greatest aspirations and long-term opportunities. The board's second role is to govern the nonprofit by establishing policy; ensuring compliance with laws and regulations; stewarding the nonprofit's assets; and guiding, supporting, and evaluating the CEO. Ultimately, the board works with leadership to navigate the landscape of their field by identifying growth opportunities, improving programming, mitigating risk, and achieving sustainability.

Colonizing behavior shows up on boards in many ways. Colonization occurs through dominance, exploitation, and even occupation. Relationships are colonized when one person or group of people prioritizes hierarchy and power over equitable relationships, outcomes, and sustainability. On colonized boards, members may ignore or devalue the expertise, knowledge, and guidance of the leadership team and/or attempt to influence action that contradicts the nonprofit's mission. They may advocate for their own positions without listening to and learning from their board colleagues or their leadership team. They may talk to funders about their own vision or strategy for the nonprofit, rather than the way the leadership team frames the work—a covert way of usurping the CEO's leadership. Members of colonized boards often see board discussions as debates that they must win, not as a collaborative process to determine the best course of action.

Within a colonized culture, a leadership team is often left confused, angry, exhausted, and demoralized. When boards are colonized, the relentless focus on where power resides and how to wield it can impede progress toward the nonprofit's mission.

A decolonized board, by contrast, is founded on values of mutual respect, honesty, integrity, and transparency in communication between the nonprofit's board and leadership. Both the board and the leadership center the nonprofit's mission in every conversation and balance outcomes of the work with the well-being of the team, relationships with stakeholders, and the sustainability of the nonprofit. Members serving on decolonized boards are excited both by what they can learn from working with the nonprofit and by how they can be a part of governance that advances the mission. They bring their best thinking to every board discussion and view challenges as problems to solve through collaboration.

Board members lead in service to the nonprofit's mission and community that it serves. This approach to leadership means that decolonized boards focus on facilitating the team's effectiveness. This does not mean that the board should simply defer to the leadership team's wishes. Rather, the board should create the conditions that the leadership team needs to operate the nonprofit with integrity, agility, and innovation.

To illustrate the strategies and tactics of decolonized board service, I have created a fictional story about a nonprofit organization called Sanctuary and its board of directors. The story describes nine examples of how nonprofit boards may be colonized and includes strategies for liberating it. The issues the case describes are commonly experienced by nonprofit leaders and their boards.

NINE LIBERATORY STRATEGIES

The characters in this case include Sanctuary CEO Gail Martinez and seven board members: Juanita Jackson (board chair), Clayton Smith, Mike Langley, Joe Costello, Lena Davis, Lisa Wilmer, and Elizabeth Bautista.

Sanctuary's mission is to address housing insecurity in Detroit, Michigan, by providing temporary housing and wraparound services to single mothers and their children under 16. Martinez founded Sanctuary in 2008. Since then, the nonprofit has served more than 1,000 Detroit families and has strong outcomes to show for its work. Within three years of receiving support from Sanctuary, 73 percent of families move on to long-term housing and economically sustainable jobs. Sanctuary's work is multigenerational as well. Recent data show that the children whom Sanctuary has served completed high school at rates that far exceeded those of other adolescents navigating housing insecurity. They were also less likely to have interactions with the police and had lower rates of drug misuse and teenage pregnancy. By 2019, Sanctuary had grown to an operating budget of $4 million and had achieved two new milestones of financial stability. First, its funder pipeline was healthier than it had ever been, with four highly likely funding opportunities greater than $250,000. Additionally, Sanctuary's net asset balance moved from negative to positive in the previous fiscal year.

The story begins just after Martinez hires a consultant to create a strategic plan. After an in-depth inquiry with Sanctuary's funders, clients, and staff and a detailed analysis of need and opportunity in major cities across the United States, the consultant presents the Sanctuary leadership team with a strategic plan to expand Sanctuary's services to five new cities over five years.

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1. Be part of the solution.

Martinez presented the strategic plan at the March board meeting. While the board was excited about the opportunity to expand nationally, several questions emerged. Most important, the board was concerned that Martinez had not cultivated national funders and that expansion seemed unlikely without them.

In the meeting, Davis said, "I worry that we are setting grand plans for growth, but this leadership team doesn't have the capacity to deliver." Martinez acknowledged that Sanctuary would have a steep hill to climb but returned to the findings in the strategic plan: Several midsize cities across the country had both the acute need and the conditions in place for a program like Sanctuary's to thrive. Davis ignored this information and whispered audibly to Langley, "I've been trying to introduce Gail to my friends at the Harris Foundation for years, but she's always been too busy. And here we are."

After the board meeting, Smith pulled Martinez aside. "I'm having dinner with an old friend next week. He's now a senior program officer at the McClain Foundation and is interested in building a portfolio of programs serving the housing-insecure. Let me see what I can do."

In this first vignette, Sanctuary faces the obstacle of not having funders in place to support its national expansion. Board members with colonizing mindsets point fingers and focus on fault. In the board discussion, Davis is frustrated that Martinez declined her offer to network with a new foundation. She not only makes her point publicly to the full board but disrespects Martinez and the rest of the board by then making a derisive comment to another board member in a stage whisper that all can hear. In contrast, Smith thinks about how his own network can help to advance the nonprofit's work.

Together, a board and leadership team can create an inspiring vision. That's the easy part. Along the way, obstacles inevitably arise. Board members can help liberate their nonprofit by focusing on solutions. Help chart a path forward and find your own role in helping the nonprofit move along that path.

2. Lead with abundance.

Three months after the March meeting, Sanctuary was in serious talks about expanding to Kansas City, Missouri. In her network-building efforts, Martinez learned about another organization, KC Jobs, that provided job placement services to homeless youth in Kansas City. She saw partnership opportunities. Working with KC Jobs could help ensure that the adolescent children in the families she would serve could access steady employment and begin to build their résumés. However, the philanthropic community in Kansas City was small, and she was concerned

that developing such a partnership would reduce the amount of funding she could otherwise receive from local foundations. Splitting grants across multiple organizations was always tricky.

When Martinez met with the CEO of KC Jobs, Ed Washington, he also saw enormous potential in working with Sanctuary. He invited Martinez to join him at an event for Kansas City Family Foundations. When he introduced Martinez to funders, he talked about the compounding benefits for families of having both safe housing and a reliable income. "If KC Jobs and Sanctuary work together to support Kansas City families, we can reduce the number of chronically homeless families in our city by half in 10 years." Martinez and Washington left the event with four new foundations to cultivate as donors.

In this example, Martinez shows a colonized mindset when she hesitates to partner with Washington, believing that the funding opportunities could not expand to serve a shared vision of two organizations. However, Washington shows an abundant, liberated mindset when he presents funders with a more inspiring vision of what becomes possible when Sanctuary and KC Jobs work together. Collaboration results in greater funding than either organization might have been able to raise on its own.

Nonprofits are notoriously underfunded and frequently feel competitive with other nonprofits who have a similar mission. Colonized leadership teams and boards alike remain entrenched in this scarcity mindset, which can ironically limit their horizons and therefore their influence. Liberate yourself from a competitive mindset. Consider who the significant players are in the landscape and where your field is moving. Then look for funders and collaborators who share your big vision for the world. While being fiscally responsible is important, you must not lose sight of the big vision. An abundance mindset will inspire your leadership team, your funders, and your collaborators.

Setting up the right systems, processes, roles, and responsibilities enables everyone to be clear about how, when, and why to show up.

3. Share the work.

At the next board meeting, in July, Martinez further clarified the path for expansion. She talked about the trade-offs of different types of growth, conditions for success in new cities, building local foundation support, and the staffing required for success. She also proposed timelines and metrics for expansion. This growth plan inspired the McLain Foundation, a national philanthropy focused on scalable approaches to ending poverty, and Sanctuary was now in its pipeline for a $2 million grant.

Most of the board responded enthusiastically. However, Davis voiced her concerns that expanding to new cities would take attention away from Detroit and that Sanctuary's flagship operation would suffer. Despite this concern, the board agreed to create an ad hoc committee to evaluate 10 potential cities for expansion, using a rubric of the conditions of success Martinez had identified. The committee included three board members: Chair Juanita Jackson, Mike Langley, and Joe Costello.

The committee planned to meet monthly before the next board meeting. However, Costello missed two of the meetings and joined via phone for the third. Since Jackson was already spread thin with her duties as chair, Langley carried most of the load. He worked with Sanctuary's chief program officer to refine the rubric, reviewed the data that the leadership team collected on potential cities, pressure-tested the options, and coplanned the board presentation. Langley felt as though he had taken on another full-time job and expressed his frustration to Martinez and Jackson.

Jackson reached out to Costello to voice her concern about his low engagement. Costello said, "I'm doing what I can, Juanita, but I'm traveling a lot these days." Jackson responded, "Okay, Joe, I hear you. But let's schedule a meeting to talk about how you're feeling about being on this board. Your first term is ending in a few months, so this seems like a good time to think together about whether you can meet the expectations we hold for board members."

In this vignette, Costello is either unwilling or unable to do his share of the work. Board members on colonized boards don't prioritize the committee or board meetings, let alone volunteer to attend evening events with stakeholders or celebrations of staff. Furthermore, board leadership with colonized boards are often unsure how to hold their board members accountable for this behavior, given that board service is voluntary. Decolonized boards set a culture of mutual accountability. Jackson addresses Costello's behavior respectfully and kindly but head-on. She lets him know that she understands his position but will not compromise her expectations for board engagement.

Setting up the right systems, processes, roles, and responsibilities enables everyone on a board to be clear about how, when, and why to show up. If you are the board chair or governance committee chair, communicate expectations for board service clearly when board candidates are being vetted, so all board members understand the time required to serve the board well. It's much easier to hold members accountable when you've been transparent about your expectations. And all board members should take seriously their commitments to participate in committees, attend events, and share the work.

4. Engage productively in the process.

At the September board meeting, the leadership team and expansion committee came prepared to work with the board to winnow a list of 10 potential expansion cities to 5, using the rubric they cocreated. The expansion committee guided the board to hold at the center of their decision-making Sanctuary's mission of providing housing and wraparound services to single mothers and their children.

Costello, who had missed most of the previous committee meetings and had not reviewed the prereading for this agenda item, began by pushing for Memphis because he knew powerful people there. He repeatedly interjected with his views about how each city was a poorer option than Memphis, often using new criteria that were not in the rubric.

After 40 minutes, Jackson turned to Wilmer, who had been listening intently, to ask her to share her thoughts. Wilmer said, "I really appreciate all of the nuanced research that went into creating this rubric. I think it's thoughtfully developed, and it helped highlight a few things. It appears that we have a few criteria that we might weigh more heavily than the others. For example, a strong local philanthropic community and supportive public policy for homeless families could really make or break our success. The expansion committee rated Denver and Oklahoma City green on both of those criteria, so those cities seem to merit further research. However, Kansas City was rated yellow on public policy, so if we decide to move forward there, we may need to cultivate some partnerships to help shore up policymaking. Joe, I know you're excited about Memphis, but it's rated yellow and red on those two criteria. In my view, it's just not as strong an option as some of these other cities. Regardless of the cities we select, we'll need to develop tailored plans for each so that we can capitalize on the green criteria and mitigate the risks of the other criteria."

By the end of the discussion for this agenda item, the board was able to winnow the list of 10 options to 6 finalists. Memphis wasn't one of them. Costello was silent for the rest of the meeting.

Costello's behavior is challenging for two reasons. First, he contradicts the expansion committee's findings despite the fact that he served on that committee and helped to design the evaluation rubric. Additionally, he repeatedly hijacks the conversation to try to influence the board toward his own way of thinking. On a colonized board, the power balance is unequal. Some board members dominate the conversation, while others sit quietly, unsure of when and whether their ideas have merit. When Jackson finally intervenes and invites Wilmer, a quieter board member, to join the discussion, Wilmer moves the board conversation forward, helping the group to come to a shared decision based on the work of the committee. Additionally, it's important to note that Wilmer challenged ideas but not individuals.

A board is a community of people, composed of a broad variety of experiences and expertise, who share governance for a nonprofit. The most effective boards ensure that all of these voices are heard in board discussions. Board chairs can decolonize their board by leaning into the facilitative aspects of their leadership role. Rather than always jumping in to add to a board meeting or allowing more vocal board members to take over the conversation, effective board chairs synthesize the important ideas, invite quieter board members into the discussion, and redirect conversations that veer away from the guiding questions or goals of the agenda item.

Further, board members must always ask difficult questions, but tone matters. Board members can help decolonize a board by making clear to colleagues that they are focusing on arriving at the best solution and by asking questions that move the conversation forward.

5. Let the mission set the agenda.

After the board meeting, Martinez asked Davis to speak with their largest funder in Detroit and provide an update on Sanctuary's growth plans. This was an important conversation because Sanctuary was in the process of securing additional funding with the foundation. Martinez requested that Davis help the foundation maintain its confidence in the work Sanctuary was doing in Detroit and feel proud about how success in Detroit could seed good work elsewhere.

When Davis spoke with the foundation's project officer, Sally Harlow, however, she did the opposite. Davis said, "I've seen nonprofits drop the ball in their home communities when they get distracted by the next shiny thing. My commitment to you is that we won't let that happen to Detroit. Frankly, I think our outcomes are good, but they could be better. If we got that right, we could simply package our model and sell it to other nonprofits in other cities. This would introduce an earned-income stream for Sanctuary and would be a whole lot less risky." Harlow was rapt, so Davis continued, "I serve on another board, with a college-readiness mission. I'd love to see Sanctuary partner with them and start to measure college readiness as one of our own metrics of success."

The next day, Harlow emailed Martinez: "Hi, Gail, I hope you're well. Thanks for connecting me with Lena. We had a great conversation, but I still have some unanswered questions about Sanctuary's growth plan. Frankly, I'm concerned that aggressive growth could detract from your emerging outcomes in Detroit. I know you're eager to get moving on our next grant; however, I think we need to slow things down, given this new plan. Before I take your proposal to our board, can you put together a quick memo with some of the growth details? In particular, the memo should clearly articulate your plan to sustain staffing and other resources in Detroit while Sanctuary invests in growth. And can you refresh my memory about Sanctuary's metrics of success? I would love to think together about whether they are still relevant. Lena raised some really interesting ideas about the nexus between housing insecurity and educational outcomes, such as college readiness, and I'm curious about your thoughts. Let me know if you have any questions. Best, Sally."

Martinez was stunned. The request for such a memo felt like unconstructive busywork. However, since this funding was contingent on such a memo, she felt as if she had no choice but to prepare it.

In this vignette, Davis not only goes off-script but also uses Sanctuary's precious time with a funder to advance a different agenda. This single conversation has significant negative consequences for Martinez and her team. Harlow introduces a new hurdle before Sanctuary can earn its next grant, and Davis seeds doubts in Harlow's mind about the quality of Sanctuary's work in Detroit and the wisdom of expanding. Unfortunately, Martinez has no choice but to craft the memo and then work to rebuild the foundation's confidence in the high quality of Sanctuary's work in Detroit, even as it expands to serve other cities.

Board members are often tasked with representing their nonprofits to important stakeholders. All members must share consistent messages informed by those actually doing the work—the leadership team and staff. Decolonize your board by remembering that you are there to advance the nonprofit's mission. When asked to speak on behalf of the nonprofit, start by asking the leadership team to describe the goal of the conversation and how it advances the program and mission. Ask for and follow the talking points. Board chairs can ensure consistency of board voice by including opportunities for the board

to practice talking points and "elevator pitches" together during regular board meetings or at annual board retreats.

6. Upend traditional power dynamics.

A new board member, Elizabeth Bautista, joined the December board meeting. Bautista was 13 years old when her family connected with Sanctuary in 2008. Her parents had immigrated from the Philippines, and when her father died of pancreatic cancer a year after they arrived, her mother struggled to keep their home and her job. With Sanctuary's help, Bautista had stable housing and was able to access mental health support and school tutoring. She graduated at the top of her class in high school and earned a full scholarship to Michigan State University. After graduation, she returned to Detroit, where she worked as a financial analyst. Bautista joined the board both for her professional growth and because of her personal connection to the mission.

When the board discussion turned to expansion, Bautista said, "I don't see any analysis on the strengths, hopes, or needs of the housing-insecure for any of these cities. We don't yet have a nuanced understanding of who these families are, where they come from, or how they have been resilient. Once we know all of that, we can start tailoring our program for each city and building a financial model for expansion. I think we'll need a different model for each city; then we can roll up to a complete expansion model. That way, we can look at how different cities will impact our overall economics."

A nonprofit that hopes to "center equity" in its work must consider whose values, histories, and aspirations set the vision of the work.

Bautista's strengths as a board member are immediately apparent because her proximity to the families that Sanctuary serves and her finance expertise illuminate an important aspect of successful growth: A one-size-fits-all approach is rarely successful.

To decolonize your board, put in place a board recruiting process that intentionally seeks out the wisdom, experience, and expertise of the communities for which you work. Then listen to and incorporate their guidance in board decision-making.

This step is important because nearly every nonprofit now seems to include "equity" in its mission. It's worth pausing to think about what that term truly means. Beyond just diversity or inclusion, the word "equity" introduces notions of agency, self-determination, and liberation. That is, when society is truly equitable, all individuals, families, and communities have what they need to choose their own path and achieve the goals they set for themselves. Therefore, a nonprofit that hopes to "center equity" in its work must consistently consider whose values, histories, and aspirations set the vision of the work; who decides which outcomes matter; who controls the resources to get to those outcomes; who designs the processes; who builds and sustains the systems; and who measures its success. And to do that, it must engage those most closely aligned with its leadership and governance.

7. Share your networks.

Over the next several months, the board finalized five cities for expansion, developed an implementation plan and financial model for each, and agreed that Kansas City would be Sanctuary's first expansion site. Martinez then asked board members to reach out to their connections in Kansas City so that she could build a local network. Davis had an old friend who led a venture capital firm in Kansas City, but she didn't contact him because she thought the expansion was risky. Several months later, her friend mentioned to her that he had given $50,000 to a local homeless shelter in Kansas City. Davis then told him about Sanctuary and confessed that she had been unsure about pitching him on the idea. "Man, I wish you had told me about this sooner," the friend replied. "I know expansion is risky, Lena, but there's risk in everything. That's my job. I place bets on good risks."

In this vignette, Davis shies away from talking to someone in her network about Sanctuary's growth plans because she fears that if Sanctuary fails, it will reflect poorly on her and harm that relationship. However, because this friend has long been passionate about supporting the needs of families facing housing insecurity, he knows how to vet the nonprofits he supports. She doesn't need to protect him.

Helping your nonprofit expand funding, hire successfully, increase its visibility, and find partners is essential to achieving its mission. Holding back until all of the tough questions are answered can be tempting. But trust that people in your network can decide for themselves whether there is a partnership to pursue. Be generous in connecting your network—funders, potential collaborators, and prospective new hires—with the leadership of your board.

8. Respect the leadership team.

In Detroit, Sanctuary owned a 10,000-square-foot building, where it provided temporary housing to families. Sanctuary also leased some of this space to wraparound service providers, such as dentists, therapists, and tutoring services. The facility had a gym that offered yoga and other group exercise classes, swimming, and basketball.

Martinez believed that what made the Sanctuary model special was that it was a safe, comfortable, welcoming space for families and promoted physical and emotional well-being. However, Wilmer was concerned that Sanctuary's balance sheet simply wouldn't allow for the purchase of such a facility in Kansas City. The March board meeting was heated; during it, Wilmer claimed, "You're not getting it! It's irresponsible for us even to consider buying a facility right now." She added, "Have you thought about how we're going to afford renovations and furnishings?" Martinez shot back, "We're not going to water down this model. We won't get the same outcomes, and that will hurt our reputation for treating our families with love and respect." No one seemed to know how to move the conversation forward.

Then Bautista broke the silence with what she hoped would be a constructive solution. "Gail, I joined this board because everything you do, you do at the highest quality. That's the reputation we need to protect and the standard we need to hold ourselves to. You've started to develop some really great relationships in Kansas City. Have we explored any long-term leases? Could we colocate with other organizations?"

The following week, Martinez and Bautista met to develop a list of banks, real estate developers, major nonprofits, and city council members who might work with them to solve their challenge. Together, they navigated the trade-offs and eventually found a terrific facility offering a 15-year lease that they could afford using creative funding. Martinez and Bautista celebrated the following Saturday with a champagne brunch.

In this example, the Sanctuary board faces the new challenge of replicating Sanctuary's facilities model in Kansas City—a proposal that seems financially untenable. It is a frightening prospect, given that the nonprofit has already agreed to move forward with expansion. Colonized boards believe that their fiduciary responsibility requires an adversarial stance with the CEO and the leadership team. They may fear that personal friendships with the executive director or others on the leadership team will make an uncomfortable decision-making situation even more difficult. Wilmer is focused solely on the impossibility of purchasing a facility and talks about the challenge as Martinez's, rather than a shared challenge. However, Bautista affirms the nonprofit's value of providing high-quality homes to the families it serves and then works with Martinez to find a solution that adheres to those values. One can imagine that over the following weeks, Bautista and Martinez work long days together to find the right facility. In the end, they not only find it but also strengthen their relationship. Their genuine affection for each other will make them stronger partners when they face the next hurdle.

Disagreements in board service are inevitable. But the goal is not to be right or to prove others wrong. The goal is to listen to the

Sample Board Culture Survey

Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements about the board's culture and climate using the following scale: 1 (Never), 2 (Rarely), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Usually), 5 (Always), or DK (Don't Know).

	1 Never	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Usually	5 Always	DK Don't Know
When problems arise, I am part of the solution.						
Our board actively looks for opportunities to collaborate with other mission-aligned nonprofits.						
I contribute the time needed to complete the tasks requested of me.						
The tone of board conversations is productive.						
I consider all voices in board conversations.						
When my own goals are in conflict with the organization's approach, my actions as a board member are guided by the organization's vision, mission, or strategy.						
Board conversations and decision-making authentically reflect the strengths, needs, and aspirations of the community closest to our mission.						
I am generous with my networks when it is time for fundraising or board recruitment.						
I have a warm relationship with the leadership team.						
Our board encourages rest and reflection.						
What additional comments would you like to share about this board's culture?						

wisdom in the room, which may come from the leadership team or other board members, to help move the organization to the best possible decision. Push the thinking of others, and allow them to push yours. Remember, the role of a board member is to facilitate the success of the nonprofit. And when disagreement occurs, it should happen from a place of respect.

The most effective boards—and the most fulfilling ones—are those on which the leadership team and board are in sync. This is not to say that they never disagree. However, when relationships are based on mutual respect, navigating conflict and finding solutions actually becomes easier.

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9. Value well-being.

A year and a half had passed since the strategic plan was presented to the board. Sanctuary was ready to open its doors in Kansas City and had a clear plan for implementation. And Martinez had begun to cultivate relationships in the next city: Denver.

At the next board meeting, Jackson led off by thanking Martinez for her leadership. In response, Martinez thanked the board for their kind words and for their commitment to the mission. But then she raised some personal concerns about their pace of expansion. "I want to talk to you all about taking a sabbatical. My daughter is leaving for college in three months. I feel like I missed the most important milestones of her senior year, and before she leaves home, it's important to us both that I spend some real time with her. And I'm tired. I need a break."

Martinez had discussed this with Jackson before the board meeting. Now Jackson chimed in. "There might be some wisdom in giving Kansas City more time to find its footing and ensuring that Detroit continues to thrive before we move on to a third market. There's nothing that says we can't extend the timeline of our strategic plan and prioritize quality above growth for a little while." By the end of the conversation, the board agreed to a three-month, fully paid sabbatical for Martinez. Langley made the final comment before the vote. "I feel good about this because we have such a strong leadership team."

Jackson and Martinez reached out to Sanctuary's funders, potential funders, and partners in Detroit and Kansas City to let them know about Martinez's sabbatical. All were supportive and agreed that the time-line shift would not negatively affect the work.

In this vignette, we are reminded that Sanctuary has had an incredibly busy 15 months. The nonprofit has engaged in a rigorous planning process and has launched a national expansion. The choice of expansion has been data-driven and intentional. Organizations are ultimately made up of real people who have lives beyond work. Martinez and Jackson have worked together to create a plan that will allow Martinez to have a restorative break while still enabling Sanctuary to operate successfully.

Rest and recovery are not anathema to excellence and high expectations. Cognitive science shows that rest helps people be more innovative, creative, and productive. When we allow ourselves to rest, we invest in not just our sustainability but the organization's sustainability as well. Board members can liberate their nonprofit from norms that demand endless growth, exponential achievement, and nonstop work. Ceaseless striving for growth and new achievement, year over year, actually chips away at a nonprofit's ability to have a transformative and lasting impact on its field. Nonprofit work is a marathon, not a sprint. Invest in periodic opportunities for the leadership team to restore themselves, both individually and collectively. Value retreats and sabbaticals. And show your appreciation.

THE DECOLONIZING PROCESS

A decolonized board advances the mission and goals of an organization and its leadership and enables them to accomplish their strategic plans. If a board suffers from a colonized mindset, taking steps to address it is vitally important.

The first step to decolonizing a board is establishing a baseline understanding of a board's culture. This inquiry should be designed according to your own board's needs and approach. I suggest a two-part process: a self-reflection activity and then a group discussion of the reflection. This can be done in conjunction with regular one-on-one meetings between board members and board leadership.

Part 1: Self-Reflection

Consider administering a brief survey as a simple reflection tool. (See "Sample Board Culture Survey" on page 32.) The sample I use applies a Likert scale, which asks board members to rate their level of agreement with 10 statements. This survey also includes a final, open-ended response question. Note that such a survey can easily be integrated into a board's larger annual self-evaluation survey, which may include questions about the technical aspects of board service, including board roles and responsibilities, board structure and composition, committee effectiveness, and board meeting effectiveness.

Part 2: Group Discussion

The governance committee should then synthesize the results of the survey and facilitate a discussion with the full board. The governance chair may bring the results to the chair and CEO first, to plan a facilitation strategy. Board members may wish to hold the discussion in an executive session, when the leadership team is not present. Finally, the board should consider allocating at least 45 to 60 minutes of the agenda for discussion. Here are a few high-level questions that could guide a board discussion about the survey responses:

- What strengths or assets are indicated?
- What opportunities for improvement are indicated?
- What surprised you?
- What goals should the board set to improve board culture?
- What is the action plan to address the outcomes of the survey? (The plan should clearly describe the strategies, who will lead them, and the milestones of progress.)

This process can be integrated into your annual board self-evaluation process, so that decolonizing your board becomes a part of your broader, continuous improvement process.

Board service can feel like a place of intractable conflict. Decolonizing board culture requires dedicated examination and reflection. The nine strategies of board liberation and the two-part process I have outlined offer pathways for decolonization. When board service is decolonized and a nonprofit's mission is truly liberated, the work can feel joyful, inspiring, and fulfilling. ■