

COMMENTARY

Leading by Example

by Yellow Light Breen, Jennifer Hutchins, and Marcia Sharp

In January 2018, the board of directors of Lift360 voted to cease operations and transfer its programs to the Maine Development Foundation (MDF) and the Maine Association of Nonprofits (MANP). Lift360 was a 25-year-old organization with three well-regarded programs—the flagship Institute for Civic Leadership Intensive, Emerging Leaders, and Springboard—and more than 1,000 alumni. Nonetheless, Lift360 had difficulty responding to Portland’s changing marketplace and expanding its geographic footprint. Exploring how Lift360’s board reached its decision and what led to the transfer of collaborative programs provides valuable lessons.

MISSION OVER ORGANIZATION

The Lift360 board put mission over organization. Through important difficult conversations, the board coalesced around its highest goal: to continue the programs by placing them together or separately to deliver the greatest value to the community, even if that meant closing the organization. The board sought partners that would honor Lift360’s central tenets of mission first, collaborative leadership, and community building, as well as commit to continuing opportunities for alumni engagement and statewide expansion. This approach—moving beyond a merger or ending the programs—was an exciting new option for the Lift360 board.

ADAPTIVE CHANGE

All three organizations stepped up to practice adaptive change. Leaders challenged themselves, their boards, and staff to embrace a change in plans and to imagine new solutions based on shared goals and aspirations. Lift360 did the seldom imaginable—it gave away its “children” to organizations that could better support and grow them. MANP stepped up to take on two programs that were clearly on mission, but not in its budget or plan, and which required the organization to refocus priorities on an enhanced vision for leadership development. MDF stepped up to offer the Leadership Intensive alongside its own Leadership Maine program, pursuing an opportunity to collaboratively apply best practices across programs, more clearly differentiate their curricula for participants and partners, and combine the impact of 1,100 Leadership Maine and 800 Leadership Intensive alumni.

TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY

All three organizations committed to trust and transparency to prevent cultural and stylistic differences from threatening the collaboration. MDF’s strong roots in Maine’s corporate business community sometimes led to a different communication style that sent unintended signals. MANP’s nature as a nonprofit membership organization was more circumspect. Lift360’s devotion to its three programs produced overly high expectations for control of future program delivery. Navigating these cultural differences to collaborate on a fast timetable—while negotiating the details of transfers—called for a high degree of transparency and trust.

Maine’s future depends on individual and organizational leaders who can skillfully navigate the challenges and opportunities that naturally arise as organizations face accelerating change. Ideally, this recent partnership serves as a useful example of making tough and creative choices, proceeding from trust, and staying focused on purpose. 🐟



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or background. He is CEO of the Maine Development Foundation, where he develops strategic direction, integration, and partnerships.



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Marcia Sharp became chair of the Lift360 Board of Directors in 2017. Throughout her career, she has been particularly interested in how nonprofit

and philanthropy organizations summon the will and vision to adapt to rapid change.