

Selfless Leadership: When to Leave Fingerprints



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If you're a fan of crime dramas, you're well aware that recovering fingerprints—the impressions left by the friction ridges (raised portion of the epidermis) of a human finger—is often an important part of a crime scene investigation. And when the identity associated with the fingerprints is revealed, it doesn't always match the initial suspect nabbed by law enforcement. According to the Wikipedia page on the topic, "Human fingerprints are detailed, nearly unique, difficult to alter, and durable over the life of an individual, making them suitable as long-term markers of human identity."

Leaving one's 'fingerprints' on an organization, versus a crime scene, is generally less sinister! The expression is used to describe the lasting impression and contributions of an employee or volunteer. For nonprofit leaders working in operations, such as finance, HR, risk management, and facility management, leaving an impression on a nonprofit is like leaving a legacy. Over the years I've heard many colleagues talk about their contributions to an organization's more efficient structure, to the modernization of key policies, or the rollout of consistent training and onboarding. Making a mission mark is something we should strive for and be proud of.

This week I've been reading *Good Counsel: Meeting the Legal Needs of Nonprofits*, by Lesley Rosenthal. I was fortunate to meet Lesley last week during a networking event for General Counsel who serve nonprofit missions. Lesley is the General Counsel of Lincoln Center in New York. In her chapter titled "Taking Charge of the Legal Function," Lesley writes, "Sometimes the best compliment a lawyer can get is that she left no visible fingerprints on a great new initiative." She recounts reading a journalist's review of Lincoln Center's redevelopment project, which included the following reference to Lincoln Center's roof top lawn: "Somehow the lawyers never got at this idea, never sank it with fears of imaginary dangers. It feels fresh and accidental, adolescent and fun."

Lesley's reminder that "sometimes the best legal review is invisible" is a timely tip for risk leaders. Author Bruce Kasanoff supplements this sentiment when he writes "...the fact is that you can accomplish much more, if you don't worry about taking the credit" in his piece ["The Incredible Power of Not Taking Credit."](#)

When to Leave Indelible Fingerprints

- **Say what?** – Risk policies for which there are bound to be questions and feedback should always include contact information for follow-up. Assuming that everyone will understand and happily comply with a new policy is naïve.

- **Controversy** – When a controversial new policy is unveiled, courageous leaders prepare for heat by acknowledging their role in its adoption. “Although the consequences are difficult, I felt this step was necessary to...”
- **In the Wake of a Mistake** – In their book *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*, authors Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson explore the human brain’s wiring for self-justification, and the self-deception that results when we shun blame. Effective, respected leaders acknowledge their fingerprints and roles when decisions backfire, so mistakes are understood in hindsight.

When to Let Your Fingerprints Fade

- **Almost Adopted** – When your team begins to take ownership of a risk management initiative, it’s time to fuel the buy-in and let them lead—even if it was your idea in the first place. Wipe your hands clean and let others imprint the finishing touch.
- **Give Credit Where It’s Due** – It’s rare that one lone person accomplishes something great. Share the glory—and admit that you shared the burden, too—by recognizing the many players involved in your success. Though your own fingerprints might fade slightly, your team will feel valued and connected, so you will all benefit tenfold.
- **Big Picture Plays** – Sometimes the catalysts of big picture, legacy changes are quickly forgotten as the change itself absorbs the spotlight and creates the desired impact. When we [shared insights](#) from Melanie Padgett’s article, “Executive Onboarding Lessons from Presidential Transitions,” we were surprised to learn that formal Presidential onboarding did not exist until the administration of George W. Bush. We didn’t know that President Bush and his team inspired this positive change, but we recognized that this shift probably made a positive, lasting effect on the Obama administration and hopefully the Federal Government’s service to the American people.
- **The Next Generation** – Passing the torch is always more important than taking credit or leaving your mark. One of my staff members is a fan of comic books and related film franchises like the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). She recently read an article about Marvel’s plan for the transition from “the greats” like Thor, Iron Man, and Captain America, to the MCU’s emerging heroes like Spiderman, Doctor Strange, and the Guardians of the Galaxy. Though it might be hard and even painful to watch beloved superheroes age out or pass away, the fate of the universe—and of your nonprofit—must be left in the next hero’s hands.

Knowing when to leave your fingerprints could be called a mark of a great leader—one who practices selfless leadership. Our fingerprints tell the story of our true motivations, whether those drivers are personal glory or altruistic service to the missions and communities we represent.

“Carve your name on hearts, not tombstones. A legacy is etched into the minds of others and the stories they share about you.” – Shannon L. Alder, author

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