



BUILD WHAT LASTS

Stewardship, leadership, culture, and legacy - building organizations capable of carrying their purpose into the next generation.

Are We Building the Future or Managing the Decline?

Organizations rarely become irrelevant all at once. They become irrelevant when yesterday's success prevents them from honestly confronting tomorrow.

There are churches that were once full of young families, children, energy, volunteers, and community influence. There are agricultural organizations that once represented a broad cross-section of producers, attracted emerging leaders, shaped important issues, and had members eager to participate. Many of those organizations still exist. They may have money in the bank, hold the same annual meeting, run the same programs, and rely on the same loyal members to faithfully show up.

And yet something important may be disappearing: fewer young people, fewer emerging leaders, less energy, less relevance, and leadership rotating among many of the same people. The organization is still functioning - but increasingly because a committed group of older members is keeping it functioning. Jim Collins' *How the Mighty Fall* offers a useful lens for this problem: decline can begin internally long before an organization looks like it is failing. The stewardship question becomes: **Are we carrying the organization into its next generation - or using its remaining strength to preserve the organization we remember?**

1

Past success can become the enemy of curiosity

Collins describes the first stage of decline as **Hubris Born of Success**. In a church or membership organization, it may sound less arrogant: **'We've always done it this way.'** **'This program used to draw 300 people.'** **'Young people just aren't willing to volunteer anymore.'** Some of those observations may contain truth. The danger is allowing yesterday's success to stop today's learning. A program that worked in 1995 may have been excellent - for 1995. Honoring tradition is different from assuming future generations should experience the organization exactly as previous generations did. Humility asks: **What did we get right, and what has changed enough that we need to learn again?**

ASK YOURSELF: Are we trying to understand today's members and community - or waiting for them to become more like the people who built the organization?

2

Activity can hide decline

Organizations in decline can be extraordinarily busy: meetings, committees, conferences, fundraisers, programs, newsletters, budgets, and traditions. The danger is measuring the continuation of activity instead of the creation of impact. For an agricultural organization: How many members are actively engaged? How many are under 40? Who is being developed for leadership? Does the organization represent the producers and businesses agriculture is becoming? For a church: Are new families becoming part of the community? Are children and younger adults present? Are they developing relationships and taking responsibility? **A shrinking group of faithful people can work very hard maintaining an organization that is still becoming weaker.**

ASK YOURSELF: If we stopped measuring how much we do and started measuring whether the organization is becoming stronger for the next generation, what would the numbers tell us?

3

Denial often sounds reasonable

Collins' third stage is **Denial of Risk and Peril**. Warning signs accumulate, but leaders explain them away: **'Young people don't join organizations.'** **'People aren't committed like they used to be.'** **'Church attendance is declining everywhere.'** **'Farmers are just too busy.'** External changes may be real. They become dangerous explanations when they eliminate organizational responsibility. If younger members have less time, how can they participate meaningfully with less time? If younger farmers do not want another monthly meeting, what other model creates value and belonging? If young families experience church differently, what helps them belong, contribute, grow, and lead? **Use change to understand the challenge, not to excuse the organization from adapting to it.**

ASK YOURSELF: Are we using changes in society to understand our challenge - or to excuse ourselves from adapting to it?



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4 Don't look for a savior. Rebuild the organization.

Collins describes Stage 4 as **Grasping for Salvation**: visible decline produces a search for a dramatic solution. For a declining organization it may sound like: **'We need a younger executive director.'** **'We need a new pastor.'** **'We need a social-media strategy.'** Those things may help, but none fixes a culture that communicates: **Younger people are welcome to participate as long as they do not change very much.** Recruiting a 35-year-old onto the board is not generational transition if that person quickly learns that meaningful decisions are still controlled elsewhere. The goal is not younger faces. It is an organization capable of sharing responsibility, authority, influence, and ownership of the future.

ASK YOURSELF: Are we actually changing how the organization works - or finding new people willing to keep the old model alive?

5 Irrelevance happens before the doors close

Collins' final stage is **Capitulation to Irrelevance or Death**. An institution may disappear - or simply atrophy into insignificance. A church does not have to close to become irrelevant. An agricultural organization does not have to dissolve. It can keep meeting, spending reserves, publishing newsletters, electing officers, and holding an annual banquet while mattering less every year. **Survival is not the same as vitality.** The harder measure is whether the organization is accomplishing a purpose important enough that future generations want to carry it forward.

ASK YOURSELF: If this organization disappeared ten years from now, who would notice - and what meaningful contribution would actually be missing?

The Generational Health Test

Healthy generational transition is not about pushing older leaders out. It is about creating enough overlap that wisdom moves forward, new thinking moves upward, and responsibility increasingly belongs to the people who will live with the organization's future.

HONOR THE PAST	FACE THE PRESENT	GET CURIOUS	INVITE THEM IN	SHARE AUTHORITY	LET THEM BUILD	STAY ENGAGED	BUILD THE NEXT VERSION
Understand what was built	Look honestly at reality	Learn how younger generations live	Genuine representation	Influence priorities and resources	Allow new approaches	Mentor without controlling	Generations build together

Successful generational transition isn't older people leaving. It is multiple generations learning how to build together.

DON'T REPLACE ONE GENERATION WITH ANOTHER

The solution to an organization dominated by older members is not an organization dominated by younger members. Healthy organizations need the strengths of multiple generations. Older members may bring **experience, institutional memory, relationships, perspective, financial capacity, time, and pattern recognition.** Younger members may bring **new relationships, technology, emerging needs, new business models, cultural awareness, energy, and a longer view of the future they will inhabit.**

The healthier posture on both sides is **humility + curiosity + shared responsibility.**

THE EMPTY-CHAIR TEST

Look around the next board, committee, church council, or leadership meeting. **Who isn't here?** Where are the 25-year-olds? The 35-year-olds? Young families? New farmers? Emerging business owners? People whose lives do not allow a two-hour meeting at 10:00 Tuesday morning?

Then ask: **Why aren't they here?** And harder still: **If they were here, would we actually allow them to change anything?**

That last question separates **recruitment** from **renewal.**

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR AN ORGANIZATION THAT WANTS A FUTURE

- 1. WHAT ARE WE ACTUALLY TRYING TO PRESERVE?** Our purpose - or the programs, structures, traditions, and leadership roles through which previous generations expressed that purpose?
- 2. WHAT DOES THE DATA SAY?** Membership by age, participation, new-member retention, volunteer involvement, leadership pipeline, finances, children, and young families. Do not substitute anecdotes for reality.
- 3. WHERE DOES REAL POWER SIT?** Who controls agendas, nominations, money, staff, committees, and strategic decisions?
- 4. WHAT WOULD WE CHANGE IF WE WERE STARTING TODAY?** Not everything should change, but the answer exposes assumptions worth examining.
- 5. ARE WE PREPARING SUCCESSORS - OR PROTECTING POSITIONS?** Healthy organizations develop people who can eventually lead them better than today's leaders can. The purpose of leadership isn't to remain necessary. It is to steward something worth carrying forward and prepare people capable of carrying it.

BUILD WHAT LASTS

Strong organizations are built through stewardship of people, culture, leadership, and the mission entrusted to them.

An organization doesn't honor its founders by freezing itself at the moment of their greatest success. It honors them by carrying the purpose forward. The objective isn't youth. It isn't tradition. And it isn't change for the sake of change. It is organizational vitality - the continuing ability to fulfill a worthwhile purpose in a changing world.

Jim Collins' *How the Mighty Fall* provides a useful warning that decline can develop before it becomes obvious - and that organizations can still reverse course before reaching the final stage. AgStrat helps organizations examine leadership, governance, culture, generational transition, organizational health, and the structures that either support renewal or quietly accelerate decline. To start a conversation about your organization's future, contact virgil@agstratsolutions.com.

Purpose | Humility | Curiosity | Generations | Stewardship