

Charismatic Leadership
August, 2009

Last month I wrote about the reasons why I think the SF Freedom School (SFFS) should and should not be called a “school.” I promised at the end of that article to explain in the next article why I feel uncomfortable referring to myself as the “executive director” of SFFS.

The concept of executive director (ED) is part of a larger corporate and political model of top-down decision-making. In every organization that employs this model, there is a check on the authority of the ED, CEO or President— IN THEORY! For example, one of the purposes of the constitution, the board of directors, the legislature or court system is to hold the supreme leader accountable. But, historically, one can see that such accountability can be easily thwarted. Presidents change constitutions to extend or abolish their term limits or they refuse to inform the legislative branch of what they are doing, citing “executive privilege.” CEOs present false data to their Boards of Directors. Superintendents ignore resolutions of school boards. And EDs embezzle funds.

I am not saying that I am afraid of the opportunity to embezzle funds as ED of SFFS (we actually have so little that any amount would be immediately and sorely missed!). I am merely pointing out that the top-down model of decision-making has a troubling track record even according to its own standards.

What bothers me mostly about this top down organizational model is what troubled Ella Baker about the way organizations like the NAACP and Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) made and implemented their policy. When Baker was advising the college students who had gathered at her alma mater to create the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Baker explained to them that they needed a decision-making process that didn’t depend on a charismatic leader. Baker believed that in relying on leaders to make decisions, people never develop the confidence and abilities that a social movement needs from them: “I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed peoples to depend so largely upon a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight . . . Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time, and they don’t do the work of actually organizing people.”

Baker (born in 1905) arrived at this conclusion after a long career as a field secretary for the NAACP and then, briefly, having worked for Martin Luther King in 1958. When observing the college students’ deliberations at Shaw University in 1960, Baker noted an “inclination toward *group-centered leadership*, rather than toward a *leader-centered group pattern of organization*. [This] was refreshing indeed to those of the older group who bear the scars of the battle, the frustrations and the disillusionment that come when the prophetic leader turns out to have heavy feet of clay. . . . Here is an opportunity for adult and youth to work together and provide genuine leadership—the development of the individual to his highest potential for the benefit of the group.”

I hold the title of ED of SFFS only because the world of fundraising and finance wouldn't understand us otherwise. But, as a member of the SFFS planning committee, I participate in a program that tries hard to promote the vision of Ella Baker. SFFS, for the fifth consecutive summer is providing a safe place where participants "can understand how to build with others, not structures, but a more tolerant world. A place where there is no need to focus on color, culture or sexual orientation, only time to focus on the thought that we are all one, brothers and sisters, we are all connected. The school is a place that has a history that needs to be spoken so that people can learn and be the future leaders of our world."