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The Effect of Leadership Transition from Founders to Members in a Non-profit Cultural Society

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics in the Graduate Division of the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Larry Starr

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Abstract
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THE EFFECT OF LEADERSHIP TRANSITION FROM FOUNDERS TO MEMBERS IN A NON-PROFIT CULTURAL SOCIETY

by

Mahmonir Shahpari

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics
in the Graduate Division of the School of Arts and Sciences
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics
at the University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2008

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Approved by:

_____

Larry M. Starr, Ph.D., Program Director

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to explore and explain some of the history and internal dynamics that concern Shabahang, a non-profit Iranian cultural society located in the United States. The organization was started by a group of culturally devoted immigrants who wanted to create an environment to preserve and promote Iranian culture and heritage for those living outside Iran. I examine the reasons and steps followed during the establishment of this society and note significant changes over the seventeen years of its existence. In particular, I describe the causes and effects of the transition of leadership from founders to members. I also compare the organization before and after the transition, and I argue that survival of Shabahang in spite of periodical membership decreases and conflicts over objectives between founders and members shows resiliency among a group of people dedicated to maintaining cultural patterns. I suggest that the continued survival of Shabahang may depend on the degree of assimilation and mode of communication among the first and subsequent generations of members and founders.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

It is not just in the 21st century that conflicts have existed between the worldview of Islamic and non-Islamic communities. Although there are conflicts between Iranian culture and the West, between them there is shared history. According to Farr (1999), a scholar of modern Iran:

> Scholars attempting to discover what the first Indo-European societies might have been look or what the original Indo-European language might have been look to the ancient Iranian stories and myths, along with those of India, since Iranian culture represents one of the oldest existing ties to this prehistoric Indo-European past. Also, since the Iranians are descendants of the Indo-Europeans, Iranian culture is related, albeit in the distant past, to European culture. (p. 16).

In particular some Iranian nationalists have a strong sense of Aryan race and ethnicity, and do not feel a cultural gap between themselves and the modern West. Indeed, not all Iranians share the same opinion about Western culture; perceptions vary among people those who live inside and outside the country.

Two notable Islamic conquests have caused Iranians to migrate. The first was the Arab-Islamic invasion more than 1,400 years ago, and the second was the 1979 Iranian internal Revolution, which was hijacked by Islamic ideology. The ancient Indo-European connection based on race and ethnicity motivated and facilitated the move of Iranians to India in their first emigration. The first invasion was not only a challenge to the dominant civilization, the Sassanian (651-224 BCE), that would create the new Arabic identity

bestowed on them by Islam, but it was also a challenge to the sustainability of Iranian culture.

The second event which the Persian Journal (2006) noted has been anecdotally referred to as the "second arabo-islamic invasion of Iran" was more metaphoric~~al~~. Many Iranian intellectuals, whether from the political left, right or center, were caught by surprise by a revolution in the name of religion in an age of modernity and secular dominance. The meaning for many Iranians including me of the 1979 Revolution, tactically directed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's supporters and labeled as an "Islamic Revolution," was that this was a strategy to gain political power rather than an event based on an ethical principle such as justice. On one side, many political activists, who heroically created a wave of protests against the new regime, lost their lives. On the other side, thousands of Iranian professionals, the elite and ordinary people who felt betrayed by the slogan of "Independence, Freedom and Islamic Republic," fled or left the country in search of liberalism and freedom. This to me was the second invasion of Islam, and this time it caused migration to the West. The 1979 Revolution pushed out approximately two million Iranians.

In my opinion, there are two dominant views among Iranians who attempt to explain the cause of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The first is a conspiracy theory that attributes the roots of the Revolution to forces outside the country, controlled and orchestrated by a coalition of the Western governments. This malevolent perception is due in part to the long history of British and American interventions in Iranian affairs. The British government had sent Reza Shah Pahlavi, the father of Mohammad Reza Shah, into exile. Many Iranians continue to believe that this manipulation of Iranian politics continues, see the internal changes as externally motivated, and include the United States in the list of countries

meddling with Iran's national affairs prior to 1979. One striking example of their meddling was the 1953 coup by American CIA agent, Kermit Roosevelt, which overthrew the government of Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh, the only democratic government in Iran's recent history. Stephen Kinzer (2003) in his book, All the Shah's Men, describes the American coup.

> In Iran, almost everyone has for decades known that the United States was responsible for putting an end to democratic rule in 1953 and installing what became the long dictatorship of Mohammad Reza Shah. His dictatorship produced the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which brought to power a passionately anti-American theocracy that embraced terrorism as a tool of state craft. (p. X)

The second theory about the 1979 Revolution attributes causes to the internal dynamics of the country, which include political deprivation, the socio-economic gap between rich and poor, lack of freedom of expression, and political associations. This argument focuses on conditions of powerlessness prior to and after the 1979 Revolution: earlier, the Iranian people were deprived of full political participation, which, after the Revolution, contributed to their inability to prevent the establishment of a religious government.

Reza Shah Pahlavi rose to power in 1921 and in 1926 announced the Pahlavi dynasty and named himself Shah (a word denoting the hereditary monarch in Iran). For the next 20 years, as he ruled the country, he fostered Iranian political identity. During this time the political structure of the country was a constitutional monarchy. According to Farr (1999) this type of political structure, with roots since the 16th century or the beginning of the Safavid dynasty, had four characteristics. These were "reliance on the personal power of the shah;" "lack of constitutional restraint (constitutions are a modern development, and

therefore constitutional issues do not apply to the earlier periods);" the prohibition of political dissent;" and "the lack of human rights (p. 57)."

Iranian nationalism encompasses a complex set of symbols and beliefs that originated in ancient Persian culture, mingled with the ideas of social, political and cultural identities from the modern era. Those three identities became linked to the ideas of progress and industrialization. A society may achieve political identity, but such an identity, formed by the sense of belonging to a single community, may or may not guarantee people the ability to determine their political rights. Although Reza Shah fostered Iranian political identity, he did not support full autonomy, so the triangle of civil rights, political rights and social rights, which are founded on civil, political and social identities, did not fully flourish. One of the measures for industrialization that Reza Shah adopted was his uncompromising position of separating religion from politics. The separation of church and state was highly visible under Reza Shah, and was continued to some extent during his son Mohammad Reza Shah's reign. As Mohammad Reza Shah mobilized socio-economic forces toward industrialization, contact between Iran and the West, particularly the United States, grew enormously. Influenced by that contact and the forces of modernization, in 1979 my family left Iran to pursue higher education in the United States. –

After the Revolution in 1979, the vast majority of Iranians opposing a secular state chose the Islamic regime. But thousands of Iranians, many of whom were intellectuals or highly educated, as well as ordinary people who confronted anti-intellectualism or felt detached from the new regime, decided to emigrate to the West. Some of those who observed the government's radical departure from their more open cultural milieu decided to revive and promote their treasured cultural values by establishing cultural organizations in

their adopted countries. The regular gatherings of people with similar interests mushroomed, reflecting an aspiration to maintain and promote Iranian culture, and often in response to the nostalgia of the past memories of their homeland. It is highly probable that the revolution may have had an unintended effect of leading expatriate Iranians to revive previously taken-for-granted concepts, such as their historical legacy, their cultural rituals and their family values.

Iranians after immigrating to Western countries pressured to assimilate with the new environment for which they were not fully prepared to live. Many had to begin without basic resources such as job, home and money to make a living. Some who were more highly educated or had professional competencies with many years of experiences were more easily able to negotiate a position within the American mainstream workforce and were able to more quickly socialize and adapt to this advanced industrial society. The combination of human capital and the social, cultural, and economic resources that many Iranian immigrants brought with them to America were matched with American dreams of success through the ethics of working hard, rationalization, competition and luck.

The majority of Iranians believed in American dreams of having a successful job, making lots of money, and living in mansions; however, to achieve these objectives they looked to network with their fellow countrymen to get help to start building the dream. In some cases those who came to the U.S. before the revolution provided mentorship and guidance to help the newcomers to assimilate with the culture of their host country. In order to survive in another country, economically and socio-culturally, the creation of cultural organizations became vital. Iranian cultural organizations, typically unrelated to religion and politics, were established in the United States especially, in regions populated by Iranians

such as the north east and the west. For example, in Philadelphia, a group of Iranians established four non-profit cultural organizations after 1979 Revolution of which two still exist and the other two dissolved. One of these non-profit organizations is Shabahang, The Iranian Cultural Society of America, born in 1990 in Philadelphia, and representing Iranians residing in the tri-state Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey region. The other one, Philadelphia Persian Society (PPS), has been created since 1999 by Iranian first generation which recruits its members among young adults.

Purpose of Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to explore and explain some of the history and internal dynamics that concern Shabahang. In Chapter 2, I describe how Shabahang was established, identify its founders and present the organizational and personal objectives as well as the mission of its constituents. Chapter 3 presents the causes and effects of the transition of leadership from founders to members, which explains how the conflicts and disagreements between the two groups encompassed a revision of the organizational structure. Chapter 4 compares organizational efficiency, quality of programs, number of members, and members' participation before and after the transition in leadership. I argue that the survival of Shabahang, in spite of periodical membership decreases and conflicts over objectives between founders and members, shows resiliency among a group of people dedicated to maintaining cultural patterns.

CHAPTER 2

ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS OF SHABAHANG

Establishment of the Organization

The seed of the Shabahang cultural organization was planted at the homes of a few professional Iranians who had settled in Philadelphia; some arrived before the 1979 revolution and some after. As new grass germinates at different rates depending on different soils and climates, Shabahang's cultural activities started from the good ground of social gatherings and took some time to germinate. The founders, through association and professional occupation or through friendship, knew each other. In their house gatherings, they served food and drink, read and interpreted poetry, played Iranian instruments, sang songs and discussed Iranian social and cultural issues.

In 1990, ten participants of these gatherings, nine men and one woman, founded the Shabahang organization. All were highly educated: one specialized in Persian literature, another was a mathematician and the rest worked in medicine. They developed Shabahang's by-laws, registered it as a non-profit organization and subsequently invited Iranians in the region to attend its first public gathering outside their homes held at Laurance Hall in Rosemont College.

Shabahang's by-laws, composed of sixteen articles, delineate the prime objective of the organization by a reference to its originators as follows:

> In 1990 the Iranian Cultural Society of America (Shabahang) was established by a group of dedicated Iranian visionary (*sic*) who felt the necessity, need, and importance of a cultural center in this part of the world.

The mission of the organization is to preserve and promote the Iranian culture and heritage, and to bring scholars and individuals interested in Iranian culture together, in order to create meetings and hold scholarly discussions.

The second article details the operational objectives of the society through a set of by-laws (see Table 1). Membership in the society is open to all Iranians and non-Iranians interested in Iranian culture and heritage. There are three categories of membership: active members, honorary members and corresponding members. Active members must submit applications and pay annual dues. They also have voting rights, unlike the other membership categories. Corresponding members are similar to active members, but they do not have voting rights. Honorary members are scholars who are selected by the board of trustees, and they do not have to pay the annual dues.

Table 1. Shabahang Society By-Laws

2.1 To preserve and promote the Iranian culture and heritage.

2.2 To bring together scholars and individuals interested in Iranian culture and heritage.

2.3 To provide meetings, exhibitions, concerts, classes and schools for presentation, discussion and education of various aspects of Iranian culture and heritage.

2.4 To publish a journal that will be the official organ of the Society and promote publication pertaining to Iranian culture and heritage.

2.5 This is a democratic organization and is non-profit, non-political and non-religious.

According to the by-laws, the Society would hold its monthly meetings on the first Friday night of each month from 8:00 pm to 11:00 pm but could continue beyond this time if needed. There would be no meetings during the months of January, July and August. The typical program for monthly meetings consists of four sections as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Typical Monthly Meeting Program

1. Part One: Podium Presentation – This shall be related to Iranian culture, heritage or appropriate topics of interest to the membership at large.
2. Part Two: Poetry – Reading of Iranian poems preferably be the poet volunteer members who are familiar with poetry. Minimal time may be devoted to prose. Time for poetry shall be limited to 20 – 30 minutes.
3. Part Three: Break and socialization, 15 – 30 minutes
4. Part Four: Music – Live Iranian music or other cultural music's shall be performed at this session.

The first section is assigned to lectures by scholars from different fields such as literature, science, music and general cultural topics. During the break usually tea or coffee, pastries, and pita bread with cheese and grapes are served. The musical performances are mostly traditional Iranian music performed by Iranian musicians.

To legally establish Shabahang as a non-profit organization, each founder had paid $500 to cover registration expenses. For many years, because they did not have enough dues-

paying members, each member of the founders periodically donated money to cover ongoing expenses.

Those Iranians who needed to appreciate and acknowledge their culture before complete assimilation with American culture were very enthusiastic about the new cultural organization. Some immediately became members and started to support the program's activities through different channels. Perhaps this rush to accept and participate in a newly formed cultural organization contributed to their efforts to adapt and survive in a new environment.

It is important to point out that the original founders' interests in establishing the Shabahang organization was infused by their education and artistic talents mixed with passion toward Iranian culture. What helped them to build the foundation was not only their education, talent and passion, but their willingness to share them with Iranian compatriots. The organization operated more like an educational setting, with an attempt to place the highest standard in its striving to uphold Iranian culture. Its founders utilized resources to invite scholars, artists and poets both from inside and outside of the United States for their monthly programs.

The founders' professional background is perhaps why they thought they deserved to remain the leaders of this organization for a long term. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that in such a cohesive group, their history, status, and power became integrated with their cultural beliefs of sustainability and their cognition of an earned entitlement to provide organizational direction and decision making. Indeed, occupational cohesion and group solidarity among the Shabahang founders was the cornerstone of their audacious move to socially construct an organization that would remain intact despite the differing interests

within the organization; specifically among the founders and members and non-members attending the monthly meetings.

Structure and Process of the Monthly Program

The majority of members and non-members usually arrive on time for the monthly programs, and although they are eager to interact with each other, there is usually not enough time for interaction as they gather in the lecture hall even if the program starts as scheduled, which happens rarely.

The program starts with the Iranian national anthem. Those few minutes of opening are heartwrenching for those Iranians who feel they are in exile. The anthem resonates with Iranian resoluteness, praises the luminous land of art and knowledge, invokes a deep sense of attachment to the homeland and is an aspiring piece wishing for long life for Iran. The Iranian anthem, created artistically, optimizes the Persian language and Iranian music; it is produced with great sincerity and signifies a high level of patriotism.

During the anthem, people stand in respect, and their solemnity speaks high of the sacredness of Iranian ancient flag standing side by side with American flag. The presence of the ancient Iranian flag, also symbolically a sign of rejection of the new flag designed after the Islamic revolution. To respect the American values of independence, democracy and freedom of speech, the two flags are placed adjacent to each other. Such a positioning manifests an appropriate venue for those Iranians to express how much they value solidarity with the United States.

Despite the founders' refusal to accept political discussion as a component of culture, their rejection of the Islamic flag implies a political image of being secular and a denial of

theocracy. Yet, the beginning of the meeting argues for an implicit politically oriented organization behind the facade of separation of politics from culture. After the anthem, usually the president of the organization welcomes the audience and announces news from the community. At times he/she informs and invites the audience to cultural events such as celebrations of Nourooz, the first day of the New Year according to Iranian calendar, as well as other ceremonies related to cultural rituals.

Shabahang's Community

In the first few years, Shabahang's attendees, members and non-members, were the Iranian immigrants who had spent a good portion of their lives in Iran, and generally they were from the same generation as the founders. Their grasp of cultural values and interests was coterminous with the founders. They were fluent in the Persian language (Farsi) and cognizant of Iranian arts and literature at different levels of sophistication. The majority of attendees had backgrounds similar to the founders, in terms of education and profession. Although one of Shabahang's objectives was to increase participation of the first generation, because of the language barrier, the number of first generation Iranian Americans attending these monthly meetings was very few, unlike their parents who emphasized flourishing Iranian culture and creating Iranian community in a foreign land. Also, there was no attempt by the founders to motivate first generation Iranian American to become members and participate in meetings.

Based on years of authoritarian control and learned dependency, it was perceived among Iranians that the government was responsible to provide social services to people and non-profit organizations in need of financial and operational support; therefore, voluntary

activities were limited to religious values as well as helping family, relatives and friends. Since the social role of volunteer work was not accentuated heavily, Shabahang founders faced the challenge of invoking attendees' participation in operational support. Later, this lack of support became a major challenge for the founders, who were overwhelmed by the enormous amount of work that each monthly meeting required. When the founders asked members to volunteer to work on operational support, members raised a question on the nature of volunteering. In Chapter 3 this challenge is presented as one of the reasons that caused leadership to change from founders to members.

CHAPTER 3

ORGANIZATIONAL THREATS TO SUSTAINABILITY

Leadership Transition

By 1998 the founders were concerned with low membership and attendance, and they needed to have volunteer workers among the members for operational support. Because of this they initiated a campaign to recruit members, and started asking existing members to help. However, the demand that members should provide help merely as workers rather than as involved in decision making was rejected by both members as well as non-members who regularly attended the monthly meetings. Members wanted the founders to share their power of decision making and leadership with them. The kind of power that the founders were exercising was more than to motivate members to cooperate in achieving the organizational goals. Ackoff (1994) has captured the distinction between the two types of powers in his book, The Democratic Corporation, as "power over" and "power to." Ackoff (1994) notes,

> Power over is the ability to get people to do things that they do not want to do, that they would not do voluntarily. This type of power is normally based on the ability to reward and punish. Autocratic rulers, dictators, military commanders, and parents of the very young have such power. On the other hand, power to is the ability to get people to do voluntarily what one wants them to do. To exercise this ability is to lead rather than to command. (p. 112)

To substantiate his viewpoints, Ackoff provides an example from his trip to Iran prior to the 1979 Revolution. This example is resonant with Shabahang's members' refusal to cooperate with founders by not helping in operational activities and by not volunteering to meet organizational objectives without adequate power. Ackoff (1994) maintains that:

> Shortly before the fundamentalist' revolution in Iran, I was asked by the empress, the shahbanoo, why her husband, the shah, who was one of the most powerful rulers on Earth, could not successfully implement most of the programs he introduced. Here was a ruler who had almost complete power over his nationals, but virtually no power

> to implement his decisions. His impotence was explained by the fact that he had significantly increased the educational level of the Iranian population. Educated people do not respond well to commands, the exercise of power over. (p. 112)

Shabahang's founders did not realize or failed to accept that educated members could only be inspired to become volunteers through the use of motivation and inspiration and not through commanding. Non-members in particular rejected the idea of becoming members because they expected to be more than mere followers. The main area of the decision making that members disagreed with was the founders' banning of political and religious discussions from the monthly programs. The members seemed to believe that such a policy did not apply to them; rather it was created solely for a group of immigrants who left their own country mostly due to political and religious beliefs.

Another area where they disagreed was in what Shabahang should do to help new immigrants to assimilate, survive, and hopefully prosper socially, legally and economically in their new environment. The members as well as non-members expected the Shabahang founders to include programs to disseminate information on social services and opportunities. In addition, some outspoken members were interested in evolving the organization from a mere "cultural" to a "cultural-social" organization with a wider scope of purposes and objectives which would cover a greater variety of views applicable to their everyday lives.

For many Iranians who came to postmodern America from a traditional and ethnically diversified society in the process of transitioning to a modern society, the emergence of a non-profit cultural organization was appreciated and acknowledged because it could ease their process of full cultural assimilation. With these assumptions, Shabahang was expected to revamp its objectives to deliver its services more pragmatically as well as manage its conceptions of culture and operational differences with members. Such a move, from the

outspoken members' and non-members' view, could make Shabahang more attractive and relevant to immigrants' actual life in America.

However, the mindset and premises of the founders that Shabahang was that it was established as a cultural organization par excellence; this led to the belief that it would lose its relevance by getting involved in discussions that drift the organization away from the course of cultural topics. As noted in Chapter 2, the objectives of the organization included a commitment to preserve and promote the Iranian culture and heritage. This seemed to be in conflict with the interests of the new community. Kottak and Kozaitis (2008) in their book, On Being Different, state that:

> The concept of culture is basic to anthropology (the study of human biological and cultural diversity in time and space).
> More than a century ago, in his classic book Primitive Culture, the British anthropologist Edward Taylor gave a definition of culture that still is quoted more widely than any other: "Culture…is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (p. 12).

If belief for Taylor included both religious and political beliefs, then one can argue that Shabahang's founders created a cultural society that excluded the two major elements of the culture - religion and politics - when they defined culture in terms of only literature, art and science.

To prevent Shabahang from disintegration and to minimize the conflict among members, the founders may have intentionally avoided invitations to scholars with strong political or religious backgrounds. Perhaps exclusion of political and religious discussion was due to the highly politicized nature of Iranians after the 1979 Revolution. This might have been perceived to create an environment where political discussion and critical thinking about religion would turn into conflict and arguments among attendees and organizers.

Contrary to the experiences and beliefs of founders, however, many new and younger members believed that these discussions would be educational, and these issues actually required analysis and exchange of ideas, especially in the American environment that encourages exchange of ideas and freedom of speech.

In addition to this rivalry in terms of intellectual curiosity, the founders had deeper reasons to exclude political and religious discussions. One was that they were frightened that the Islamic agents in the United States would discover their existence and report them to the authorities in Iran. This could produce threats or worse for family members or friends who were left behind. In addition and related to this, the founders avoided open discussion of politics and expressing a critical approach to Islamic Iran due to their desire to travel to Iran. Again if discovered by agents in the U. S. they were afraid of being scrutinized and interrogated when arriving at the Tehran airport. These were not idle fears. The political regime had proven to be cruel and unforgiving toward opposition. For that reason and to protect their families and friends, they actively avoided opportunities where ideological conflict could penetrate into open discussions among audiences and lecturers. This behavior by the founders, inadvertently and paradoxically, sided with the Iranian regime which promoted being quiet and which suppressed alternative thinking for members and non-members alike.

Post-Revolution, the Iranian government planted their agents to monitor any threat to the government by various Iranian associations which existed overseas, especially those that used media to express their views against the regime. For example, one Iranian scholar who gave some critical remarks during an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) was interrogated by government agents while he was visiting his family in Iran. The Iranian

regime, both inside and outside of the country, pursued any perceivable threat to its survival by any means. They used terror to silence opponents, jailed, tortured and murdered intellectuals, and burned at the stake or hanged in public many ordinary citizens. They did not even stop short of indoctrination of the youth by recruiting them to militant Islam. (Personal Correspondence).

There were two main reasons that many Iranians opposed Mohammad Reza Shah's regime and the Islamic Republic government; freedom of self-expression and participation in decision making. For those Iranians who had struggled to establish democracy within their own political system, living to a democratic country such as United States was an opportunity to experience democracy by electing their leaders. Some vocal members and attending non-members, consequently, turned their attention to revamping the by-laws and oligarchic structure of Shabahang. To those who aspired to create a shift of authority from the founders to members, a move toward democratic elections represented their assimilating a positive Western value as well as realizing the Iranians' previously unrealized dream within their native country.

They argued that democratic behavior would benefit the long term organizational goals as the older generation gives way to the younger generation. This transition would also shift the characteristics of the objectives of the decisions. Previously, choices were in a closed environment and with only a few objectives important to the founders' values. The new strategy would be based on evaluation of shared and quantitative objectives such as efficiency, talent, leadership skills and resourcefulness.

The founders were well aware that full integration and liberalization were vital to the continuation of Shabahang, and an increase in membership would boost their national and

cultural endeavors. However, the founders with a predominantly conservative framework resisted tailoring the content of programs to spark interests and to increase number of members.

The transition presented several conflicts of interest. For the vocal members, there was concern about how well their words would affect the founders. For the founders, there was concern about their readiness to give power to unknown members whose skills and interests had not been tested. There was also a question from all participants relating to how the organizational structure would adjust when the members took over, and how organizational continuity could be guaranteed.

To support the organization's central ideals, the members acknowledged their faithfulness to the founders' ideas of upholding the exquisite nature of Persian poetry and inviting articulate speakers and experts on Iranian history, archeology, philosophy and literary figures. Yet they were straightforward about their beliefs and continued to criticize the founders for making all the decisions within an oligarchy. The founders continued to believe that they needed to be personally responsible for sustaining the social and cultural images, and they intended to continue to protect everyone from the unexpected consequences of threats from a religious government. Simply, from the founders' view, launching the freedom of political opinions, openness, critical assessment and discourse on the future of theocracy was irrelevant to a cultural organization and could foster many conflicts.

The opening page of the by-laws starts with a quote from Hafiz, a celebrated 7th century Iranian poet [Divan-e Hafiz/Poetry of Hafiz, 1325-1400 A.D.]:

> Do not take a step
> On the path of love without a guide.
> I have tried it
> One hundred times and failed.

The reason they chose this poem, I believe, was that they wanted to refer to the by-laws and themselves as “guides.” They remained faithful to their personally imposed and interpreted rigid boundaries stipulated in the by-laws, and showed less receptivity to the members’ interests and demands to change the by-laws. These changes reflected their desires to join the organizational leadership, as well as their definition of culture which included increased female representation in the leadership positions. In this organization a woman’s place was not well established as acceptable to hold powerful roles which for many members had with direct implications on the long term planning. Usually, women were assigned to the back stage activities including preparation of food for the break, an unacceptable role for the modern citizen living in the U.S.

The control exerted by the founders on the activities of every person who participated in the monthly program had important outcomes for my family. Once, the founders approached my husband, who plays an Iranian instrument, and invited him to perform in one of the monthly programs. When he decided to invite other Iranian musicians including an ex-wife of one of the founders to join him the founders requested that he remove her from the group and replace her with someone else. Her ex-husband, a major financial contributor to the organization and highly respectable member of the founders, seemed to feel that her presence would threaten his self-esteem so tried to prevent her from performing. All the performers were angry and amazed when they heard such a demand by the founders and rejected the request totally, responding that they would not perform if she was excluded.

The founders, after years of control, expected musicians to comply with their requests, so when they found that their request was rejected they tried to convince them through different channels; but with no success. When the story spread among the members

and non-members of the society, the founders encountered a situation that challenged their power; yet if they wanted the musicians to play, they had no other option other than accepting her as a performer. This incident was a turning point in changing the power and leadership from the founders to the members.

This incident, others with similar conflicts, the long hours of work required to manage each monthly program, and a reduction in the number of memberships and attendees, contributed to the leadership change. Shabahang's founders ultimately agreed to relinquish their authority to the members. In a meeting of the general assembly, the founders gave in to the demands for change and gradually withdrew from leadership, participation and attendance. In 1998, eight years after Shabahang's establishment, a committee of four people was elected by members to revise the by-laws.

This organizational change demonstrated a cultural organization rooted in and operating according to founding immigrants' early needs followed a healthy pathway. While it broke with a rigid belief system that hampered organizational and leadership change it gradually moved to a new state that reflected the interests of its new membership and community. Thus, the traditional notion of what constitutes a leader-follower organization was replaced by a modern notion of elections and democratic participation by all members. Accordingly, a critical distinction between "us" versus "them" that potentially could have opened the door to feelings of being subordinate was dismantled.

CHAPTER 4

TRANSITION

Effects of Leadership Transition

Shabahang recently celebrated its seventeenth anniversary. Like all good milestones, this occasion provides an opportunity to protect this cultural society from disintegration by reviewing what has been accomplished, taking note of changes, and considering what lies ahead. In 1998 after the founders agreed to transition the leadership to the members, a committee of four elected people was created. They were assigned to review the by-laws and change the sections and definitions that needed to be changed in order to make the society more interesting to people of all types of ideologies and political and social views. By doing this the members hoped to increase the participation and attract more volunteers to run the operations. The major change established by the new by-laws was to form a committee of nine members, elected by members, to serve as a board of trustees to lead the organization. The process of selecting nine members, based on members nominating themselves or being nominated by others, was scheduled to occur during the month of June, which is the last monthly program of each year. The term for working as a member of the board of trustees was limited to three years. These changes did not alter officers' positions. As before, the executive officers, a president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer were chosen by the board of trustees from the members of the board.

The overwhelming majority of members and nonmembers were educated, many hold graduate or professional degrees; however, their social and cultural capital were unknown to each other. Unlike the old plan, in which the founders' social capital and occupational homogeneity were assumed to be necessary for social and cultural cohesion, the new plan

sought to overcome the disjunction resulting from the old organizational structure and reinforced diversity as emblematic of the framework of American society. Nominating for leadership or being nominated provided a chance for empathy to flourish. People were able to share differences and similarities of their backgrounds. The nominating process also raised sympathy that caused more help and participation to run the organization. Furthermore, for the first time, members felt that some parts of a social system could be replaced or even eliminated to achieve a higher level of integration. The new diversity in the organization's leadership could overcome the founders' conservative biases that had in the past hampered functionality between the means and ends as well as goals and their socially structured capabilities.

One of the positive consequences of this change was bridging the gender gap, an ingrained inequality that was not expected to be challenged. After the leadership transition the new board of trustees elected a woman as president for the first time. This radical move caused a change in gender roles from operational support, such as preparing foods and drinks for the entertainment sections of programs, to a leadership position for women. The original by-laws never declared any position on gender difference or gender inequality since the organization was assumed to operate on the basis of gender neutrality. Given that the founders were influenced culturally by patriarchy and organizationally by structured gender stratification, it was expected that women's roles in Shabahang were defined. The new board of trustees did not debate gender differences as essential components of its agenda. Instead of theorizing, they simply elected female members for the board of trustees and for the first time as president of Shabahang. Realizing the immense value of this change, the new president, who was an Economics professor teaching at a local university, assured the

members that she would reshape the organization by increasing the number of members and participants, having diverse programs, and exercising freedom of speech by engaging people in different discussions.

During her first year of presidency, she spent hours every day speaking with Iranian people that she knew to encourage them to become members of the Society and to participate in different activities. She received people with respect and courtesy and never undermined their eminence and dignity. Inspired by her determination to increase the quality and diversity of programs, many Iranian people became members, and both membership and number of attendees increased during this time. Using a variety of techniques ranging from the recruitment of members, persuading scholars (mostly women) across the country to give lectures, avoiding censorship by giving total freedom of choosing the material for presentation, and finally giving everyone a chance to criticize either the decisions or processes, she managed to secure the Society's future.

The effectiveness of her course of actions created a pleasant and engaging environment that encouraged people to become involved with running the organization through creative and innovative ideas and processes. For this reason, when a year later I was asked to nominate myself to become a member of the board of trustees, I accepted immediately and was elected by a large number of votes. During my first two years as the secretary of the organization I was heavily involved with making decisions on a variety of subjects ranging from choosing and inviting lecturers, managing the section assigned to poetry reading, writing and distributing minutes from board of trustees meetings, mailing monthly flyers to members, and working on different committees in addition to the monthly

meetings' activities. During my third year as a member of the board of trustees my responsibilities decreased as I became the vice president of the organization.

During those three years, I experienced that one of the unintended consequences of the transition was that some members of the board of trustees created a network among themselves to monopolize the leadership in order to avoid radical changes. This social network included long term and loyal members of the organization who were conservatives and believed in only minor modifications every few years. They assumed their conservative views would make Shabahang an unbreakable organization. Hirschman (1970) argues in Exit, Voice, and Loyalty:

> Just as it would be impossible to be good in a world without evil, so it makes no sense to speak of being loyal to a firm, a party, or an organization with an unbreakable monopoly.

This unbreakable monopoly was created by a network of friends to keep the organization from disintegration. Similar to the founders' monopolization of leadership, some members of the board of trustees monopolized the leadership again, and this caused members to face another period of leadership monopoly during the post-transitional period. Their objective was to lead the organization in a stable state. Thus, the unbreakable monopoly within the new leadership caused Shabahang members to lose their loyalty to the organization for the second time. The dilemma that members faced was that there was no other cultural organization competing with Shabahang around this area; therefore, some members felt that they were locked in and could not exit from this organization. This time members decided to keep their silence, did not voice their resentments, and gradually some left and others limited their participation to just attendance and became a silent majority.

Since the transition in 1998, Shabahang has experienced the same problems as before. Members did not want to become a member of the board of trustees. Some members, including those of a younger generation, who got elected to the board, left the organization after few months of participation. It is highly probable that they were excluded from the process of decision making, and their inputs were not considered seriously. The established leadership's distrust of the newly elected younger members was based on a perceived lack of experience in leading a cultural organization.

There were several attempts by the new leaders to motivate first generation Iranian-Americans to become members and participate in meetings, but these were in vain. One example is an invitation extended to five young Iranian-Americans to hold a panel to talk about their social and cultural concerns and how they could become active members of Shabahang. Following this event they were given an opportunity to plan for further monthly events. After two sessions their involvements came to a halt when their incapability to communicate linguistically to an Iranian audience was recognized. As the Persian language was the primary means of communications this was extremely important for attending a cultural program. The good part of getting the youth to engage more was blocked by the lack of linguistic competence. The reality is that some young Iranian-Americans have been deprived of Persian language acquisition, which is a substantial key to and a significant symbolic form upon which poetry and prose are created. The February 2008 program was designated the "Youth Program" and was organized by active participation of the "Youth Chapter of Shabahang." This program was mostly in English and included a virtual tour of metropolitan cities in Iran.

During the first six years after the leadership transitioned from founders to members, the number of members and attendees gradually declined. In response to this decline, in 2004 the president of the organization, facing problem of recruiting members to the board of trustees, invited the founders to a private gathering to find a way to align all the stakeholders to the changing interests of the "new" organization. To avoid further deterioration, he encouraged them to become involved with Shabahang's leadership and create an advisory board. Some of the founders accepted this recommendation, started to attend the monthly meetings, and invited some of their family members and friends to participate and become members of the board of trustees.

The issue of qualification became a challenge within the new board. Contrary to the founders, who either were well informed about Iranian cultural heritage or were resourceful through connections to qualified individuals, some members of the new board, if not alien, were less knowledgeable than the founders. The new members were more heterogeneous in age, cultural competence, and gender; however, the younger cohort was less integrated in regard to team work. The tendency to make the leadership more heterogeneous overrode the founders' qualifications and articulation of cultural issues, and it created an environment of diversified interest along with a move from monopoly to a comforted competition.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Shabahang's role of propagating Iranian culture, through creating a non-profit association, responds to Iranians' anxiety about cultural promotion and survival as well as assimilation with the culture of their adopted country, the United States. Iranians are fortunate to have an organization that implicitly, and in innovative and creative ways, cared about them and brings richly imaginative components of their culture into lively sessions each month. One of the major sources of becoming affiliated with and by the same token strength of Shabahang was the extent to which tolerance is a pivotal component of the organization. From the conception, Shabahang's memberships and its audience have come from all religious inclinations and diverse ethnic, gender, and social class identities as well as professional backgrounds. Zoroastrians, Muslims, Jews, Christians, Baha'is and secular Iranians get together and interact in close-knit activities. Along this line, Shabahang is an example to be emulated, and contrary to present theocracy in Iran, it remains as a stronghold of a secular organization that is markedly loyal to national and international values of modernity.

Leadership, before and after transition, has attracted divergent lecturers and brought various works of arts in order to promulgate an authentic integration that Iranian culture has been built upon for centuries, particularly pre-Islam. This approach has not been due to resource-constrained conditions, rather it was due to the celebrated ancient pre-Islamic Iranian worldview that is steeped in tolerance and commemorates variations and wonderfully adjusts itself functionally to the paradigm of modernity. This liberal Iranians' attitude is an

antidote to biases that ethnic and religious homogeneity may cause and stands against manifold ways of communications.

The leadership qualities, such as compassion, honesty, trust, hospitality, generosity and good reputation, that buttressed the operation of Shabahang have significant value among the Iranians. The members, by redressing the imbalance of power and through convergence bridged the gap between the founders and members and ended in sharing the leadership. This transition toward democratization of the organization, however modest, became a reality. After the transition, many members felt the internal fortitude to recognize that the organizational changes at Shabahang were created with the ultimate goals of democratic participation of electing leaders.

The group dynamic among Iranians at Shabahang as a microcosm of a small organization went through transitional periods, indeed at times facing some slack. Accordingly, the unsatisfied members had and still have the opportunity to exit or to stay. Still the dilemma of exit and loyalty remains intact due to the unavailability of alternative or competitive cultural organizations in the area. For this reason, members have developed de facto loyalty. Whenever loyalty to a cultural non-profit organization in Diaspora becomes highly dependent on purely self interest of the members, the opportunity to exit becomes easier, especially when members see their voice may be hampered by those in power who favor the idea of a leader-follower or client-patron relationship.

Hirschman captures this condition by extending Michael Walzer's view on "Corporate Authority and Civil Disobedience," saying that:

> The greater the opportunities for exit, the easier it appears for the organization to resist, evade, and postpone the introduction of internal democracy even though they function in a democratic environment. (p. 84).

Table 3 summarizes changes in behavior among the members before and after the leadership transition. The consequence of leadership transition is the increase in the number of members who voiced their objections toward leaders' decisions, and the decrease in exiting the organization.

Table 3. Voice and Exit at Shabahang Before and After Transition

Transition Time	Exit	Voice
Before	High	Low
After	Low	High

Still, Shabahang has a long way to go and may be able to have a profound effect on Iranians understanding of their national history, culture, and the reasons for which they left their country, as well as adjusting themselves to multiple identities as Iranian-Americans.

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