

# Once Upon A Time In A Dying Organization

By Ary Rosenbaum, Esq.

Whether it's a synagogue, a law firm, or a third-party administration (TPA), I've been involved in one way or another with dying organizations. That's probably a good reason why I'm not involved in any civic organizations and I work on my own. My experience with dying organizations may not make me an expert, but I realize a common thread among them and I think it's great to identify these common threads so we can all avoid them as retirement plan provider because as they said in *The Shawshank Redemption*, "get busy living or get busy dying" and it makes no sense to die when you can choose life.

## Being a spectator to their death

One of the greatest influences in my life was my grandmother, Rozalia ("Rose"). My grandmother was liberated from Auschwitz and one of the few stories she was able to talk about her time there was about the younger girl in her prison barrack. The younger girl kept on repeating that she was going to die, my grandmother was the opposite, she was convinced she would survive. The younger girl died and my grandmother survived, even surviving typhoid after liberation and being left for dead by the soviet troops. So I believe that no matter what, you need to put yourself in a position to live and, not die. That's for the actual life of people and life for organizations. The problem with dying organizations is that they continue to die, even when they know they're dying. A former synagogue I belonged to has been dying for 20 years and for 20 years, they've done nothing. At the last moment, they finally panicked and tried to sell half their property to a real estate developer who wanted to develop a senior care center in a residen-

tial neighborhood. The synagogue never bothered to engage the community, had no plan to grow their dying membership, and never bothered to campaign for the property re-zoning that was needed to get this senior care center built. The community opposition was organized and the support of the synagogue members was not. Needless to say, the rezoning was rejected and now the rumor is that this synagogue is going to fold. Dying organizations have that common thread of either not understanding their doom or if they understand their



doom, they decide to just become spectators to their eventual death. As Josie Wales once said, dying ain't much of a living.

## Arrogant leadership

One of the hallmarks that I've found with dying organizations is it's being led by clueless leadership that is just arrogant. I worked two years at a semi-prestigious law firm and after those two years, I swore I would never work for anyone again. The reason I felt that way was because of the managing attorney. I always tell the story, but Lois was one of the few people in my life that didn't like me from day one and

I had no idea why (I usually am aware of why people dislike me). When I first started as an associate attorney there, I realized what kind of a person that Lois was. I was invited to attend a meeting with a client of hers. The general counsel of the company was someone who worked with her as an associate at a Manhattan law firm many years ago, so he thought there was a friendship there and started to talk about how his children were doing. After the meeting at their office, Lois invited me to her car for a short meeting and advised me that she had zero interest in what the general counsel was saying about his kids. I didn't understand why she was telling me this, because it showed me what kind of a person she was since this person was a client and someone she had worked with, 30 years before. Lois was someone who might have been a very good lawyer, but she was a terrible businessperson. As someone who was an attorney who started practice in the 1980s, it was clear she was stuck in the 1980s. When I suggested I could use social media to develop a National ERISA practice, she thought it was denigrating the legal profession

even though her husband was good at it in his law practice. Lois was arrogant and stuck in her ways. Even when told that the average age of the law firm partners was in the early 60s and she understood that was a problem, she did nothing. I jokingly said that if Lois wanted to kill a good idea, she would create a committee for it. That is what she did with my idea of social media, she created a committee for it and didn't put me on it. Instead, she put on a law firm partner who was against social media and never drew a dime of business and the technology guru who wasn't an attorney. When I left the firm in 2010, I knew they were in

trouble. Lois led the firm for another 7 years and the firm shrunk by 40%. At least she didn't have to return all the business leader awards that the newspapers the firm advertised in, gave her. Arrogance is one of the worst traits a leader can have. When you're arrogant, you end up being stubborn and you think that you know it all. You don't allow yourself to learn, to be open to new ideas, and you continue to follow that path to ruin. When I was a synagogue vice president (not the one I previously discussed), I joked that



the rest of the leadership thought it was still 1981 in the way they handled things. In the 11 years since I left that law firm, I used social media to build a national practice and I just knew that her arrogance was going to cost the firm dearly.

### **There always is an excuse, rather than a solution**

One thing I hear about the dwindling membership of the local synagogues in my area is that it's all blamed on demographics as Jewish residents are leaving the area. I met a Kosher deli owner in Queens once and he told me that when you start blaming demographics, you're just making excuses. So when I was vice president of a synagogue in charge of membership, I decided that I would try to fight a changing demographic tide by trying to recruit members from areas outside the village where the synagogue was. When a dying organization cites excuses for their trouble, the problem is they never cite any solutions that can change their flight pattern. Like a plane in an aerodynamic stall, these dying organizations usually find themselves in a death spiral that they can't get out of.

### **Too much bureaucracy**

A hallmark of a dying organization is that they develop a bureaucracy that only impedes any work to improve the organization. Like I said about my old law firm, I believe that if Lois wanted to kill an issue, she would create a committee for it. There were so many levels of partnership and committees to get an article I would

write to get approved; it could take 6 months from the article being completed into something that was published. I debate whether the creation of committees is to stifle creativity and work or whether it's a ploy for the leaders to have more control since most committees accomplish nothing other than having the occasional meeting or whether the dying organization has this misguided notion that committees will work. Between different legal departments and committees, it was clear that nothing was improving the law firm I was at and I'm convinced that Lois used that bureaucracy to stifle dissension and keep her in power.

### **Leadership in it for the wrong reasons**

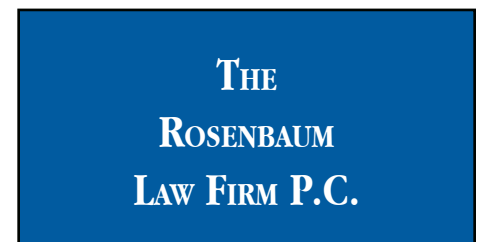
When I was at my old synagogue, I was in charge of fundraising and membership. We also had a Parent Teachers Association for the Hebrew school led by two women who did absolutely nothing and one of them didn't even have kids in the school anymore. Rather than stepping aside to let someone else do the work, they just wanted the title and do nothing. I always find it odd that anyone would take a position and just use it for the title because I think at a certain page, resume padding is just completely unnecessary. Too often, the leadership at these dying organizations has leaders that are there for the wrong reasons such as resume padding, the need for control, lust for power, or other selfish reasons. At that synagogue, we had the head of the Hebrew school's Board of Education who only wanted the school to continue as long as her children were going there, she ended up gutting the school, its faculty, and

student body once her youngest child graduated. These types of leaders lack any vision and have absolutely no interest in the future of the organization, which unfortunately may take up the space of someone who could have filled that leadership role that did have care for the future.

### **Leadership that is always there and always inept**

One of the biggest problems I had at the synagogue that I was a vice president at was that the leadership actually in control was the same

leadership that took the synagogue from 750 families to 300. Dying organizations seem to have the same awful leadership in place. My very first job was at a TPA where the head of the company would develop new plans every year or so in how things were managed. After one such plan, he said he would fire himself if things didn't work out. It didn't work out and he didn't fire himself. Dying organizations seem to have leadership that has zero accountability and zero repercussions for incompetence and failure. These dying organizations continue on the path of failure because it's being led by people who have been leading them that path for a very long time.



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