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## Book Review: Building Unity: Leading a Nonprofit from Spark to Succession

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Author: Hilary Pearson

Published in: *The Philanthropist*

ISSN: 2562-1491

Date: December 16, 2020

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2020/12/book-review-building-unity-leading-a-nonprofit-from-spark-to-succession/>

Date of PDF Download: January 23, 2021

*Building Unity: Leading a Nonprofit from Spark to Succession*, by Michael Prosserman. ECW Press, Toronto, 2020; 288 pp.: ISBN 978-1-77041-563-8

This is a book about leading innovation in the non-profit sector, built on the unique experience and language of hip hop or breakin' culture. Mike Prosserman is a [gifted professional dancer](#), a b-boy who created and led [Unity Charity](#), a Toronto-based mental health charity that uses hip hop art forms to promote resilience and wellbeing among underserved youth. While he has moved on from Unity, it continues to thrive and Prosserman is eager to tell the story of its success and the lessons learned from the years he spent as its leader.

Prosserman threads ideas from hip hop culture throughout the book, calling it "a metaphor for life, leadership and innovation." In his words, "one of the core philosophies of hip hop culture is that it provides a platform to create something out of nothing." Like many innovators, Prosserman started with a direction or intention, and improvised it into something new, much as he did in his dancing. The story of how he founded, built, and then left Unity is the structuring element in a book about social impact leadership.

Written in a very direct, first-person style, the book is both a frank personal memoir and an instruction guide for would-be innovators and creators of social impact. It is not a theoretical book about leadership, nor does it include references to other management or leadership studies and cases. Instead, it is an accessible and pragmatic advice manual based on an extraordinary personal experience of leadership. In breakin', as Prosserman notes, many of the

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dance moves come from watching and learning from peers, the idea of “each one teach one.” Although Prosserman is quick to point out that straight copying of moves is frowned on by dancers, he clearly believes that it is valuable to share experiences as a way of inspiring new moves by others.

Unity was created as a program when Prosserman was still in high school. Beginning in his own school, Prosserman created opportunities for hip hop performances in schools across Toronto. Over the years, Unity expanded into a national non-profit delivering multiple hip hop-based programs to engage and build resilience among youth in underserved communities.

From hip hop, Prosserman applies the idea of “flipping it,” building or innovating on someone else’s move or idea. Interspersed through the chapters are sections titled “Flipping,” in which Prosserman describes moments when his leadership and operational skills were tested and what he discovered as a result. His candid descriptions of the challenges of growing a non-profit organization from zero over 10 years is a realistic account of what it is like to learn as you go or, as he says, to “build the plane while flying it.”

His chapters mirror the circular process followed by many innovators, from first spark through growth and evolution to reignition. At the end of each chapter, Prosserman lists questions for reflection, addressed to leaders at these various stages.

Prosserman introduces another idea from his dancing experience into his reflections on organizational leadership. In the hip hop dance world, dancers are members of a “crew.” They practice with, support, and represent each other in competitions with other crews. Prosserman describes the “cypher,” the circle into which each dancer goes to share and test moves, and to be respectfully challenged by others in the crew. This leads him to muse on the tensions between the need for decision-making in a hierarchy and the need for collaboration and input in a collective or crew. His descriptions of the challenges and solutions developed to hiring, motivating, trusting, and holding team members accountable will be useful for any non-profit leader, new or experienced. As he notes, empowerment and accountability are a constant balancing act for any leader, and one that is not easy to achieve.

The chapter on organizational growth has some particularly wise advice for smaller non-profits planning their own growth. Over 15 years, Unity grew from a start-up to an organization with more than 15 full time staff and a budget of more than \$1.4 million. Prosserman’s observations and detailed advice on how and when to consider scaling up, and how to build a sustainable and diversified revenue stream are sensible and remarkably helpful.

Unity attracted and retained funders from across the spectrum (corporate, government and individual). Through many candid stories, Prosserman makes clear that the elements of Unity’s fundraising success are persistence, boldness of ask, and close attention to relationships with funders. He also points out the advantages of being absolutely authentic. Breakin’ performances were an important part of the Unity pitch, regardless of the audience, whether at a big corporate event or at an MP’s office on Parliament Hill. Prosserman is a believer in “putting our true selves out into the world and seeing who was magnetized to connect.”

Prosserman is clearly a charismatic leader, someone whose personality, energy, talent, and remarkable networking ability were fundamental to growing Unity as an organization with influence far beyond its unique mission and programming. His awareness of the wider

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ecosystem within which Unity evolved made it possible for him to acquire partners, funders, board members, and connectors in a network that created a solid national reputation for a start-up organization working in a neglected field and using unusual tools and approaches. While he does not characterize himself as this type of leader, and indeed describes and praises an organizational culture that values the team, the “crew,” and not the “boss” alone, his extraordinary intensity and all-out commitment were essential to Unity’s early success.

He is candid about another aspect of himself too, one which led him to move away from Unity after 15 years of intense hard work. He experienced a mental health challenge with severe anxiety. With support from his board and team members, he was able to step back and recover. He describes this experience as a painful blessing in disguise. His vulnerability broke down walls between himself and others and gave him an opportunity to empower others. Typically, he also seized the opportunity to improve mental health benefits and supports for his organization and create more ways to practice self-care for everyone. His illness also forced him to consider whether he was learning new things or adding value to Unity. At age 31 he decided to step down.

In his closing chapter he discusses, with the same personal tone and frankness as he deploys throughout the book, the conflicting feelings and priorities involved in leaving an organization you have created. As he notes, poor succession is often the demise of many great charities and businesses. His wise advice is that “succession is about genuinely modelling healthy relationships . . . selecting a strong successor and having a committed team to support the work that’s needed” for the next stage. He shares his framework of steps to transition, built on his own reflections and those of other long-time leaders and founders making their own transition.

In 2018, after leaving Unity, Prosserman started a new venture, EPIC, a social enterprise focused on helping social impact leaders build sustainable organizations. He has concluded that this is his next plane to build while flying: a vehicle that will focus on helping non-profit leaders find leverage points that they can invest in to create social change at a systemic level. This book is Prosserman’s own solid contribution to the “each one teach one” philosophy.