

# MY VIEW



Founder Wayne Fortin



## TIP: From Idea to Reality

I belong to a group of founders of nonprofit organizations. Recently I was asked to share my thoughts on how TIP went from an idea to a national organization. Below is a summary of my presentation.

When I look back at my experience of founding TIP and then building it into a national organization, I have identified 12 factors which I believe were key to this unlikely accomplishment. I say “unlikely” because those of us involved had no experience in the nonprofit world or in founding and growing any kind of organization for that matter. But we kept at it... trying, experimenting, adjusting and learning. We made mistakes, took too long to do some things and failed to do others. But we did more things right than wrong. Here are those “**12 Right Things**” ...

1. **WE FOCUSED ON A PROBLEM THAT ENERGIZED US:** The problem we identified was that victims of tragedy were not being provided immediate support after their victimizations, thus leading to “second injuries.” We believed that this was a serious problem, and we wanted to solve it. Solving this problem became our MISSION which fueled our enthusiasm and propelled us forward. This enthusiasm was essential in helping us meet the challenges which lay ahead.
2. **WE SEIZED THE OPPORTUNITY:** We realized that we had a unique opportunity to solve the “second injury” problem. The stars seemed to be aligning and circumstances seemed to be saying “**You have what’s necessary to do this!**” We had the support of a mental health center, an existing relationship with the police and the expertise. It seemed that doors were opening, and we just needed to walk through those doors. And we did.
3. **WE DESIGNED A PLAN:** We spent a year discussing how a program which could solve the problem should operate. We received input from the police, citizens and mental health providers. The result was what we now call THE TIP MODEL (24/7/365 immediate service using volunteers...) This model has proven very durable and has survived to this day because of the extensive input we received at the outset.
4. **WE CLEARLY AND ENTHUSIASTICALLY COMMUNICATED THE PROBLEM AND OUR SOLUTION:** We developed an ability to articulate the problem and the solution in simple terms so that others would be attracted to it. We made the problem/solution relatable and real. We used phrases like “*citizens helping citizens in crisis*” and “*we help people at the worst time in their lives*” which attracted others to join our cause.
5. **WE INVOLVED OTHERS AND ASSEMBLED A TEAM:** We involved ordinary citizens who had no experience operating a nonprofit organization. But because they loved the mission

these early pioneers figured out how to accomplish the many tasks that needed to be done. TIP became a place where “ordinary citizens” could find and use skills they didn’t know they had. This rag tag group of “amateurs” established the organization and grew it into the organization it is today.

6. **WE PROVIDED TEAM MEMBERS WITH THE TOOLS TO ACCOMPLISH THE MISSION:** We recognized that to help survivors of tragedy we needed knowledgeable “helpers.” We realized early on that we didn’t have this knowledge, and that we needed to learn from our experiences in the field. We established a “culture of learning.” We encouraged volunteers to share what they were learning, and we integrated that learning into our training materials. This learning culture not only enabled us to provide excellent service to clients, but it also helped us retain volunteers who appreciated that TIP was a place where they could learn and grow.
7. **WE OPERATED A FLAT ORGANIZATION:** We were concerned about getting the job done and not about titles or job descriptions. We didn’t have a rigid chain of command. Jobs were interchangeable... leaders responded into the field and front-line volunteers took on leadership positions. This flexible and simple structure allowed us to move quickly to accomplish what needed to be done.
8. **WE FOCUSED:** We focused like a laser on our singular crisis response service, and we resisted the temptation to add to this core service. We didn’t try to be all things to all people. We focused on making our service a “finely tuned machine.”
9. **WE PERSERVERED:** We encountered naysayers, thieves and troublemakers, and we experienced many cities and agencies who were indifferent to our program. But our enthusiasm for our mission carried the day, and we persevered.
10. **WE VALUED THE SERVICE WE PROVIDED:** We realized that we were solving a big problem for the emergency response system, and we expected them to be part of the solution. We decided early on to expect users of the program (emergency agencies) to help fund it. This decision was one of the best decisions we made. It established a partnership and a funding base that was essential for our survival and growth.
11. **WE CONTINUED TO GROW:** We felt so strongly about our mission that we wanted to share our program with others across the country. We grew from serving one city to serving many. This growth not only allowed us to serve many more clients, but it also kept our organization vital and alive. Every time we added a new city to the TIP network we cheered, and our enthusiasm for our cause grew.
12. **WE REMAINED HUMBLE:** Because we were always aware that we were learning as we went, we did not take ourselves too seriously. And we were always aware of our good fortune and the role luck played in our founding and growth. The term “The Big Dispatcher In The Sky” became a popular saying in TIP. It was a way TIP volunteers and leaders expressed their sense that we were getting help from a mysterious somewhere...that we weren’t doing all we were doing alone. Our leaders have remained humble. That humility has been an important factor in our organization’s development, and it has been important to our ability to retain our volunteers who would not follow leaders who are full of themselves.

We did not start the TIP journey with these “**12 Right Things**” as a guide. These are things we learned as we went. Hopefully others just starting their journey to establish nonprofit organizations can learn from our experience and will use these “**12 Right Things**” as a guide. And perhaps veteran nonprofit leaders will find these “**12 Right Things**” helpful when they step back to evaluate their organization’s effectiveness and ask themselves: “*Are we doing the right things?*”