

Mission Creep: *Temptations and Solutions*

By Robert Hodge



“Mission Creep” sounds like an insidious force that changes an organization’s primary focus to something less than its mission, vision, and heritage. While it may not be all that insidious, mission creep is a documented phenomenon that usually damages an organization.

Few organizations intentionally creep away from their mission. However, changes in increments become a change in kind. Assuring adaptive adherence to the mission and values of the organization requires a greater focus on culture and communication, not just a checklist of analytical tasks.

John W. Gardner, former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has spoken well about values, goals and the balance between continuity and change as part of organizational renewal:

“Now these values and goals, at their best, don’t come out of the mind of the leader. They come out of a lot of back and forth among the leadership team, which is in touch with an even broader circle in the system, and then folks in the system itself.

Out of that come the values and goals. But, you’ve got to formulate them in understandable ways. You’ve got to disseminate them. . . . It isn’t enough just to have goals and values. You’ve got to celebrate them. You’ve got to reaffirm them. You’ve got to say these are the things that are important to us. There’s an old saying that it’s a waste of time to preach to the choir or preach to the converted. But in fact, it isn’t a waste of time, and time out of mind, from the dawn of history, I’m sure, people who keep their

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faith keep telling one another what their faith is. It’s got to be done.” (“Conversations with John W. Gardner,” Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation 2000).

We can expand on this statement to gain a number of insights to maintain the mission while adapting to a changing environment.

Avoiding mission creep presupposes a good and well-understood mission statement. The Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management suggests that “a great mission statement:

1. Is short and sharply focused
2. Is clear and easily understood

3. Defines why we do what we do, why the organization exists
4. Does not prescribe means
5. Is sufficiently broad
6. Provides direction for doing the right things.
7. Addresses opportunities
8. Matches our competence
9. Inspires our commitment
10. Says what, in the end, we want to be remembered for.”

In short, a great mission statement proactively draws people to its broad center, preventing the organization from straying from its foundation.

Gardner makes an excellent point that the vision and mission, while possibly articulated by a small group of leaders, must contain the voices of those who are giving their lives to it.

Internalization of the mission is critical to its success, possibly even more so in organizations highly dependent on volunteers. “The leader’s vision”—if that is all there is—can be dangerous since it is as temporary as the leader. “Our vision and mission” takes a lot more time to establish and articulate but will last a lot longer than “my vision.” This does not discount the vision of or mission given to a single person, but it requires that person to be a great communicator with the ability to inspire people to internalize the mission in the mold of Nehemiah.

Who is responsible for maintaining the focus of the mission in your organization? Where it is everyone’s responsibility, it is nobody’s responsibility. Formal responsibility for establishing and maintaining the mission should be identified as a governing board function, with much of the activity

to that end being delegated through the executive director. Focusing on the mission should be a significant part of the board's work. Quick checks of adequate focus can be made by simply reviewing the board agenda, preventing, detecting and correcting problems of focus and attention.

With a mission that meets the Drucker criteria, it is then natural and easy to tie the strategic plan and strategic budget to the mission. In its long range/strategic plan, one organization quoted the exact portion of the mission or vision that was to be supported by each strategic element and respective budget amount. It provided a simple test to assure that the money followed the mission, rather than the other way around.

Likewise, tying grant proposals explicitly and boldly to the mission and its values assures that a donor will perceive a clear relationship between the proposal and the mission. This will help achieve the ECFA Standards of Responsible Stewardship noted in 7.1–Truthfulness in Communication, 7.2–Communication and Donor Expectations, 7.3–Communication and Donor Intent, and 7.4–Projects Unrelated to a Ministry's Primary Purpose. Going a little deeper into grant proposal writing, an independent internal test for mission continuity will prevent “hobby horse” proposals by those looking primarily for an outlet for their particular interests, however praiseworthy, yet outside of the primary role of the ministry.

Anecdotes of those served will have a much greater impact on board and staff than will data of numbers served alone. Great

boards, when presented with stories, or seeing them firsthand as volunteers, that demonstrate the grander value of the organization will be more fully informed to make wise strategic decisions regarding the bottom line (measured in dollars) and “the other bottom line” (transformed lives). This can help detect inappropriate value changes not easily measured or reported in summary form.

“Long timers” on the board and staff assure an active organizational memory. They not only bring their stories, they bring the earlier culture into the future. And those served by the organization can passionately articulate the needs of the people and the

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value of the mission to meet them. At one college, almost twenty years ago, a mom and dad stood in line at the bursar's office to pay her son's tuition. Surprised at some extra fees, she expressed to her husband that she then understood why she had waited to get the dishwasher repaired. In this writer's life, a cabinet member of the college, the high cost of that quality education was expressed in new and meaningful terms. Future decisions about capital expenditures were often mentally measured and communicated in increments of “dishwashers not fixed.”

Recruitment of staff and board members must sufficiently focus on the mission as well as the tasks at hand. Everyone,

including clerical or manual workers will benefit from understanding how his role links to the achievement of the mission. As workers are fully brought into the family to accomplish the mission—rather than performing individual tasks—they will bring far more commitment and energy each day. While more senior leaders and board members will talk about the mission, these people will walk the walk every day as they engage those being served. Given an opportunity to express themselves, they may become some of the better detectors of incremental mission creep.

A number of simple practices will help keep the mission in the forefront of each person on a daily basis. Once enabled, people with the mission on their mind will rise above the limiting circumstances and resources of the day to find new ways to achieve that which inspires them. This will prevent mission creep at the incremental level and enable each person to detect mission creep on a daily basis.

- Craft the mission statement such that it can be easily remembered apart from the founding and governing documents.
- Assure ongoing board awareness by stating the mission and values clearly in various documents, such as the agenda, the governance policy book, and/or placards on the desks at every meeting. Several boards recite the mission at the beginning of the meeting to assure that it remains fresh in their minds.

With a story and devotion by a staff member or person served, the board is ready to fully engage the organization with head, heart, and hand.

- Impress the mission every day on staff and visitors by proudly displaying the mission and values at the entrances to the building or offices. Insert the statement and possibly an application of it in the computer screensavers.
- Directly impact each new person engaged by printing the mission statement on the back of business cards.

Common wisdom teaches, “If you want to know the organization’s priorities, follow the money.” While somewhat distasteful because of its apparent simplistic emphasis on the business end of the organization, there is much truth to the statement. Ongoing ratio analysis, tying budgets to specific components of the mission, and reasonable evaluation will assure, from the corporate side, that financial resources are focused appropriately. These tools will incite dialogue during budget approval and ongoing review, assuring that the resources align with the mission.

• **Transparency assures accountability to the mission and vision.** This is increasingly difficult where there are pressures to soften or deny founding values under the sometimes agenda-seeking auspices of diversity or tolerance. Indeed, there are reasons to seek diversity and tolerance, but not to the incremental detriment of the organization’s foundation as articulated in

the mission and values. If correction of past restrictions and offenses is needed, be transparent, intentional and bold to change.

• **Transparency is just good business.** For example, a volunteer-based organization must rely on the good will of well-informed and motivated people; they can and will quickly detect the de-motivating gaps between what an organization is and what it says it is. Organizations can ill afford a new, self-funded volunteer, committing to a long-term engagement, yet surprised at the organization’s real values and how they are lived out daily. Transparency up front will assure that the right people “get on the bus.”

• **Transparency builds trust in the mission and the people who lead.** It opens the way for feedback from those who are on the frontlines every day, offering still better approaches to achieve the mission. Those people will continually close any gaps between the mission and the tasks of the day.

• **All great causes are not your cause.** Mission creep as discussed here is an organizational issue with both organizational and individual causes and influencing forces. The preventive, detective and corrective solutions, especially in faith-based organizations, are both organizational and individual. Hitting the white ring around the red bull’s eye is one thing; shifting the aim to the white ring is another.

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