

Blueprint for Mission Creep



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.

Completing a mission is one reason for organizations to change their mission, but it is far from common. More often the causes for mission creep lie in finances, personnel, organizational structure, demographics, or philosophy. Each of these causes, in turn, comes in obvious and not-so-obvious forms.

The influence of money. "Chasing after the money" is commonly cited as the basis for incremental if not dramatic shifts away from the core mission. The chase can start with financial good news or bad news. An example of this phenomenon would be a small rescue mission receiving a renovated hotel for housing the homeless without receiving commensurate support for ministry staff. The larger shelter, while still rescuing people from the streets, simply cannot offer the intensive personal ministry that had been the mission's hallmark.

On the flip side, tight budgets pressure organizations to broaden their mission and values, allowing for greater reach (in terms of staff, potential donors, and persons ministered to) but often leading to a loss of the original vision. One Christian college in the early 1990s, needing more students to remain full, downplayed its denominational background. The plan backfired as the distinctives of the university were temporarily hidden. Faculty with good academic credentials but heritage-opposing doctrinal

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beliefs were hired and later let go with great pain. Fewer students chose to matriculate as they did not grasp or appreciate the now-hidden distinctives of the university. Recapturing the distinctives and alumni support has taken years, and the university has become more focused and is enjoying increased attendance, campus community, and academic quality from united faculty.

The influence of personnel. Personnel changes, though inevitable and sometimes desirable, can also cause an organization's vision to wander. Changes in leadership at the senior or

board level will inherently bring a different perspective to the mission of the organization. Recruiting and selecting new staff will bring different thoughts about the organization. Where a mission statement is broad enough to identify the general outcomes, the specific outcomes and pathways to get there may be interpreted differently by each new person based on his previous experiences.

Whether a board member, new staff member, donor or executive director, often we all may bring our own “hobby horses” to an organization. Each person would like to work in his area of greatest expertise, demonstrating mastery in something, gaining some early wins. A staff recruiter who makes hiring decisions based only on competency and character may innocently bring staff into the organization that do not grasp or appreciate the mission and values. The same issue applies to leaders, board members, and the most senior leader.

The influence of organizational structure. The personalities and experiences of the people in an organization certainly influence its direction, but so do the structures in which those people operate. At the board level, the committee structure itself can shift the direction and priorities of an organization. Aligning committees along operational lines can divert the board's attention to three-month issues rather than three-year or 30-year issues. An operations board whose executive director is an implementer of board decisions defines an environment where no group formally

“owns” the mission and values. Relegating the mission statement and values to a committee begs the question of what is so important that it does not allow the entire board to be fully attentive to mission and values.

An over-emphasis on evaluative metrics—or poor usage of them—may pull an organization toward that which is small and most easily measured at an operations level, and away from that which is most important and more subjective. Measurement of parts does not assure an adequate measure of the whole. The transformation of human lives is complex, usually inefficient, and difficult to measure. Donors, foundations, and others increasingly base their funding decisions on quantitative data that can override or overwhelm qualitative knowledge and prayerful discernment. Some have noted that, under much of today’s drive for efficiency as measured by emerging standards of analysis and evaluation, Jesus would not be fundable.

The influence of demographics. Like competition, demographic shifts create a temptation toward mission creep with internal and external components. Internally, new generations will change the interpretation of values and worldview of the organization as the generation gains greater influence. Externally, organizations must be increasingly adaptive to remain relevant to the changing communities that they serve. Yet they will do well to allow for much adaptation of the “how” of ministry while not causing or allowing an unintentional change in “what” or “why” of the organization.

Over time, those served may change. A neighborhood church or social service ministry will most likely see the demographics of those served change significantly over time. A mission statement that focuses on a narrowly defined group of people will suffer; a mission broader in scope, focusing on ends rather than means, will endure, possibly even becoming more successful. Alternately, the people served might stay constant, but their real and perceived needs could change, sometimes quite rapidly. For example, church planting missions in earthquake-torn Pakistan had to adapt quickly to simply keep those served alive.

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The influence of philosophy. Whether changes in finances, personnel, structure, or demographics push an organization from its moorings may ultimately depend on whether the organization’s philosophy remains tethered. The biggest challenge in this area is secularization.

Secularization may be the single greatest cause of mission creep in Christian organizations. Historian George Marsden, in his 1995 book, *The Soul of the American University: from Protestant Establishment to Established Non-belief*, recounts this process for one sector of the non-profit world. The people who built America’s universities tended to be ardent, active

Protestants. Marsden writes, “In the late nineteenth century, when American universities took their shape, the Protestantism of the major northern denominations acted as a virtual religious and cultural establishment. . . . As late as the 1950s it was not unusual for spokespersons of leading schools to refer to them as ‘Christian’ institutions.” Over the next decades, however, “Many of the same forces set in motion by liberal Protestantism, which rooted out traditional evangelicalism from university education, were eventually turned against the liberal Protestant establishment itself. Now, while it is the spirit of liberal Protestantism that arguably survives, normative religious teaching of any sort has been nearly eliminated from standard university education.”

This dramatic shift did not take place overnight, nor did it result from any organized campaign of militant atheists. In many cases, the desire to obtain government funding has prompted educators (and leaders of other types of non-profits) to tone down the offensive “Christianese.” At some point, the primary focus of their organizations shifted from “Christ proclaiming” or “Christ honoring” to providing services indistinguishable from secular organizations.

Accreditation plays a role in potential mission creep as well. Accreditation and certification agencies are often not government agencies, yet they exert influence as gatekeepers for funds, clients and licenses to practice. For example, children’s homes, colleges, medical clinics

and social service ministries must meet strict guidelines to assure quality, but “quality standards” increasingly pressure organizations to ease up on “restrictive” policies and practices often tied to their faith. Who they hire—their selection criteria based on religious or sexual practices—and explanations of their faith in service programs are influenced heavily by accreditors with secular agendas not defined by the actual laws.

A final thought. A significant cause of mission creep is that people simply do not know what the mission is, or the problems of the day tend to become the focus of their attention instead. Without constant reminders to “look up” to the long term, inspiring mission and vision, people turn their head down. Daily goals focus on accomplishing tasks within the circumstances of the day. Nehemiah learned that he had to renew the vision about every four weeks or the circumstances would be sufficient for people to simply drop their hands. ☹️

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