

Why it would be better for the world if we were all less mission-driven

<http://nonprofitaf.com/2018/04/why-it-would-be-better-for-the-world-if-we-were-all-less-mission-driven/>

The concept of mission-driven has been well-beaten into all of us. It seems that nothing is more important to our work than our mission. This idea has been baked into everything we do: fundraise, communicate, run programs. Concepts like “mission creep” (which sounds like the name of a really boring super-villain) are designed to instill in us this sense that our individual mission is pure and sacred, and that all of us must have as our highest imperative the unwavering devotion to it.

I’m going to say something kind of blasphemous, so hold on to your suspenders. I think we all need to be less mission-driven. “What? No! Oooh, he didn’t just say that!”

I didn’t say for us to abandon our missions, or to stray far from our missions, but honestly, there is a hyper-focus on our own individual mission, and it has been unintentionally leading to some no-good, very bad things, including perpetuating the Nonprofit Hunger Games, furthering isolationism among nonprofits, creating imbalances in the nonprofit “ecosystem,” and proliferating “zombie” nonprofits (ineffective organizations that refuse to close).

A few months ago I wrote about community-centered fundraising, a response to the donor-centered fundraising model, which, while effective to bring in funding in the short term, inadvertently creates many of the inequities our sector is trying to address. Our default fundraising philosophy, unfortunately, amounts to “do whatever you can to raise as much money for your own organization as possible, and don’t worry about other orgs.” This aligns with and stems from this belief that our individual mission is all that matters. I don’t think this is good. We need to get out of this mindset.

To fully unlock our sector’s full potential and effectively address society’s growing challenges, we’re going to have to care about one another’s missions, not just our own. We must be less mission-driven and more community-driven. Here are several things to consider:

Missions are not isolated; they co-exist in relationships. What makes our work so complicated and also so amazing is that our missions are all interrelated, because we deal with societal factors that constantly affect one another. Art will affect mental health will affect employment will affect housing will affect early learning will affect youth development will affect safety will affect civic engagement, etc. No mission works in isolation. We have to be aware of how other missions are doing, as well as worry about how our own actions may be helping or hindering, because this ecosystem of missions affects our individual missions and the entire community.

Missions are not all equal, and we need to stop assuming that they are. Some missions—such as those working with kids and animals—pull on the heart-strings more, which means they are able to bring in more resources. Unfortunately, many missions are not going to have the same emotional pull—sorry, fellow capacity builders as well as orgs working with older adults—and so they struggle. But our sector, and thus our communities, are best served when these missions are also effective by being well-supported. In a similar vein, some missions are terrible—“let’s send winter coats to Africa!” as satirized here—and if they were less “mission-driven,” they may realize that they may be causing more harm than good.

Missions are not all urgent simultaneously. Right now, for example, communities of color are being attacked and families are being deported. The missions of organizations on the frontline dealing with these issues and protecting families have to come first. The concept of mission-driven, however, means that many of us do not stop to think “Hm, should our mission take a backseat and play a supporting role during this time? Is there anything we can do to help bring attention to other missions that right now really need the help?” For our sector to be effective, we must have better agreements and communication regarding which missions should get the spotlight when, not just simply compete with one another all the time.

As our work gets more and more complex, we cannot afford to simply worry about the success of our own missions. We have to end this competitive streak we learned from the for-profit sector. We have to work to lift one another up and act as a sector. What does that look like? Here are a few ideas:

1. **Have internal conversations about our role and relationships:** The conversations we have about other organizations are always from the perspective of how we can have an edge over them. Let’s have more conversations about how we can strengthen relationships with or support them. At a future board or staff meeting, or both, talk about your organization’s mission and how it’s been helping or hurting other orgs, especially smaller grassroots orgs led by and serving marginalized communities, and the entire community at large.
2. **Highlight other organizations’ work:** Let’s all talk more about other organizations’ work, highlighting them in our newsletters, website, and social media. Bay-area-based organization Justice Funders, for example, has this simple yet brilliant idea: In our automatic donation receipt emails, we should feature several partner organizations. Wouldn’t it be awesome if whenever donors make a donation, the automatically generated email goes something like “Thank you so much for your support. Here are other organizations that we work with that also provide critical services. Please check them out.” Especially for organizations that right now could use more time in the spotlight—organizations led by marginalized communities—this support would make a huge difference.
3. **Allow board members, staff, and volunteers to be involved with other missions:** It always saddens me when nonprofit professionals get turf-y and defensive; getting upset, for example,

when their board member sends out an invitation to another organization's event or information about another organization's work. This belief that board members, staff, and volunteers should only be loyal to our own organization and its mission undermines the work of the entire sector. Let's not only tolerate, but encourage our people to be involved with other organizations. The cross-pollination of information and strategies will make us all more effective in the long-run.

4. **Be on the lookout for one another:** A colleague told me once that he came across a grant and was torn about whether to tell another organization about it. "My conscience told me I needed to tell them," he said, "they didn't even know about it." Well, it was a significant amount, the other organization got it, and his organization did not. He told me how at first he was kicking himself, but then he thought about the important work that the other org was doing, about all the people who could now be helped. He didn't just think about his own organization's mission, but about other organizations and the entire community. Let's all be on the lookout for one another.
5. **Introduce one another to funders and donors:** Once a month, my organization hosts a small, intimate "Community Connect" lunch with donors. Each time, the main topic of discussion features a partner organization's work. Last month, after one such lunch, the ED of the partner organization called on the same day and said one of our donors she met at the lunch just donated to her organization. She was very surprised and extremely happy. I was happy that something my organization did led to funding for a partner organization. And I bet our donor was happy that our orgs are supporting each other. Everyone wins, especially the families our partner organization serves.
6. **Ask whether you really need the funding:** Larger, more influential organizations need to examine whether they should be getting certain funds, or whether there are other organizations that could use those resources more. Unfortunately, in our sector, funding often does not go to the communities that most need the resources. It goes to whoever has the best relationships, has the brightest spotlight, and can write the best grant proposals, and those are often not organizations led by the communities most affected by injustice. And because we are all "mission-driven," it does not allow for much self-reflection. My organization this year has declined to apply to several grants that we likely could have received. Of course, we can't decline all funds, but we are now much more intentional and self-reflective about which ones we do apply to.
7. **Support one another during intense times:** Galas and other events are some of the most stressful things in our work. I've seen inspiring examples of nonprofits helping one another out. I remember one time on the day-off of our major fundraising event, an ED of another nonprofit texted and asked if I needed her to run an errand, pick up food for volunteers, set up chairs, or whatever. She knew that something always falls through at the last minute. My team had it all

taken care of, so I didn't need anything. But I had been stressed out, and that text reminded me that we exist in community, and it's an amazing one full of thoughtful, caring colleagues.

We've all been trained to think of only our organization's survival, under this concept of being mission-driven. But to use an old cliché, because I watched several episodes of Mozart in the Jungle on the plane, our sector is like the symphony. Sure, if you play the flute, by all means ensure you are an effective flautist. But the symphony cannot work if we each only care about how our own instrument sounds. Each mission must care about other missions. This is the only way our sector can be truly effective at its work. I am sure Paddington would agree.