

Mission Creep: Understand it; Know it; Resist it

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First of a Two-Part Series by Avrum Lapin

What is Mission Creep?

Among nonprofits, and in the for profit sector, mission creep is an often irresistible force that expands or changes an organization's primary focus to something that is different than the original mission. These changes threaten to damage the organization and pull time, personnel and resources away from its core purpose and values. For a nonprofit, its mission should clearly articulate the reason it exists and the desired impact that the organization will/should have on the community that it serves. Once the organization opportunistically expands beyond these boundaries, mission creep sets in.

While changing focus deliberately can be advantageous or necessary, mission creep describes when it happens without strategic direction or a formal shift. Strategic adaptations involve a critical process that is well-thought-out and focused, and communicated throughout the organization. Mission creep describes when this process is reactionary, rash, or responding to an opportunity or a crisis.

Causes of Mission Creep

Chasing Dollars: It is no secret that nonprofits require operating and project funds to function. Aside from the healthcare sector, most nonprofit support comes from donations – both private individuals, institutions and foundations, and, for some, the public sector. When foundations offer a grant that is “adjacent” to the core mission of an organization, development directors are often tempted to “take a shot” at applying for the much needed dollars that might not exactly fit the mission, but gets them “close enough” to their current programming or plans. Once the grant is made, then the organization faces an obligation to fulfill the terms. These terms might include projects that are outside of the organization's purpose, but turning away dollars may not be an option.

So too, individual donors can request that their gifts support specific projects. Perhaps a donor is interested in funding job training and wants to support an organization which provides meals to the homeless. The organization accepts the gift, viewing it as something that resembles their mission and perhaps helps their constituents. Suddenly, the nonprofit is engaged in a new program that is not part of the core competency, only to satisfy the wishes of the donor. Years after the gift was given, the organization is left with a program that it never intended to create. Perhaps it works for the nonprofits; perhaps it does not.

Changing Nonprofit Landscape: The nonprofit landscape is changing due to generational shifts, funding patterns, tax codes, technology, and the effect of newly formed 501(c)3s. Each of these issues has an impact on how and how well a nonprofit operates. Over time, the people served by an organization will invariably change. Their needs might differ. Donor's goals may shift. Younger generations focused on results may demand different programs than their parents. A new competitor may enter the "space" and divert resources away. Each of these shifts may be subtle and happen over time, but the cumulative effect may result in changes and often, mission creep.

Personnel Changes: Turnover is all too common in the nonprofit marketplace and many organizations will face issues stemming from new leadership. New Board leaders and members, Executive Directors, or even new program directors may have different priorities than their predecessors. These personnel changes can cause an organization's focus to drift. New leaders bring their own experiences and perspective into an organization and may interpret its mission differently.

While mission creep is often slow to develop, it can become quite harmful. There are many negative consequences to an organization experiencing mission creep and the implications can be serious.

Dangers of Mission Creep:

Spreading Resources Thin: Mission creep may originate with an offer of financial support. However, as noted earlier, sometimes these grants may have the opposite effect, possibly ending up costing the nonprofit. The organization may spend time and resources to support a program that was created for the grant, but now is taking people, time, and funds away from other projects that were part of the organization's core mission.

Eroding impact: No matter what the size and scope of a nonprofit, they all have limited budgets and finite resources. By siphoning funding, personnel and time to projects and programs that are outside of the mission, nonprofits are weakening their ability to positively impact the community and essential programs become less supported.

Diminished Reputation: Nonprofits in the current age of social media and instant news rely heavily on public trust and public perception. Donors and supporters may lose confidence in the organization's capacity to fulfill its original promises. Communication to stakeholders may become blurry when trying to convey increasingly disjointed activities and programs. Original supporters may not like the new direction and feel as if they were not involved in the shift in focus. Internally, staff may become confused. Reputation is key when asking for support and when compromised, the organization's financial health is in peril. Whispers get louder as people become more dissatisfied.

Whether an organization's mission creep has just begun to make an impact, or has been a nagging factor for months or years, it is clear that passively straying from the core vision of an organization can have serious consequences.

Prevention:

The Benjamin Franklin axiom that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” is as true today as it was when it was written. Preventing the issue of mission creep is easier and often less costly than fixing problems once they arise.

Strong and Focused Mission: A strong and focused mission is the best defense against mission creep. The mission statement is not meant to sit in a drawer after being crafted, but rather used as a guide to making important decisions. When in doubt, the question to ask is, “Does this program or project fit into our mission.” If the answer is no, think long and hard before proceeding. On the other hand, if the thinking is that, for a variety of reasons, the organization has outlived or outstripped its purpose, a fundamental discussion must be engaged about why the organization remains in business and if changes should be considered.

Say “No”: Turning down funds is painful, difficult and often counterintuitive. However, accepting funds that take the organization away from its focus is often the seed that starts the problem. Make sure that funds support the right programs and work towards the stated purpose.

Effective Communication: Ensuring that each Board director, staff member, and donor/volunteer is clear about the organization’s goals helps to keep things on track and on task. If everyone understands and supports the current mission, vision and goals, it will be easier to avoid mission creep.

Use data: Using technology and looking at data are often ways of helping to make decisions that are guided by impact, rather than emotions.

Return to your mission often, especially when making new decisions: By having the mission front and center as the guiding principle, it will be a useful benchmark to decision making. Asking questions like “does this advance our mission?” and “will this bring us closer to achieving our goals?” can help leaders to stay on track, focused and prioritizing the right programs.

Often there are good reasons for a nonprofit to shift direction or to change focus. Perhaps the community has changed, the demographics no longer support core programs, or the original need is no longer relevant. A hospital whose original mission was to support orphans may now be filling a different need in the community; or a nonprofit addressing the effects of polio will have to find a new cause – or cease to exist. If an organization is rooted in a strategy, and has clear and effective communications both internally and with its supports, modifying the mission or vision can be a positive outcome. Being thoughtful, transparent and reflective are qualities that every nonprofit should strive to espouse.

My colleagues and I are interested in your experiences, especially about this important topic. Let us know what you are thinking.

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