

Nonprofit Mission in the Age of Coronavirus

02.11.21 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



“A nonprofit’s mission statement,” according to the experts at The Bridgespan Group, is “at its best, ... a succinct expression of an organization’s essential reason for existence or core purpose.”

Experts recommend periodic reviews of both the mission statement *and* the mission itself. Could there be a more appropriate time for such a reevaluation than right now with a raging pandemic posing an existential threat to the very survival of many organizations?

Mission Reviews

A mission statement is shorthand for the complex bundle of values, purposes, and goals that was the impetus for starting the organization in the first place.

It’s important for two distinct audiences. First, it’s the public-relations message – the elevator pitch, as it were – to outsiders, including funders and donors as well as volunteers and community fans and supporters. Second, it’s the guidepost for insiders – the board, executives, and staff – to keep the group’s programs and operations consistent with its bedrock principles and aims.

It’s not unusual, according to researchers who study the efficacy of nonprofit organizations, for insiders to be unable to – (when pressed on the matter) – correctly articulate the mission of their group. Without it, though, it’s difficult to evaluate whether current operations match or support the core aims.

And it’s a matter of good governance. Independent Sector has published a best-practices series called *Principles for Good Governance and Ethical Practice*. It’s a “roadmap of 33 sound practices” for organizations to follow to strengthen their commitment to ethics and accountability. Principle 19 is “Review of Mission and Goals.”

An organization's mission is not a static or unchangeable matter, set in stone from when the organization is first created. "Nonprofit organizations are unique:we're accountable to the public thus it's vital our mission and goals remain relevant," explains Mareeja Niaz, the author of a blog post accompanying Principle 19. The board is "responsible for reviewing the organization's mission and goals frequently" to "evaluate the progress of the organization against these components consistently."

"The purpose of a periodic mission reevaluation is "to make sure your programs, goals, and activities continue to advance your mission and make wise use of your resources." It's a matter of the "obligation" imposed on a nonprofit as a steward "of the public's trust."

A "nonprofit organization encapsulates its purpose and direction," Mareeja Niaz reminds us, "with one golden nugget, its mission statement." This is "... the north star in guiding purpose, dictating goals, and ultimately impacting where your organization is allocating resources. Clear articulation and evaluation of this north star allows your organization to assess which activities remain mission critical."

Avoiding Mission Creep

In *Mission Creep Faced By Detroit Nonprofit* (February 13, 2020), we wrote about a "common affliction of groups dedicated to remedying deep and intractable problems in society: namely, 'mission creep.'"

In Detroit, a 50-year-old organization named Focus: Hope took the painful but necessary step to roll back its size and scope that had ballooned from its early days as a small, grassroots, anti-poverty group to a sprawling giant with a staff of 200 and a budget over \$30 million. The people in the neighborhood that the organization had long served had more and more needs that the dedicated founders and staff were reluctant to leave unmet.

Focus: Hope turned back to its core mission – social services and job training – and is in the process of spinning off other major programs and projects. The mission creep had become a destructive and demoralizing force wearing down staff and supporters to an unacceptable level.

Particularly during a time like the current pandemic when financial resources slip away and there are other limits on an organization's ability to function (like mandatory shutdowns), the mission review should include a serious "mission creep" evaluation.

This comports with the advice related in *Nonprofit Survival Tactics* (July 22, 2020) in *The NonProfit Times*. That article included advice from Barbara Floersch of The Grantsmanship Center in Los Angeles. She addressed the growing concerns that a substantial number of nonprofits around the nation have been suffering financially and may be in danger of having to shut down.

"Battered by COVID-19 restrictions," Ms. Floersch explained, "the cascading, deep economic recession, and falling contributions, many nonprofits are like flooding submarines, in the middle of the ocean and taking on water." This pandemic, she noted, has tested the limits of even "seasoned administrators who've faced down one crisis after another." Her key recommendation, using the submarine example, is to "protect the boat." When the "flooding alarm sounds, water-tight doors are

shut and sealed between compartments of the boat. The idea is to contain the flooding to a limited area and protect the core.”

Like the flooding submarine, board members and administrators of a nonprofit in distress must take extreme action like cutting programs. “Nonprofits exist to accomplish a mission,” and the “core of the organization” must be protected so that, “in better circumstances, it can rebound and continue the important work.” Of course, this can entail wrenching decisions including job loss and curtailment of services to the community, but it may mean the difference between the organization’s survival, albeit as a leaner operation, and the demise of the entire operation.

Conclusion

This reevaluation of an organization’s mission is, of course, a key element of the scenario planning exercises we discussed in *Nonprofits: Update Your Scenario Planning* (February 8, 2021). For each and every U.S. nonprofit, the circumstances have changed so substantially from the pre-March 2020 status quo that it’s critical for the board, executive staff, and other stakeholders to plan for whatever dramatic measures may be necessary to survive until we all emerge on the other side of the pandemic.

Or – more difficult to consider or accept – the appropriate conclusion in a particular case may be that the mission can be fulfilled – only or better – by handing off one or more programs to another organization entirely or in partnership. For a thoughtful and provocative discussion, see *Why it would be better for the world if we were all less mission-driven* (April 9, 2018) Vu Le, *Nonprofit AF Blog*. This prolific blogger and astute observer regularly says “the quiet part” right out loud. More often than not, he turns out to be right.

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