

The Mission Myth

Is it possible to focus too much on your organization's mission?

By Deirdre Maloney

It's a story that all of us have told and been told countless times: I was working for a for-profit company and was disheartened by the constant focus on the bottom line. I decided to leave the corporate world behind so I could do good.

We join nonprofits because of the mission. We love them for the same reason. We immerse ourselves in them, pour our time, efforts, and tears into them, all because of the mission. Put simply, we want to do good and we want to feel good. There's nothing wrong with that.

The mission drives you. It's the reason your organization exists, the reason people join it, staff it, volunteer for it, and give to it. Yet it's *not* the reason an organization succeeds.

Oftentimes nonprofit staff and board members believe that if they just put everything they have into the mission, then the rest—the successes and the money and the admiration and the impact—will all follow. Wrong. This is what I call the Mission Myth.

The truth is that the things that drove many of us away from the for-profit sector are precisely the critical factors that determine a nonprofit organization's success. I call them the four Ms: management, money, marketing, and measurement. They aren't sexy, but in the end they're just as important, and in some cases *more* important, than the mission in determining whether a nonprofit organization is successful.

It's not good enough to simply *do* the mission. You must carry it out effectively, efficiently, and with the highest standards of excellence. Why would you ever settle for anything less?

It may be the mission that drives you, but it's the business that drives you to success.

This isn't usually how people think when they first enter the nonprofit sector. Individuals don't become staff members at nonprofit organizations because they care about policies and procedures. They don't join boards because they care about governance. In the beginning, when they puff up their chests and know that their altruistic spirit is about to descend on an unsuspecting nonprofit, they don't think about accounting. Or liability insurance. Or office space. They want to do good and they want to feel good.

The four Ms must all be taken seriously and integrated into your organization. Strategic plans, fundraising and marketing strategies, policies and procedures, personnel and board development—each strengthens an organization at its core. You must have systems in place to ensure consistency and sustainability, no matter who is on the board and staff at the moment and no matter the current economic picture. The infrastructure must work. The books must balance. Computers can't crash and sinks can't leak. From the role of the board chair to the staff member who locks the door at night, you need to be mindful, thoughtful, and intentional about the needs of the business and each function within it.

“It may be the mission that drives you, but it's the business that drives you to success.”

A successful nonprofit doesn't run arbitrarily. It runs with a constant and diligent eye to the goals it strives to reach, continually searching for ways to serve more people more effectively, ensuring dollars are spent with the greatest of integrity and the highest of impact. This doesn't happen by chance. To make everything you do as meaningful as

possible, you must plan for it. You must create goals that reflect not just what you're working on, but what you're working *toward*. You must know who is doing each task, how they're doing it, and how you'll know if they've been successful.

If you don't market to the right audience to build investment in your organization and measure impact to prove your worth over others, the best-case scenario is that you aren't doing the mission as effectively as you could be. The worst-case scenario is that you're setting your organization up for failure. Ironically, more mission can sometimes be bad for your organization.

While it may be the mission that got you in the door, you don't have the luxury to think about the mission constantly. Sure, you must integrate it into your work. You must sell it. You must market it. You must collect data about it. But to focus on the mission *only* is to do good without doing good *well*. Those you serve deserve better. 

Deirdre Maloney is the principal of Momentum San Diego (deirdre@makemomentum.com, www.makemomentum.com), created to enhance organizational work. Deirdre has served as the executive of a multi-million-dollar nonprofit organization, a board member, a media specialist, marketing director, technical writer, and broadcast news producer.

“More mission can sometimes be bad for your organization.”

