



Why Organizations Go Off Course – Lesson 3: Don't Lose Touch with your Deeper Purpose
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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Go Off Course*. The article details a series of lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),¹ buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

This series offers a counterpoint to the lessons in my other series: *Why Organizations Thrive*.

Why Organizations Go off Course Lesson Three is: Don't Lose Touch with your Deeper Purpose

This lesson can best be introduced via a classic story about three bricklayers.

A man was walking down a street and came across someone laying bricks. The first bricklayer was dejected and doing a sloppy job as he laid bricks on top of each other. The man asked the bricklayer: "what are you doing?"

The first bricklayer's answer: "I'm putting bricks in a row and then putting another layer of bricks on top of them."

Further down the street, the man came across a second bricklayer. This bricklayer was workmanlike – doing her job in an apparently competent manner.

The man asked the second bricklayer: "what are you doing?"

The second bricklayer's answer: "I'm building a wall that will form the side of a building."

As the man walked even further down the street, the man came across a third bricklayer. This bricklayer was whistling as they worked, obviously happy, as he methodically put bricks together in rows, mortared them, and slowly built upwards.

The man asked the bricklayer: "what are you doing?"

The third bricklayer's answer: "I'm building the wall of a hospital that will save people's lives."

¹ I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around \$200,000 to more than \$1 million.

Is it any wonder that the second bricklayer was more productive than the first, and the third was most productive of all? The first was given a task, but had no purpose. The second had a purpose, but it was shallow. The third had a task, a purpose, and the purpose was framed in a deeper way that could arouse passion.

So how does this apply to nonprofits?

Almost always, small, new nonprofits are like bricklayer 3. They are founded around a purpose and that purpose tends to remain front and center as the team is built and tasks are divided up.

Yet, over time – whether the organization grows or not – nonprofits often wind up treating their staff, board, and other volunteers like bricklayer 2, or even worse bricklayer 1.

I saw this repeatedly when I was an Executive Director interacting with other organizations, and I see it sometimes as well as a consultant.

As organizations grow, there is a tendency to focus on specific duties or tasks that need to get done at the expense of the mission. This is particularly true on the organizational capacity side of the equation.

It's easy to stay focused on the purpose when you're doing the programmatic work of your nonprofit. It's harder to stay focused on the purpose when you're working on board governance, or fundraising, or information management systems.

These are the “bricks” that form the foundation of the organization, so it's easy to get caught in the trap of focusing on the process of laying bricks or the fact that it's a “foundation.”

Yet, in failing to keep your deeper purpose front and center, groups are likely to go off course as they lose some of the passion essential to fuel volunteer and staff activity.

Here are a few examples.

Your board is asked to raise money. You pay a great deal of attention in training them to the mechanics of raising the money and the need to hit certain financial goals. Yet, if the staff doesn't repeatedly tie those financial goals back to the purpose as it talks to the board, the board is less likely to go the extra mile to ask their friends for money.

I've seen the same situation happen with staff playing a non-program role. Whether they're doing your human resources, your database management, your accounting, or any of the myriad of other tasks that go into a medium or larger sized nonprofit, it's easy to fall into the trap of training them in isolation on just their own jobs. Many nonprofits can find competent administrative staff to “lay the bricks.”

But when push comes to shove, administrative staff who're repeatedly shown how their work is critical to your deeper purpose, are likely to be stronger performers. It may take a little extra time up-front to consistently keep the purpose front and center, but the payoff is almost always

worth it. They will work harder and longer for less pay. And they will be more creative in finding ways for their work to better support the programmatic work.

How about volunteers?

A great deal of my experience managing volunteers is in the election context, so my example will lie in that realm. Election volunteers are asked to step out of their comfort zone to talk to strangers at the door or on the phone on behalf of candidates or issues.

In the election context, I repeatedly found that staff organizers were more likely to generate enthusiastic, repeat volunteers if they always communicated to volunteers not just about the task at hand (the phone bank – bricklayer 1), and not just about the campaign (the phone bank as key to winning the election – bricklayer 2), but also the underlying purpose (the phone bank as key to winning the election so the candidate can lead on policies that save lives from dangerous levels of pollution -- bricklayer 3).

So what are some management techniques leaders can use as a manager to avoid going off course by losing touch with your deeper purpose?

Three techniques come immediately to mind:

First, get really good at talking about your organization's fundamental purpose, whether you call that your mission or otherwise. Make sure this is about underlying values and not first-order impacts.

Second, make sure the agenda for any significant meeting and the talking points for any presentation have some time set aside that connects the topic at hand to your deeper purpose. Even if you think everyone attending already understands your purpose, consistently reminding people of that purpose when they're together as a group is a powerful way to build community and teamwork.

Third, as you grow, don't completely silo those people who perform largely administrative or capacity building functions from your program work. They should be part of staff meetings or retreats that are focused on program. As you hire, train, and supervise these staff, make sure you find ways to continually connect them to the purpose.

In the end, of course, some people are going to naturally think like bricklayer 1, just as others are naturally going to think like bricklayer 3. But nonprofit leaders are absolutely in a position to make sure their organization doesn't go off course by letting the purpose be lost amidst the details.

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