



Why Organizations Go Off Course – Lesson 6: Don't Rehash Past Decisions
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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 Six is: Don't rehash past decisions.

Organizations that develop a culture of continually reopening decisions that were previously made almost never thrive.

This may seem like a no-brainer to many, yet I've seen it crop up time and time again in my interactions with nonprofit organizations over the last two decades. I've seen boards revisit big-picture strategies and one-time tactics. I've seen organizations make a fundraising decision at one meeting and then seemingly have the same fundraising conversation two meetings later. No topic seems off-limit to this failure.

Two questions come to mind:

Why is this damaging? And how can you develop a culture and set of practices to minimize the risk to your nonprofit?

What's the big deal with rehashing past decisions?

Time is among your most precious commodities as a nonprofit leader. Particularly with your board serving as volunteers, you maybe get 20-30 hours of their time together in one room in any given year. Spending time going back over old decisions means time that can't be spent making other critical decisions or team building. And it can be demoralizing to board members feeling like their time is wasted.

Of course, a related problem occurs when the rehashing leads to a different decision. Organizations that tend to yo-yo back and forth on decisions and strategies tend to lack discipline in other areas.

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.

A culture of rehashing decisions can also cause paralysis for staff. If staff fears that decisions once made aren't set in stone, they will be less likely to enthusiastically begin implementation, for fear their early work will become wasted.

So how do you minimize the risk that your organization will develop a culture of rehashing old decisions?

Start by understanding why organizations fall into this trap.

For starters, boards of directors and staff are rarely fixed over the long run. In any given year, boards will have turnover, as will staff who participate in major decisions. Newcomers will naturally raise issues that were previously resolved. Absent strong facilitation from a chair, the debate will take place all over again.

More nefariously, I've watched board members who lost a previous debate reopen a decision when they sense that the new board composition might yield a different outcome.

Another significant factor is a tendency to leave decisions half-made. More than once I've encountered boards who debated a topic, but the debate petered out without decision. Or, the decision was made vaguely and not committed to writing. Within a month, memories of what decision was made vary. So the debate happens again.

Given these factors, here are four tips for avoiding this trap:

1. Do a good board and staff orientation. Make sure it covers the big decisions of the organization, so that new board members won't rehash those (at least not prematurely).
2. Set clear meeting agendas and have a board chair who understands their role includes shutting down off-topic suggestions or reopening past decisions.
3. Clearly document decisions and share them with everyone that matters, not just via minutes, but through other means.
4. Include a lay of the land within strategic plans and other significant planning documents, so that you'll have a clear understanding of what needs to change before you reopen a decision.

Of course, no decision lasts forever. There is a time and a place to re-open a decision. But generally that should either be at a designated planning process or when the lay of the land has changed significantly.

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