

Mission Drift

When the work becomes crowded, can the mission still be seen?



An Experience

At a community town hall, a county behavioral health director met a mother who had been willing to speak candidly about her family's experience with the system.

They talked for a few minutes afterward.

Before she left, he invited her to attend an upcoming implementation planning meeting for a new initiative.

It was at 9:00 on a Monday morning—not exactly designed around a parent's life—but she came.

Around the table were administrators, providers, and representatives from behavioral health, child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and other child-serving agencies. People responsible for turning policy, funding, and expectations into services that worked in the community.

The director had invited her because he wanted her to hear about the work underway.

A significant new initiative had brought new resources and new possibilities. There was a lot to accomplish.

The conversation moved quickly.

- Funding requirements.

- Implementation timelines.

- Staffing.

- Contracts.

- Performance measures.

- Reporting expectations.

Everyone around the table was working through something important.

The mother listened.

Eventually, she raised her hand.

"I think I understand what we're required to do," she said. "I'm just wondering—how does this get us closer to what we said we wanted for children and families?"

The room grew quiet.

The director looked around the table.

Nothing they had been discussing was unimportant.

The funding mattered.

The requirements mattered.

The timelines mattered.

The outcomes mattered.

But he realized something.

They had spent the morning talking about what they needed to do.

No one had talked about why they were doing it.

Introduction

Organizations do not operate in a vacuum.

Public systems navigate changing mandates, legislation, governing priorities, funding requirements, new initiatives, workforce realities, and the expectations of the communities they serve.

Community-based organizations experience many of the same pressures from a different position. Contracts change. Funding priorities shift. New opportunities emerge. Community needs evolve. Sometimes adapting is necessary simply to keep doing the work.

Adaptation is not mission drift.

Organizations must change as the conditions around them change. New funding can create opportunities to reach people differently, strengthen services, respond to emerging needs, or accomplish something that was not possible before.

The challenge comes when responding to what is changing around us begins to quietly change what is guiding us.

Perhaps the question is not whether funding should influence what an organization does. Of course it will.

The question is:

Can funding influence what you do without being allowed to redefine why you do it?

Reflection

Mission drift does not always look like an organization moving away from its mission.

Sometimes the mission and the purpose behind it are still there.

They have simply become harder to see beneath everything the organization is carrying.

Multiple funding streams. Multiple initiatives. Different programs. Different populations. Different reporting requirements. Different expectations.

No one has necessarily stopped caring.

No one has necessarily abandoned the mission.

The work may simply have become crowded.

Staff can lose sight of how their work fits.

Managers can become consumed with translating competing priorities.

Leaders can spend so much time responding to what is required that it becomes harder to see what is guiding the organization as a whole.

And the people receiving services may experience all of that disconnection as a system that sends them in circles.

The question may not be whether the mission still exists.

It may be whether the organization still owns it.

Does the organization still own its purpose, or has purpose become something everyone assumes is there while they focus on everything else?

Another Way to See It

People do not need to understand every initiative.

But they do need to understand how their work connects to the organization's mission and the purpose behind it, how it intersects with the work of others, and what that combined experience feels like to the person being served.

That is different from simply knowing a job description.

A staff member may know exactly what they are responsible for and still be unclear about how their work contributes to the larger purpose.

A manager may understand the initiative they are responsible for and still struggle to see how it connects with the priorities being carried by another team.

Leadership may be successfully managing multiple funding streams, programs, requirements, and expectations while the people doing the work are trying to make sense of how all the pieces fit together.

Good work is not always connected work.

People can be capable, committed, and doing exactly what is expected of them while their work remains disconnected from the work happening around them.

And the person receiving services experiences all of those separate decisions as one experience.

They do not experience the funding streams.

They do not experience the organizational chart.

They do not experience the initiatives.

They experience whether the people and services around them make sense together.

Perhaps keeping mission and purpose visible is not about asking everyone to know everything.

It is about creating enough shared understanding that people can recognize:

Why the organization exists.

Where their own contribution fits.

How their work affects the work of others.

And what all of that feels like to the people the organization exists to serve.

The mission may not need to be rediscovered.

The purpose behind it may simply need to become visible again.

Companion Discussion Guide to follow.