

# How to Avoid Mission Drift and Stay True to Your Purpose

*Mission drift is an irresistible force. You need to build in measures to help you avoid suffering from this crisis of identity. If you don't, you might end up running a company that is very different than the one you intended to build.*

Jim Schleckser

As every company gets older and matures, especially around its tenth anniversary and after, it can become difficult to remember the reasons why it was founded in the first place. When you look to those organizations that have been around 30 to 50 years and older, it can be really hard to believe you're talking about the same place.

For example, did you know that Harvard University's founding purpose was to "prepare ministers of upright character"?

It would be tough to argue that Harvard still operates by that same purpose today even though it's in the exact same place it was founded back in 1636. So, what happened?

In short, mission drift.

This is something that threatens every organization out there and, unless you put some safeguards and preventative measures in place, you could find yourself running an organization you don't even recognize anymore.

What makes this challenging is that mission drift isn't something that happens all at once. Think of it more as being nibbled to death by ducks. It happens one little decision at a time, where you go astray by just a bit. Maybe it's a decision about chasing revenue from a customer that doesn't really fit with your mission. It doesn't seem like a big deal at the time. But, when you add that decision up with all the others like it, you can't believe how you got where you ended up.

Take another example, this time from the retail sector. Entrepreneur Dov Charney founded his company American Apparel back in 1997 because he was tired of seeing American manufacturing shops being shipped overseas. He started his company to create jobs by starting to make clothes in the U.S. again.

But over time, the business experienced mission drift. Eventually, rather than focusing on creating American jobs, the company became known for its sexually charged ads. For his part, Charney became known as the Hugh Hefner of retail as the business continued to shift away from its original mission. More recently, the company declared bankruptcy, which should serve as a sobering reminder of what can happen when you lose touch with the values you began your business with.

So how do you avoid mission drift and keep your organization on the right path? Here are a few tips:

### **Your Board**

Tip one is to enlist a board that is fully in line with the organization's mission. Make sure they buy into your purpose and then charge them helping make sure they say something if they think a decision is out of alignment with your values.

### **Your Executive Team**

The second tip is to hire executives and leaders who also buy into the mission, purpose and values of the organization. Then exit the people who don't--regardless of how great a performer they are. While that might be a painful decision to make to your bottom line in the near term, it will pay off big time over the long run.

### **Embed Mission into Your Culture**

You can also use stories and symbols as ways to embed your mission and purpose into your organization DNA in such a way that everyone in the organization can make their own course corrections on a daily basis.

Similarly, everyone in the company should use the mission and purpose of the company as their North Star of sorts as they make their decisions. Everyone needs to be encouraged to act on the notion that if something requires him or her to act against those values, they quite simply shouldn't do it.

### **Measure the Mission**

And finally, constantly measure how true you are acting when it comes to your mission. You need only look to the great retailer Nordstrom for inspiration in how to do this. Every day, Nordstrom posts a list of the top ten salespeople in the company: everyone knows who the rainmakers are. But just as importantly, the company also publishes the letters from customers who are saluting those employees who stood out in supporting the company's mission, which is to "provide outstanding service every day, one customer at a time." Seeing those letters every day is a way to measure how well Nordstrom is tracking to its mission.

One day, for instance, the company posted the letter from a customer who couldn't believe how, after she called a store to see if they had found a diamond that gotten loose from the customer's engagement ring, the staff at the store scoured every inch of floor looking for it. More incredibly, they also went through every dirty vacuum bag until they found it. How's that for supporting your mission?

The key again is that as your company gets going, you need to build in measures like these to help you avoid suffering mission drift. If you don't, you might end up running a company that is very different than the one you intended to build.