

Curbing Mission Creep and Micromanagement

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Mission creep and micromanagement are disorders of a board. The symptoms and cures are different. Both create disruption in an organization.

Mission Creep

Mission creep is not a disparaging characterization of a member of the board.

It is the process where a gradual shift in purpose occurs, with or without awareness. In organizations with limited resources, the expansion of the mission will dilute programs and services.

A board that tries to be all things to all people will exhaust resources and reduce quality of programs and services.

From the perspective of the IRS, working outside the mission statement may cause “unrelated business income tax” or UBT. The organization has described its purpose to receive its tax exemption status.

Guided by Governing Documents

Governing documents define the parameters of board work.

At the national level, the IRS has reviewed the narrowly defined purpose of the organization. It is noted in the application for exempt status with a “description of the activity including its purpose and how each activity furthers your exempt purpose.” Expansion beyond the purpose can be troublesome.

At the state level the Division of Corporations issues not-for-profit status. The original incorporators submit the association’s mission.

Bylaws describe the purpose of the organization and the relationship of the board to the membership. In addition to defining the purpose the board’s duties are communicated.

Here is a bylaws example that specifies the board’s purpose:

- Establish governance policies.
- Approve the annual budget.
- Establish dues and fees.

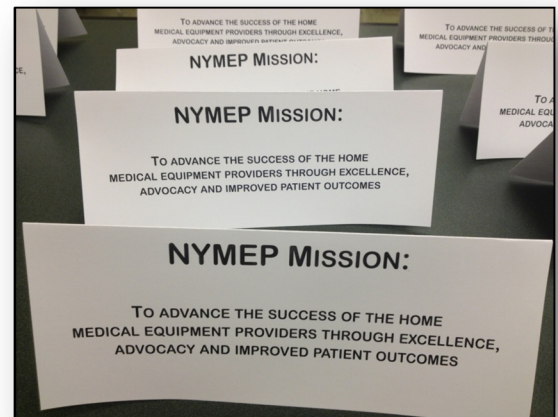
- Retain executive director for organization.

Exceeding the parameters of board service, or expanding beyond the mission statement, can have adverse impact. Generally the bylaws approve the board approving funds, setting policy, advancing the mission, hiring a CEO and representing the membership.

Curbing Mission Creep

Some ways to curb mission creep:

- **Awareness** – Be sure board members understand the mission statement and its relationship to governing documents, membership and legal authorities.
- **Squirrels** – Directors, committees and boards that chase good idea may be distracted from the mission, like a dog chases every squirrel. Before pursuing new ideas, check them against the mission statement.
- **Discipline** – It requires discipline not to expand the mission. If directors don't have the discipline, you would expect the chair of the board to remind board members of the purpose. Use the techniques of reading the mission at the start of meetings or sharing a mission-moment to demonstrate how the organization has recently carried out its mission. Members generally prefer their association be good at a few things rather than trying to do everything.
- **Display** – Wherever governance decisions are made the mission should be displayed. It may be framed on the wall of a conference room, printed on the agenda, or on the reverse side of name tent cards.
- **Resources** – Limited resources should restrain mission creep. As resources grow the board may want to grow association programs. Possibly directors are not aware of the nexus between resources and new initiatives. "This won't take the staff much time," is a frequent board remark.
- **Strategic Plan** – A strategic plan is built upon the mission statement. Within the plan are goals and strategies. If directors ignore the plan or are unaware of its purpose, mission creep may occur. The plan keeps the board "between the rails."



Curbing Micromanagement

Micromanagement is a style where a manager, or in the case of an association, board members, too closely monitor employees. It has a negative impact on staff when employees feel they are not trusted and are being evaluated by the board.

An example would be a director that drops by the office and begins to ask questions about workload, efficiency and operations. These are areas outside of governance and not in the purview of board members. The staff answer to their supervisors and the executive director.

Remedies for Micromanagement

Try these cures for micromanagement, starting with awareness:

- **Board Training** – Directors may not realize that their service on the board does not include hiring and evaluating staff. A good orientation will help them understand that the staff work for the executive director.
- **Staff Relationships** – An organizational chart should depict the relationships and lines of authority in the organization. The board has a direct link to the executive director but not to the staff. It would be inappropriate for directors and committees to be calling staff asking for help or favors. Assume the staff has a full workload.
- **Fraternization** – Personal relationships with staff should be careful. Directors maintain a professional, collegial relationship with staff. If staff serve as liaisons to committees, they should be respected as a resource.
- **Enforcement** – In appropriate relationships with staff can result in conflicts of interest or even sexual harassment. The officers and executive director must enforce inappropriate behaviors.

In summary, both mission creep and micromanagement can have adverse effects on the organization. Awareness is the start to avoiding the problems.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.co