

Is your organization handcuffed by its mission?

by Robert Ferguson

The venerable *Washington Post* only narrowly-escaped the fate of many newspapers by realizing its mission was the greatest impediment to its survival. Its story of transformation – from hyper-focused newspaper with a local identity, to highly influential national news organization with global reach – holds lessons for organizations everywhere that are currently facing challenges.



Once upon a time, *The Washington Post* was the world's most famous local newspaper. It published the Pentagon Papers in 1971, then doggedly followed the story of the Watergate break-in to its bitter conclusion in 1974 – earning global name recognition in the process – but it never sought to capitalize on those achievements by recruiting readers and subscribers from beyond its geographic base.

Expansion was considered and rejected: the Graham family, which had controlled the Post since 1933, felt the *Post's* identity was too tied up in its local business model to change. "We are not a national newspaper," Donald Graham, publisher from 1979-2000, said defiantly. "We are a local newspaper for a place that happens to be the capital of the United States," so its focus remained "about Washington, for Washingtonians."

What then happened at the *Post* is a roadmap for the transformation of a lot of organizations – including your nonprofit.



Washington Post Publisher Katharine Graham, reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, managing editor Howard Simons and Executive Editor Ben Bradlee in *The Washington Post* newsroom.

An unlikely roadmap to transformation

The idea the *Post* would ever lose sight of its identity as a paper with a local mission was anathema. And in the 1980s and '90s, when the paper reached more households in its geographic area than any other daily, this single-minded focus was fine. But by the first decade of the new millennium, as the traditional newspaper model began breaking everywhere, hanging-on to this local newspaper identity was proving self-destructive.

When the Grahams sold *Newsweek* for \$1 (plus assumption of liabilities) in 2010 they feared the same future for the *Post*, which was struggling to survive. Managers undermine their future by slashing budgets because this deprives organizations of their ability to understand what they want to be bold about. In the case of the *Post*, shedding personnel diminished its ambition, which led to entrenched uncertainty and corporate weakness.

The Washington Post

It seemed unlikely the *Post* would escape the sad demise shared by many similar regional papers, but two good things happened: First, in 2011, when offered the chance to fill Ben Bradlee's chair, Marty Baron couldn't pass-up editing the newspaper Bradlee, Woodward, and Bernstein had made eternally famous. Second, it's historic name was equally compelling to Jeff Bezos and, in 2013, conditional on his commitment to invest in the newspaper, Bezos bought the struggling paper for \$250 million.

A regional strategy wasn't going to work any longer

Baron knew Bezos had built Amazon by giving it years of "runway" to lose money in the name of long-term growth, and that he had not bought the *Post* to continue shrinking it – that meant good things were on the horizon. Bezos immediately announced the paper's outlook would change from local to national, even global, and he insisted it start persuading more subscribers to buy cheaper digital-only subscriptions. After all, he knows better than anyone that the Internet's great gift is in providing virtually free global distribution.



While Baron cherishes traditional newspapers, he believes it better to have newspapers in some form than no newspaper at all. The essential purpose of newspapers is journalism and storytelling – not ink and paper – and that can take place in myriad forms. Baron was practical enough to know building a bigger digital audience would be a more alluring challenge than desperately hanging on to a shrinking number of paper-only subscribers. The Bezos-Baron duo began transforming this old-style business into a digital-first newspaper and it has become a truly national paper capable of understanding the country at large. It now has three million digital subscribers, the most of any U.S. paper after *The New York Times*, and its website has been topping 100 million monthly unique visitors, which is also on par with the Times.

Money is nice but vision comes first

Bezos is the world's richest person, so it is easy to conclude the paper's turnaround was the result of his deep pockets. Yet it seems more correct to say the *Post*, under the Grahams, was held back by a lack of imagination, not a lack of money. They had the money to make the necessary changes Bezos ultimately made after his 2013 takeover. Donald Graham had invested tens of millions of dollars in digital initiatives as early as the 1990s, and considered expanding its reach beyond the

Beltway as late as 2002. But the family simply couldn't get over its belief in its identity as a local newspaper. Their sense of mission handcuffed them. In other words, Bezos' money didn't breach the barrier of local identity, his vision did.

Ultimately, change and renewed success came as the result of being brave about innovating and thinking about the *Post* as a national paper rather than continue managing it as a local paper. Bezos and Baron thought beyond the walls so they could grab a larger share of voice.



“Imagine what we could do, if only we had more money.”

Organizations spend their whole life trying to get more money so they can achieve their plans. They see the lack of money as the biggest problem holding them back from future success.

But where's the vision? Where are the innovative ideas? The biggest problem is when mission holds your imagination and ambition hostage, causing you to innovate too little.

Overlook Jeff Bezos' deep pockets. *The Washington Post* story provides purpose-driven organizations with an intriguing, if familiar-sounding truth: ***It's not about the money.*** To emerge from the pandemic stronger than before, they must:

- not allow their foundational mission to limit the expansion of their vision and organizational potential;
- lay new foundations for relationships with transformative and differentiating narratives and renew their story for a new age of listeners;
- reach out beyond their self-limited mission-imposed parameters and grow their sphere of influence;
- create a well-differentiated leadership story and use deep-seated expertise to make their organization more competitive in a cluttered space;
- build a more resilient brand that connects meaningfully with donors so they can overcome skepticism and build the trust essential to successful fundraising.

Organizations currently facing financial challenges would do well to remember this:

Money only rarely precedes innovation, but it almost always seeks it out.

Reference: Marc Tracy “How Marty Baron and Jeff Bezos Remade The Washington Post,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2021.