



Stanford eCorner

The Power of a Mission

Christine Benninger, *Humane Society of Silicon Valley*

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Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/1934/The-Power-of-a-Mission>

If you're seeking inspiration, you will find it here from Humane Society Silicon Valley's President, Christine Benninger. She describes the organization as she inherited it as a cesspool, rife with drug dealing staff, disorderly management, sour community relations, and cruel animal care. She recalls her quickly orchestrated six-month plan to keep the organization afloat - and how dire circumstances made her monumentally more creative and successful.



Transcript

Tell the students if you would, I know a little bit about this but I'd love for you to share it. What was it like when you joined? What was the state of the organization and how were they doing? So, when I joined, when I said I didn't really know much about the job, I "really" did not know much about the job like. The county had a contract with Humane Society to house their stray animals and that was a contract that provided 90 % of our revenue stream. And the county had just cancelled that contract. We had about 300 donors. We had a board that didn't believe in fund raising because we didn't really want to go out to the world and sort of with a tin cup and beg. We fought what everybody in our community. We had no support from the Vets, no support from city government. We had employees that were dealing drugs on site. We had employees that were sending animals, you know, selling animals to bunchers.

The bunchers are people who collect animals and take them out on for use in labs, by the most scrupulous labs. So it was a bit of a cesspool when I first started. It was quite interesting. And what was on the list of positives though? These guys. Yeah. You know? So Lily is - she was there when I first op there. But, so what made it all worthwhile was the fact that we had this amazing mission, which was to save and enhance lives. And it's not just literally about the four-legged lives. It's about the two-legged lives and the magic that happens when those two entities come together. So that's the saving grace.

It's that the mission really carries you through the tough times. Indeed. I'm intrigued by the whole 90 % of your revenue coming from a contract that was about to be cancelled. Can you take the students back to the moment that you realized this was happening and kind of what your thoughts were at the time? Well I probably can't exactly tell you my thoughts because I, you don't want it on tape. You know, a lot of four-letter words there. Oh my God! But you know, when you and I talked, you know I think, oftentimes we were back-faced to the wall like that that's probably when you start to become your most creative because you have no choice. You've got to do something. And that's where we made this strategic decision that to keep afloat in the short-term we've got to jump right back into doing animal control and actually expand our reach in animal control where before we'd only been doing housing. We really need to, you know, be going out and bidding on contracts for also having the officers on the streets as well as just doing the housing. So it took us about 6 months but went and we're able to garner contracts from 9 different cities for animal control and housing.

And that kept us afloat. Uh-huh. Until we get kind of sort or sold out. Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. What were some of the other strategic changes that you had to make? That's a big one. What were some of the others that you faced at the time? Pretty much a complete turnover on management. So, you know, my predecessor was one who had a lot of personal problems so the

organization had sort of been left to go its own way in a variety of different ways and oftentimes the organization's attract the wrong people in those cases. So I had to make a complete management change because there was so much distrust for our organization with the community that also elicited concern from certain community members. So there was, you know, there was a lot of turmoil that first year in trying to get things settled down. People make all the difference in the world and you just, if you can get the right people within the organization, you know, sharing a common goal and a common mission, it's amazing what you can do.

And that made all the difference.