

The Effects of the YMCA's Mission Statement

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### Abstract

The goal of this autoethnography is to discover how well the Warsaw YMCA's mission statement was implemented throughout all departments. More closely, the study will examine how the failure to apply the mission statement equally in each department resulted in the organization trying to abandon the gymnastics program. Gender imbalance in the organization is also discussed as a possibility for the neglect of the gymnastics program. This research will be contributing to the lack of research on mission statements being applied in organizations. According to their mission statement, the YMCA is a Christian faith-based organization, so this research examines how religion is navigated in a non-profit organization.

*Keywords: YMCA, mission statement, gender equality, CDO, non-profit organization, religion, Christianity*

I researched the YMCA organization that I was involved with for most of my life until about a year ago. YMCA stands for “Young Men’s Christian Association” (Our Y). It is a recreational facility that offers programs that promote fitness and health. The main goal of the YMCA is to help the community. I began going to the YMCA in my hometown when I was around 3 years old because my parents decided to put me in gymnastics. They actually had a pretty decent team there, so I continued to train there until I started high school gymnastics. Not only did I do gymnastics here, but I also got my first job here. Right when I turned fourteen, I got hired to be a gymnastics coach. It wasn’t until I was an employee at the organization where I began to realize what the organization’s values were and what they did for the community.

In this autoethnography I will be comparing my life experiences at the YMCA with archival research to analyze and critique the communication and operations of this facility. One focus will be on the organization’s mission statement. When I got hired at 14 years old, I discovered their mission statement for the first time. Their mission statement is “to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all” (Our Y). I had never really realized the YMCA was a Christian organization until then, and after that I began seeing different ways they try to incorporate that into the culture of the organization. For example, one time when I was working out there, a woman at the front desk asked me to change my shirt because my stomach was showing. At first I thought it was odd since you see videos of people working out in just shorts and a bra all the time on the internet, and I was covered far more than that. Once I remembered that the YMCA is not your typical gym, I realized it was one way the Christian aspect of the organization is put into practice. It is strange however, that I never noticed this culture in the gymnastics gym.

I wanted to find out how the YMCA is consistent with their mission statement and what they do to create a culture of similar values. I think that they definitely have a bit of work to do when it comes to uniting all branches of the organization, and I am going to include that in my study. I think it is important to conduct this study because it will show what they do well and what they do poorly by having such unique values for their organization. It can help us learn what to do and what not to do when managing a large organization with religious values.

There is a lot of research on what makes a strong mission statement, but there is not very much research on how to successfully implement the mission statement into the organization. An article about corporate mission statements explained that there are empirical studies that describe desirable component characteristics of strong mission statements, but none have attempted to link mission statements to the actual performance of an organization or corporation (Pearce, 1987). This is a rather dated article, but it is still true today. This autoethnography will show the need for research in this area, because many organizations do not put their mission statement into practice throughout their departments. I will be measuring how strong the YMCA's communication of their mission statement is based on my experiences in each department there. I will also be using archival research to support my claims.

In an article that describes strong mission statements, Tarnow explains that "if correctly worded, a company's mission or vision statement serves the same function as a team jersey. Both can serve to unify the group around a task" (Tarnow, 2001, p. 138). This is a good way to view practicing a mission statement in an organization. The mission statement should act as a team jersey in the sense that it can be seen across all departments in the entire organization. If all departments are not practicing the mission statement, the organization is not seen as one unified team.

When departments are not unified, cliques can be created within the organization. I did see the formation of cliques throughout my time at the YMCA. I think most of the cliques were really just between the departments. The front desk employees stuck together, the fitness staff stuck together, the swim program stuck together, and the gymnastics program stuck together. Even though the fitness staff worked right next to the front desk staff, they didn't really talk to each other because they were in different departments. As I researched the formation of cliques in organizations, I read about how many different forms of cliques there are. My research indicated that the type of clique formed in the YMCA was one of "interrank membership; the degree of inclusion of members from different status levels present in any clique over the number of formal status levels present in the organization" (Tichy, 1973, p. 197). This type of clique is found in the YMCA organization. For example, the gymnastics department, or gymnastics "clique" included all levels of people, including gymnasts, parents, coaches for low level classes, team coaches, assistant coaches, and of course our head coach. In these types of cliques, Tichy suggests that members of the clique with a higher status often are dependent on bringing good people up in the system in order to impress their own superiors (Tichy, 1973). My head coach was always trying to recruit gymnasts to be coaches at the gym, likely to impress her boss so he would be more inclined to support the program more.

This autoethnography will also be diving into how gender imbalance could have affected the formation of cliques and the abandonment of some departments. In an article where a feminist institutional perspective was applied to the study of male dominated organizations, O'Connor discovered that organizations that are dominated by men are simply reproducing gender equality by not trying to change the imbalance of their staff (O'Connor, 2020). This does occur in the organization I studied and will be discussed in this autoethnography.

According to the Warsaw YMCA's website, their mission statement is "to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all" (Our Y). They also include that "the Y is more than a building, it's the nation's leading nonprofit focused on strengthening communities through youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility" (Our Y). Throughout my time at the YMCA, I found that they were proactive at instilling their mission statement in some programs, but not all. I definitely felt like I was building a healthy body throughout my time in the gymnastics program, but I did not notice any Christian principles until I was exposed to other departments. This is something that needs to be changed. Going back to the jersey analogy, this means that the departments at the YMCA were not all in the same jersey, which means they were not unified. Their mission statement was not encapsulated across each department. Because the YMCA is a nonprofit organization, I researched nonprofits and found that mission statements are actually especially important for nonprofits. It "defines the organizational identity and purpose for both external and internal stakeholders" (Pandey, 2017, p. 1). Unfortunately, as an internal stakeholder, I was lost on the mission statement purpose, so I can only imagine how people on the outside felt.

The YMCA's mission statement includes that they use Christian principles through everything they do. However, they are not necessarily an official religious organization such as a church. Deb Hancox dives into these "in between" religious organizations by defining them as "CDO's," a Christian development organization (Hancox, 2019). Hancox explains that these organizations are "a practical faith that seeks, hopes and works for the well-being of people in difficult situations. This in turn leads to the development of operative theologies (often not written but alive in organizational culture and strategies) related to their area of work, for example homelessness, joblessness, disaster relief, children at risk or any other focus area"

(Hancox, 2019, p.7). According to her research, the YMCA can be counted as a CDO, which means that most of their “Christian emphasis” is displayed through acts of service for those in need. YMCA’s provide childcare, fitness, pastor meetings, sports for young children, and more. However, when I was hired at the YMCA, I was not informed of *how* we would be working to have a Christian emphasis. I was left wondering if I was expected to be Christian, if I should be encouraging others to be Christian, etc. There was definitely a miscommunication here. I think without this miscommunication, there might be less cliques in the organization because everyone would be on the same page.

Throughout my time at the YMCA, I quickly learned that the majority of the staff and even the guests were mostly Christians. They were all very accustomed to being surrounded by Christians. Because of this, they were very comfortable with asking me about my faith, what church I attended and more. Based on my artifacts, this was not the intention of the YMCA’s mission statement. I think that because the YMCA is considered a CDO, they intended to practice Christianity through good deeds with the services they provided. However, because they did not clearly specify this in any employee training, many Christian employees assumed their job was also an outlet to practice their religion by communicating with guests and employees about it. This is a mistake in management/training. Studies on mission statements suggest that we publish and use these manuals and mission statements like open source projects, meaning that we should continuously remind staff of the mission, as well as keep the mission open for discussion and changes if desired (Perkmann, 2014). This leads me to believe the YMCA needed clearer communication with their staff about their mission.

In my research, an article by Kramer and Miller suggests that anticipatory socialization (both occupational and organizational)) refers to “the influence of family, education, part-time

jobs, peers or friends, and the media on occupational selection” (Kramer and Miller [29], 359). I believe that this occurred after I was hired as an employee. Once I was hired as an employee, I was told that it was a Christian organization. I also began receiving emails every week from the Director of Christian Emphasis. These emails were called “Weekly Devotionals” where he would include a bible verse and then write a few short paragraphs about what it meant or what we could take away from it. I believe in God, but religion was never a priority in my home and I have never been very religious, so I personally found this rather odd. I was originally hired as a gymnastics coach, but I was later hired as a fitness instructor as well. During my time as a fitness instructor, lots of my coworkers would talk to each other about what church they went to, if they would see them at church that Sunday, etc. I often felt judged by the anticipatory socialization I had with my peers/coworkers because when they would ask me this question, I would tell them that I did not attend a church. Considering I also was lost on how I was expected to carry out the Christian emphasis of the mission statement, I felt very out of place. I wasn’t sure if I belonged. While conducting my research, I discovered there is very little research on spirituality and how it is portrayed in organizations (Harter, 2007). My hope is that this study will contribute to the few resources that are out there for religion in organizations.

One thing that I thought was interesting about my experience at the YMCA was that it actually seems to have a lot of different groups. When I was younger, I really just thought of the YMCA as the place I do gymnastics at. I didn’t think of it as a non-profit organization or a gym or anything like that. As I got older, I started to notice more things. For example, I never really realized how big of a deal the pool at the YMCA was until I started taking swim lessons. When I did this, I started to notice differences between the gymnastics gym and the pool area. There were different teachers and they seemed to follow more “YMCA rules” than the gymnastics gym

did. It definitely seemed like the values were not the same. For example, I absolutely loved my gymnastics coach, but she definitely pushed us hard. I even had one coach there that would sit on girls while we did our splits. Once I started swim lessons, they definitely did not seem to push anyone as hard as they did in gymnastics.

There were definitely departments that were favored over others at the YMCA. One of them was the swim team. The swim team was likely favored because they followed the mission statement very closely. The gymnastics program did not quite as well. I believe that my experience as a gymnast has made me extremely brave. In gymnastics, there are a lot of different skills that you have to try, even if you are afraid of them. There were times where I would be standing on the balance beam, afraid to do a skill, and my coach wouldn't let me do anything else until I did the skill. She would keep me from going to my favorite event, or even keep me after practice was over until I did the skill. I and many other gymnasts there have countless experiences of standing on the beam bawling while our coach yells at us to just "DO IT." This was the only sport I had ever done, so I assumed all sports were like this. When I started taking swim lessons at the YMCA, I was very surprised.

Kids have a lot of fears when it comes to swimming as well. Most kids are afraid of jumping off the diving board. When kids would refuse to jump off the diving board, the swim coaches would try to convince them for about two minutes, and then they'd let it go and the child would not participate. I was shocked. This was something that would never have happened in the gymnastics program. This shows me that the swim team followed the mission statement more closely. They wanted to build kids up and improve their mental and physical health. The gymnastics program focused on creating strong gymnasts, rather than building up their mind and spirits like the mission statement suggests.

When I was around 15 years old, the YMCA built a new building. It was a huge, newer building and everyone was super excited about it. However, once the time for the building to open was getting closer, our coach informed us, with tears in her eyes, that due to budget cuts the CEO had told her that there was not enough room for us at the new facility. She told us that she was working on figuring a new plan out, but that for right now we didn't have anywhere to go. While this plan was being figured out, I remember my coach continuing to ask me to get trained to teach new classes. She also was trying to get me to sign up to coach during the YMCA's gymnastics summer camp. This is an example of how a higher level of authority in an interranks membership clique tries to bring good people up the chain in order to raise the clique's status for the CEO. By bringing more talented coaches in, she showed promise for the gymnastics program.

My coach ended up negotiating enough with the CEO to get him to rent out a separate building for the team to practice. They also provided a small area at the new YMCA building for preschool classes and other gymnastics classes that led up to the team level, but it did not have the proper equipment for the team practice. There was no spring floor, nor were there uneven bars that could reach the correct height for competition. The gym was also in the basketball gym, with a cloth divider between the basketball court and the gymnastics area. Although we had somewhere to go, it was in a dark, cold, warehouse that you had to drive down an alley to the back of the building for, and there was limited parking. It definitely seemed like the YMCA was trying to push us out of the organization. In contrast, the swim program got a giant pool room with bigger and better pools and better equipment. The gymnastics program and the swim program bring in roughly the same amount of money per year, so it is strange that they tried to cut one of their biggest programs. One interpretation of this was that because my coach did not

push the mission statement and Christian principles as much as the other programs did, the organization deemed it as invaluable.

While this is a very likely component of the gymnastics program's demise, there are some other limitations to note. The lack of carrying out the mission statement may not be the only thing to blame. The CEO at the time was a male, the director of marketing was also a male, and the director of the aquatics program was a male as well. The gymnastics program was of course heavily female dominated. There were no male employees, and there was just one introductory boys gymnastics class. The CEO had told our coach that they were not able to give us space in the new facility because it was not in the budget, and that most of the budget had to go towards the new swimming pools for the aquatics program. These reasons were coming from 3 men. The CEO, the director of marketing, and the aquatics director. The gymnastics program had been doing very well. We were shocked that they would want to cut it because it was bringing in so many customers. It's important to note that it could have been a result of gender imbalance. Considering it was 3 men defying the gymnastics program a space, it seems that these people of authority were struggling to accept this female dominated program because they didn't want it to overshadow the swim program. This is found often, as Cockburn explains in an article about gender equality. Cockburn explains that "women's acceptance is fragile in male dominated organizations since their status as honorary males may be withdrawn at any time" (Cockburn, 1991, p. 5). I think a possibility of why the gymnastics program was shut out could be because the swim director felt threatened by our program.

Another way that the mission statement was not entirely followed happened in the basketball gym. At the old facility, we would have to go outside the gym to get water. Outside our gym was actually the basketball gym, so we would have to drink from the drinking fountain

in that gym. It was not uncommon for us to be cat-called in there, especially for the older girls. Considering this is a Christian faith based, family friendly facility, that behavior should have been shut down immediately, but it never was. This is another implication that makes me wonder if the gymnastics program being abandoned had nothing to do with following the mission statement at all. The basketball gym followed the YMCA rules the least, yet they were given a huge beautiful gym in the new facility. This could also be because the basketball program is male dominated. In an article from 2002, Connell found that every institution has a “particular gender order or ‘gender regime’ that operates through a ‘hidden’ day to day interplay of formal and informal norms with gendered implications. It defines what is expected, allowed, and encouraged in relation to what women and men do in different contexts” (Connell, 2002, p.1). This seems to be the scenario of what happened at the YMCA. In the YMCA’s rules, they explain that they have no tolerance for profanities or disrespectful behavior, however, nothing was ever done about the disrespectful behavior in the basketball gym. Unfortunately, as discussed in O’Connor’s article, this cycle is likely going to be repeated. After moving to the new facility, we actually got another CEO, but he was a male as well. I hope that one day there is more female leadership for this organization.

Another limitation of this study is that I am not very religious. It is possible that I may be more critical of religion being thrown in my face because it is very foreign to me. Nonetheless, This autoethnography has taught me a lot about how a mission statement compared to how an organization operates can be very indicative of how an organization is performing. The conclusion of this study is that the YMCA struggles to communicate how to put its mission statement into action, which results in departments not being unified and forming into cliques. There are also indications in this organization of some gender imbalance between departments.

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