

Stagnation and Decline: Symptoms and Treatments

The signs of organizational distress in an NGO aren't difficult to identify. Here are the most typical symptoms of decline and some practical responses:

Program	
Symptom Demand has declined, and capacity to deliver services is under-utilized.	Treatment Reassess the needs of target audiences, and revise programs to meet current needs. Or, add new offerings to the program mix, and eliminate outmoded ones. Restaffing or retraining may be required to deliver new or revised services.
Management	
Symptom Management is unable to think creatively about the organization's mission or approach.	Treatment Enlist help from external advisors to generate fresh alternatives and provide objective perspectives. A change in leadership may be appropriate.
Staffing	
Symptom The staff is torn by infighting and turf wars.	Treatment Consider reorganizing staffing structure, including reallocating responsibility and retraining people. Retain consultants to help clarify disputed issues and assess staff members' capabilities.
Board	
Symptom The same few board members show up at every meeting to rehash familiar issues.	Treatment Contact all board members and discuss their commitment to the organization. Revise the board's structure to reflect present-day needs. As part of this process, some board members may resign voluntarily and new members with critical skills can be recruited.
Systems	
Symptom Administrative systems are needlessly complex, confusing, and outmoded.	Treatment Review your systems requirements in light of changing programs and technologies. This may require the expertise of outside management and information technology consultants.
Fundraising	
Symptom The organization is "chasing dollars" by inventing new initiatives primarily to attract available funding, contorting existing programs to match funders' special interests, or responding to Requests for Proposals indiscriminately.	Treatment Clarify the mission, and revise programs to make them more relevant. Concentrate on funding opportunities that clearly fit this new direction. Adopt a more proactive approach to funders.
Financial Management	
Symptom Cash flow problems and projected budget deficits are chronic.	Treatment Pare expenses by dropping or curtailing non-essential services. Develop new sources of income based on revised programs.

Internal Communications	
Symptom Staff members don't willingly speak out on critical problems and feel disconnected from important decision-making.	Treatment Create an operational policy that outlines procedures for involving staff. Give senior staff opportunities to work with the board.
External Relations	
Symptom The organization's reputation has diminished; there is confusion among outsiders about its mission and programs.	Treatment Inform funders and other constituents of your progress as you revise goals and programs. Be sure that messages about newsworthy accomplishments are conveyed to key audiences.

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