

Build your church on its core competencies for successful growth

To most observers the church looked healthy and strong. Mt. Zion Church sat near a busy intersection, on a main artery of this growing suburb of Dayton, OH. The pastor was a skilled communicator and had personally overseen the development of a small group network that involved more than 65 percent of the congregation.

An associate pastor had created an elaborate advertising strategy, and the church enjoyed an influx of newcomers. However, the newcomers were not joining the church. “We’ve got a big front door, and a big back door,” confided one layperson.

I was asked to help the congregation in long-range planning and to uncover why the church was not growing proportionally when there were so many visitors. It soon became clear that Mt. Zion (a real church but a different name) did a few things very well, many things moderately well, and a number of things poorly. Further research revealed that some substandard programs along with highly visible programming failures had detracted from the things the church did well. In other words the church was headed in too many directions, and many of these directions were neither suitable nor successful.

Newcomers often were attracted to the church because of its advertisements for particular ministries. However, they found many of these ministries to be poorly or halfheartedly conducted. As a result, the newcomers were inadvertently rebuffed. The strong inflow of guests was followed by their gradual disappointment and eventual exit.

The heart of Mt. Zion’s problem was that it had not yet identified its core competencies—the things the church did well—nor had it built its ministry strategy around these core competencies.

Core competencies are the things an organization does well. In the business world core competencies are characterized by four traits: they are valuable, rare, costly to imitate and non-substitutable. Another way to say this is that core competencies reflect and organization’s personality and distinguish it from similar organizations.

Discovering your church’s core competencies

To uncover a church’s core competencies, look first at the church as it relates to the four criteria that define a core competency.

1. Valuable. These are the competencies that make a church valuable to the community and to the church at large. They allow the church to explore and expand opportunities to reach out to the community and to neutralize external threats. This IS PART OF A PROCESS what is known as A S.W.O.T. analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats).
2. Rare. Few other groups or secular organizations can offer these core competencies. The Good News of salvation is a rare competency that all churches share.
3. Costly to imitate. Because a competency may not be financially rewarding, it is difficult for a secular group to satisfactorily imitate or promote the competency. Generally, the church does not operate with a for-profit philosophy. Thus the church can offer ministries that are too costly for secular businesses to operate.
4. Non-substitutable. ~~The~~ Core competencies SHOULD BE ~~are~~ incapable of being

counterfeited or imitated authentically. The Good News that Jesus died for our sins is a non-substitutable competency that all churches possess and ~~are~~ (or should be) capable of offering.

By illustration, LET'S clarify these criteria using worship as a core competency. Energetic, anointed, and heartfelt worship was a core competency at Mt. Zion church. How does Mt. Zion's type of worship relate to the four criteria of core competencies?

1. Valuable. Worship is an expression of gratitude, interaction, and adoration towards God. As such, it meets the human need to be in contact with and express gratitude towards the Supreme Being. This ability to be connected with God is highly "valued" by most people in all cultures. German religious thinker Rudolph Otto describes this as a feeling that "at times comes sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It many pass into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing as it were, thrilling vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane,' non-religious mood of everyday existence." Most who visited Mt. Zion Church would agree that worship was one of its core competencies.
2. Rare. Authentic worship, as described by Otto, is certainly rare, considering that much of life consists of what Otto calls the "'profane,' non-religious mood of everyday existence."
3. Costly to imitate. True worship of and interaction with a living God is difficult, if not impossible, for secular society to imitate. Some might argue that musical rock concerts and their rapturous fans offer a counterfeit of God-directed worship. However, the audience isn't there to worship the musicians. While some unstable fans may do so, most rock concert attendees consider the raucous music and audience gyrations as a celebration of the music and not worship of an entity. In true Christian worship, the celebration of the entity (God) takes primacy over musical euphoria; this makes worship costly if not impossible to imitate.
4. Non-substitutable. If humankind needs to exalt and interact with God via worship, as the psalmist reminds us in Psalm 100, then true worship is non-substitutable.

Core competencies at Mt. Zion Church

An analysis of Mt. Zion Church revealed several core competencies. However, many of its recently added programs were not in alignment with these core competencies. Further, much of the new programming had been added because it was popular with other churches.

In my book, *Growth by Accident, Death by Planning: How NOT to Kill a Growing Congregation*, I examine how programming that works in one context is often inappropriately applied to another church context simply because it is the popular "thing to do." This cross-pollination often stunts growth in churches when a fashionable program is incompatible or inconsistent with the church's personality.

At other times, programming that does not align with a church's core competencies is pressed upon a church by a denominational strategy that does not take into account a church's indigenous core competencies. Either way, a program is launched not because of suitability but because of haste and reputation.

Thus, core competencies must be the foundation upon which all new programming is built. Here are a couple of Mt. Zion's core competencies that came to light through my analysis:

1. Mt. Zion had a strong network of small-groups. Most churches the size of Mt. Zion (550 in weekend attendance) have less than 100 attendees involved in small groups. Mt. Zion had over three times this number (355). This distinct core competency indicated that new programming utilizing and/or supporting the church's small group network would most likely succeed.
2. Mt. Zion had a strong music ministry. The music at the church celebrations was exceptional, and one of the primary factors in members' high satisfaction levels. This professionalism and anointing in musical ministries was a core competency. To succeed, programs would need to be connected to Mt. Zion's core competency of music anointing and proficiency. Regrettably, much of the new programming had not been built upon this core competency.

As a result of our long-range strategy sessions, Mt. Zion soon began to sift through its various programs and eliminate (or give away to other congregations) programs not directly related to its core competencies. This strategy helped the church to focus on what it did well.

Core competencies of well-known businesses

| <u>Company</u> | <u>Core Competencies</u> |
|-----------------------|--|
| Wal-Mart | Lowest prices, large selection |
| Target: | Low prices, style |
| Ralph Lauren Clothing | Branding, effective promotion |
| Gap, Inc. | Forecasting, low price, multi-brand strategy |
| Sony | Quality, innovation, miniaturization |
| Sanyo | Innovation, low price |

Source: Michael Hitt, Strategic Management