

Jump the Shark: How to Cope When Programs Outlive Their Usefulness

Shark Jumping Checklist

|  | Shark bite | Injury | Treatment |
|---|--|--|---|
| | Low attendance (Few swimmers) | Attendance at your program has steadily declined over the years; only a handful of students attend. | Ask your audience |
| | Increased costs (Costly fishing expedition) | A program has gotten more expensive yet involves fewer students and the “bang for the buck” is gone. | Asses needs and benefits Ask your audience |
| | Lacks purpose (No porpoise) | Program’s existence, is no longer relevant, e.g., eAttorney workshop. | Assess original need |
| | Trouble planning (Scared swimmers) | Everyone around the table groans when you mention planning for a particular workshop. | Assess procedures and personalities |
| | Lonely champion (Bleeding swimmer) | You find that you have just one champion left – a wacky faculty member, staffer, alum, employer, partner, vendor or donor. | Treat person not the program |
| | Lacks ownership (Missing fisherman) | The program has become a hot potato around your institution and no-one seems to want to take ownership. | If program of value, find true champion |
| | Desperate makeovers (Jaws’s sequels) | You reinvent, reinvent and reinvent, and it just never seems to get any better. | Original may not be the answer; assess why. |
| | Inability to change (Swimmers strike) | The process is so broken that people just throw up their hands in disgust when you suggest a change. | Treat group, and program. |
| | Meaningless recycle (Recycled catch) | It’s easier to pull out the file from the previous year and replicate your program than actually think about what you’re doing. | If broken, disregard or fix. |
| | Dead program walking (Deceased fisherman) | The staff member who used to manage the program/process has moved on and the position has not been filled for budgetary reasons. | Confirm value of program. |
| | Quantity focus (Decoy shark) | You adopt a “quantity vs. quality” mentality in order to make your calendar look full or your staff looks busy. | Focus on quality. |
| | Life vest (S.O.S.) | The process is tied to one staff member who – in the current economy – is especially nervous about becoming irrelevant and losing their job. | Treat person not program. |

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Shark Jumping Scenarios

Shark Jumping Scenario: Law Career Day program

Law Career Day was launched in the early 1980s as a full day of robust programming for 1Ls, typically incorporating job search skills, mock interviews, practice area overviews and networking. Over the years it had dwindled in scope, size and participation levels from both alumni and students to a lackluster three-hour program on a Saturday morning in the fall. Each summer, I would call our very involved alum. He and I would have basically the same conversation from year to year about what worked, what didn't, and how we thought we could improve the program, yet somehow every year it ended up being pretty much the same.

When I was at Santa Clara the first time (1999-2004) I felt that the program had already outlived its usefulness. Imagine my surprise when I rejoined the law school in 2009, and found that Law Career Day – now in its 19th year – was still limping along! The program has literally become an institution at the law school. Faculty, staff and even the dean all know and talk about Law Career Day as one of the marquee programs of our Law Career Services office.

Shark Jumping Scenario: Summer success snoozer seminar

You are a brand new career dean brimming with experience and ideas to share with students. Pre-existing “workshop” on “How to Succeed at Your Summer Job” lovingly created by a highly committed faculty member. Professor has turned workshop into, essentially, a two hour lecture on Bluebook citation and proofreading. Faculty has partnered with administrator from local employer with longstanding relationship to school. Attendance is low, program doesn't seem to meet stated goal. The Proud Professor visits your office shortly after your arrival and begins to school you on this program will proceed again this year, so you can “watch and learn.”

Shark Jumping Scenario: Morning interviews as recruiting practice

Upon joining Davis Polk, I learned that during Recruiting the department's practice was to schedule interviews the morning of each candidate's visit. This was no small feat given that we typically interview thirty candidates a day. The method seemed outdated and I knew from prior experience that we could update it and find an effective procedure to alleviate pressure on recruiting, allow attorneys to provide availability, give attorneys advance notice, and better meet candidate requests. The principal challenge was that this method was used for years. The firm was accustomed to it and it got the job done during a hectic time. Any change would require Management approval and necessitate an education plan for all involving new practices, technology and resources.

Recruiting mapped out requirements in terms of resources, time, and changes and demonstrated to Management exactly how these changes would work, what would be achieved, and how problems with the status quo would be alleviated. Numerous training sessions were held for the firm detailing new changes. Three years later it is a highly effective procedure.

Shark Jumping Scenario: Louisiana State Bar Review CDO program

An eager alumnus decides to host Louisiana State Bar review CDO program to provide students strategies on how to prepare for the examination. The program becomes dated, lacks attendance, and conflicts with other CDO and Law School efforts. Despite the conflicts, the alumnus continues to press for a forum each year. Program jumped from counselor to counselor all expressing dissatisfaction with the value of the program. Promotion for the event became a challenge, particularly for the alumnus expecting larger attendance. After several obvious jumps, the alumnus repeatedly calls your office, and the cycle continues.

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Shark Taming Tips and Treatments

Be a SHARK TAMER

Solicit
Helpful
Allies;
Regularly
Keep

Tab's;
Assess
Motives,
Emotions and
Risks.

TIPS for Treating Shark Bites

Ask why

- what motivates the desire to keep resuscitating the program despite feedback to the contrary?
- what motivates the emphasis on quantity/appearance?

Ask your audience

- solicit feedback in writing or through individual or group interview
- consider past, present, and future audiences, as perspectives might differ

Assess the original needs and benefits of the program

- get the history: review “the file,” ask the founders, if available
- did the program ever meet the need/provide the benefit?
- what changed?
- are the needs/benefits to be fulfilled the same? Or have these changed/disappeared?

Treat process

- what's the history? Any traumas related to the program?
- is it the program, the process, or the people?
- process should not dictate existence of program

Is it really broken?

- is it stale—or is it solid?
- is change necessary and, if so, to what degree?

Treat people, not the program...

- consider the personal investments individuals have made
- view the change scenario from the stakeholder's perspective
- identify ways to keep key people involved, while transitioning their role
- honor the person, while changing the program
- open a safe dialogue to explore the resistance / negativity