

How to Write a Mission Statement

By Janel M. Radtke

Every organization has a mission, a purpose, a reason for being. Often the mission is why the organization was first created — to meet a need identified years ago. Sometimes, the same problems that the organization initially tried to address continue to haunt generation after generation. In that case, the organization's purpose doesn't change — although how it does business has probably evolved. Other times, even 10 or 20 years can change the landscape so markedly that the original mission must be updated, altered, or changed dramatically in order to address those new realities.

That your organization's mission is current, alive, and well, however, doesn't necessarily mean that the organization has translated that purpose into a clear, concise mission statement. A good mission statement should accurately explain why your organization exists and what it hopes to achieve in the future. It articulates the organization's essential nature, its values, and its work.

This should be accomplished in a brief paragraph that is free of jargon and "terms of art." In other words, it should avoid the kind of shorthand that you may be in the habit of swapping with others who work in the field, but is unfamiliar to anyone who is outside the organization or the field in which it works.

Another important consideration is how recently your mission statement was reviewed by board or staff members. If it has been more than five years, now is probably a good time to review and, if necessary, fine-tune or even rewrite your mission statement. All too often an organization's mission statement, which has been handed down over the years, loses relevance and ceases to speak to staff, board members, or supporters.

An effective mission statement must resonate with the people working in and for the organization, as well as with the different constituencies that the organization hopes to affect. It must express the organization's purpose in a way that inspires commitment, innovation, and courage -- not an easy task!

At the very least, your organization's mission statement should answer three key questions:

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1. What are the opportunities or needs that we exist to address? (the purpose of the organization)

2. What are we doing to address these needs? (the business of the organization)

3. What principles or beliefs guide our work? (the values of the organization)

You can begin the process of drafting a mission statement by creating a worksheet based on these questions. Ask staff, volunteers, and constituents to list any words, phrases, or ideas that come to mind with respect to the organization and these various categories. Do not edit at this point. Give everyone a chance to be heard. Look for language and concepts that enjoy broad consensus.

Here are three mission statements that do attempt to answer these questions. Let's see what they have in common.

1. The mission of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America is to make a positive difference in the lives of children and youth, primarily through a professionally-supported, one-to-one relationship with a caring adult, and to assist them in achieving their highest potential as they grow to become confident, competent, and caring individuals, by providing committed volunteers, national leadership and standards of excellence.

The purpose: to make a positive difference in the lives of children and youth so that they'll achieve their highest potential

The business: providing and supporting committed volunteers who have one-to-one relationships with children and youth

The values: individuals who are confident, competent, and caring; leadership and standards of excellence

2. The National Conference, founded in 1927 as the National Conference of Christians and Jews, is a human relations organization dedicated to fighting bias, bigotry, and racism in America. The National Conference promotes understanding and respect among all races, religions and cultures through advocacy, conflict resolution, and education.

The purpose: to fight bias, bigotry, and racism in America

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The business: advocacy, conflict resolution, and education

The values: understanding and respect among all races, religions, and cultures

3. Planet 3000 is committed to healing the earth. Using research into natural ecosystems, Planet 3000 develops policy recommendations and pilot projects that apply these underlying principles to human ecosystems that are in harmony with other life on the planet. By bringing the human social order into balance with ecological principles, diversity of all living things can be sustained and the evolutionary process that has guided and nurtured life on this planet for millions of years can continue unabated.

The purpose: to "heal" the planet

The business: advocacy, research, and demonstration projects

The values: ecological principles; protecting balance, diversity, the evolutionary process, and harmony with life on the planet

Your Mission Statement Should . . .

- express your organization's purpose in a way that inspires support and ongoing commitment
- motivate those who are connected to the organization
- be articulated in a way that is convincing and easy to grasp
- use proactive verbs to describe what you do
- be free of jargon
- be short enough so that anyone connected to the organization can readily repeat it

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