

Framing Your Mission Statement

This document augments *Boards on Fire*, page 38

By Susan Howlett

When I am asked to work with nonprofits who are struggling to raise money or keep board members productively engaged, I often begin by asking who can tell me the organization's mission. Invariably, no one can recite the exact words, and people start to rifle through papers to find the mission statement on a newsletter, brochure, or board notebook. If they DO find it, it's half a page long, or uninspired and confusing, or it explains what the organization *does*, not *why* it does it.

Herein lies the problem. The issue is not the lackluster fundraising efforts, or the disengaged board members, but the lack of clarity about core purpose.

If people can't repeat the mission statement without looking it up, they're surely not using it to make decisions at board meetings, or to drive work plans for board and staff, to make staffing and budgeting choices, or decisions about whom to partner with or what position to take on legislation. Mission statements should be clear enough to help us decide what to do in the midst of controversy, and what NOT to do when there's too much on your plate. Clear missions actually make our work easier!

Here is a simple exercise to focus leaders on what really matters.

Ingredients: 90 minutes
colored sticky pads
critical mass among board and key staff

Pass out the colored sticky pads (or 3 x 5 cards) and ask everyone to write down what they think the mission of the organization should be, in one sentence, using the following framework.

- 1) the name of the organization
- 2) an action verb
- 3) among whom, and
- 4) toward what end.

Name

- 1) It's easy to start with the name, assuming it's not an issue.

Action

2) There are two reasons I suggest using an action verb, and specifically, NOT “is” or “provides.” I see a lot of mission statements that begin with, “we seek to” or “we strive to” or “our mission is to” or “we are committed to.” None of these sound very convincing. They sound like you’re not really doing it yet, but you hope to someday. If you’re making a difference, let the world know that by sounding definitive, like you’re initiating change and taking charge of something! Use punchy words like “galvanize,” or “mobilize” or “build” or “inspire” or “engage” – something that stirs the reader or listener and makes them want to join you.

The reason I discourage “provide” is that it explains what you do, not why you do it. It talks about activities, and not the impact of those activities. Don’t tell people your programs when you could be describing your results. Goals and objectives can describe methods later. Your mission statement should be lofty and passionate and visionary and inviting. So see if you can find another way of saying what you’re about than describing what activities you engage in.

Beneficiaries

3) “Among whom” describes your intended beneficiaries. Often I see organizations be really global about their audience – all parents, residents of our county, children, the environment. The mission should help leaders narrow the scope of your work so that they can say “no” to some ideas that come your way. Narrowing your audience also makes your goal-setting and accountability easier.

Here is one example. One organization said that they were teaching all the residents in their community to take good care of some public assets. But as the discussion unfolded, they realized that they really served only certain activists in town who in turn mobilized the community. Knowing that their target audience was now limited made everyone breathe a sigh of relief, because they knew how to reach those advocates, how to communicate with and engage with them, and then how to measure whether they had met their needs.

And here is another example. A group that deals with the legal system indicated that they were serving people in the midst of a particular legal process. But further examination revealed that they were really serving only the judges in the process, giving them specific information they needed to make the wisest choice in each case.

Sometimes narrowing your audience, rather than saying you serve everyone in your catchment area makes your work easier, and helps you become more successful. Don’t try to be all things to all people. It’s too hard with the resources you have at hand.

Purpose

4) “Toward what end” answers the question “why.” What is the ultimate outcome of your work? How are people’s lives or the community’s vitality improved as a result of your work? This will be an interesting conversation as you realize that board members have distinct ideas about your ultimate goals, assuming everyone agreed.

Once you’ve given the instructions, give each board member a few minutes to write down one sentence on one page of their sticky pad. It needs to be short enough that they can remember it and say it easily at a cocktail party, a Rotary meeting, along the sidelines at a soccer field, or with a lawmaker.

Next Steps

After everyone’s had a chance to finish (usually about five minutes), invite them to pair up with the person sitting next to them and combine both their statements into one. This will take another five to eight minutes or so, as they realize that they agreed on some elements, but not on others, and they must defend their statement, or compromise, or find something they’re both excited about. Watch the dynamics in the room at this point, as some dyads will finish quickly, having capitulated to one or the other partner, and others will be engaged in animated conversation, arguing about geographic scope or intended beneficiaries. You might have to call time before everyone is completely done.

The next step is for each dyad to pair up with another dyad and make their newly amalgamated statements into one again. And so on, and so on, until you end up with only two sentences. Invite each group to write theirs on a large easel pad so everyone in the room can see both of them side by side or both on one easel sheet, and let ‘er rip! Each group will be quite pleased with their statement, satisfied that they have had a rich conversation that has considered all points of view and fully captures what you’re about. But the other group will have made assertions that some are not sold on, and heated debate will follow.

This will be one of the most fertile and productive conversations leaders will have engaged in