

On Mission

Often when the question of the mission statement comes up with a nonprofit board there are groans.

We don't want to get bogged down in wordsmithing; we have more important issues to deal with.

We all know why we're here, let's figure out how to do our work better.

We worked on that two years ago and gave up because it was a pointless waste of time. Why should we get into that again?

So what is the point of a mission statement? Is it just something you're supposed to have somewhere for appearance sake and move on to more important things? Or is it worth time and effort to re-examine and craft it to serve a clear purpose?

Here's my claim: a mission statement is a fundamental tool of strategy, focus, marketing, and identity. It provides the shortest route to your goal... for the simple reason that without it you don't really know (collectively) what your goal is.

Let's examine that claim.

First let's distinguish between *mission* and *mission statement*. Your *mission* is the reason you exist. If your organization is to be as effective as possible, its reason/mission needs to be shared by those who govern, manage, work within, volunteer for, and otherwise have a stake in your organization. Unless you express the mission clearly there is no way that everyone involved will have the same understanding of it and be able to work most effectively toward it. Thus the *mission statement*. The job of the mission statement is to articulate the essence of why the organization exists. If you don't articulate it, then it's very likely that there isn't an *essence* at all, just a cloud of assumedly similar individual understandings.

So when people advocate working on the mission statement, what they mean is: let's sharpen what we say about our purpose so that we can work more effectively together to achieve it, and draw more people into our fold to support it.

Externally, a mission statement is branding and positioning. It differentiates your organization from others that may do similar work. It captures most compellingly your case for support. It creates awareness for your cause, and it focuses that awareness on you. It unifies your communications so that when people hear about the organization from any source, the message is the same and reinforces what they heard before.

Internally, a mission statement is a generative tool for **clarity and focus**. First, through that maligned process of wordsmithing, the discussion itself will raise important questions of intention and priority. If the discussion is difficult, that may mean you need to

resolve some differences of direction. If well orchestrated, the discussion will be neither interminable nor tedious, but contained, validating and invigorating.

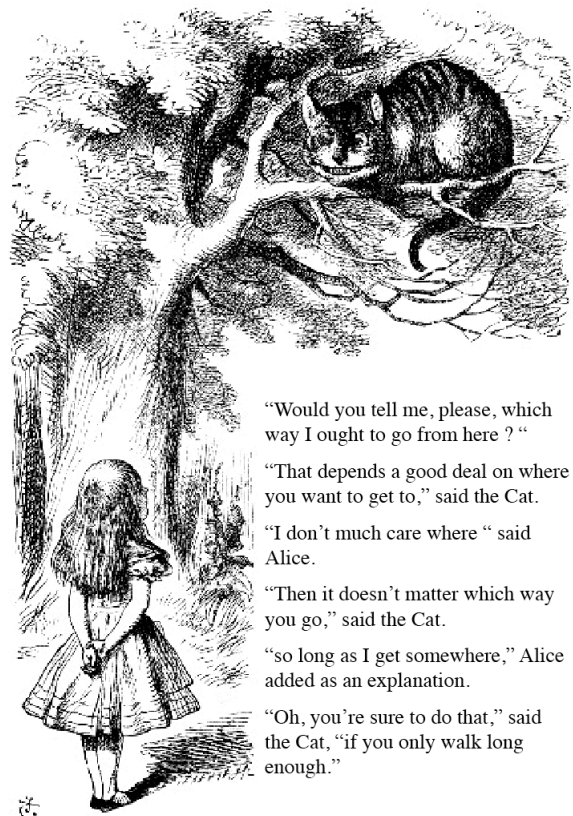
Once you have the statement it will remind you what is most important and distinctive about your organization. It will help all stakeholders to be clear about the organization they're involved in, and stay focused. It will help them avoid disappointment that the organization is not doing things they value individually, but are outside the purview of this organization.

Here are a couple of examples of well crafted mission statements:

Moses Brown, a Friends School, exists to inspire the inner promise of each student and instill the utmost care for learning, people, and place.

This statement sticks to the question of *why*, leaving *what* and *how* for elaboration elsewhere. There is nothing about location, size, grade levels, rigorous academic standards, the quality of teaching, or preparation for college and global citizenship; just the essence of purpose that can be elaborated upon elsewhere in statements of values and principles, and facts.

The mission of the I'm Too Young for This! Cancer Foundation is to *end isolation and improve quality of life for young adults affected by cancer.*



"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where," said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

In an organization serving a population with many unaddressed needs, there is an ongoing danger of mission creep—*there is another need, it's important, and we could somehow do that too, or if we can't draw you into our community with this appeal, how about something else?* Both of the above mission statements focus on fundamentals that differentiate the organization from others and clearly convey focus and attitude both internally and externally.

Secondly, the mission statement will help you to structure your **strategic planning** process.

The mission statement expresses why you exist. A strategic plan is a tool for realizing the mission. The strategic plans that we guide usually start from the mission statement and lay out broad mission-based goals, more specific supporting objectives, and measurable actions. (For more about the planning process, see *Critical Issues* #5, [The Structure of Planning](#) and materials from the webinar [From Strategy to Action](#).) When your mission statement is clear and robust enough to serve as a solid foundation for a strategic plan, and every action can be traced back by steps of what is necessary and sufficient through objectives and goals to the mission, you have a solid, logical plan that the organization can follow and refresh with new actions.

Without this linkage of actions to mission, how do you determine what actions to take to support the organization, much less make a compelling case for the plan as a whole?

Finally, this approach will allow you to develop, evaluate and rank **metrics** for tracking the plan and holding everyone to account for its—and the organization's—success. A mission and the broad goals that fall under it are qualitative statements about what is important to the organization and its stakeholders. They are not measurable directly. However, with a firm logical link from mission down to measurable actions, there will be quantitative measures that indicate progress toward a qualitative mission.

Some considerations for drafting a mission statement:

Length. Keep it to one sentence. You can find lots of opinions about what a mission statement is and does, and how long it should be. If it is to serve the purposes described above, though, it needs to be memorable. How many senior staff and trustees can recite your mission from memory? If they can, the statement is more likely to do its job of defining, differentiating, branding and supporting internal consensus and focus.

What's in what's out. A mission statement should be about why the organization exists. It can address what the organization is, but should avoid getting into what it does. There is plenty of room for that information—

and more—on the same page with the mission. That's where statements of vision, values, principles and means appear. That way you won't dull the power of the mission statement as a tightly worded tool.

Geography. In an age of hyperbole it can be hard to avoid aspiring to be the best in the country or the world at something. It's important, for example for there to be a Harlem Children's Zone inspiring emulation elsewhere. But if you are a local group, trying to be the best in the world may distract you from the fundamentals of serving your community. Identify best practices, for sure, but it can be much more effective to focus on your market than on greatness.

Test. Don't be afraid to test your mission statement. If you've revised it in the early stages of a planning process, check it against the plan at the end. Does the knowledge you've acquired during the process suggest it needs a tweak? While mission statements should have a longer shelf life than any of the more specific elements of your programs, operations, or strategic goals, that doesn't mean they can't be modified or refined from time to time. It's also good to test the elements of the mission statement in stakeholder surveys. You may well find that the responses show a need to clarify the mission and specific positioning of the organization. If that is the case, the result will be better understanding, loyalty and support.

Planning for yourself?

We're happy to offer as much (or as little) advice or guidance as you need. Use our experience to assure your success.

Contact Sam Frank to discuss the possibilities.
617 340 9991
sbf@synthesispartnership.com



Resources

- CI 1: Why Plan? (<http://bit.ly/SyPci01>)
- CI 2: The Secret Life of Surveys (<http://bit.ly/SyPci02>)
- CI 4: On Boards (<http://bit.ly/SyPci04>)
- CI 5: The Structure of Planning (<http://bit.ly/SyPci05>)
- CI 8: The Measure of Success (<http://bit.ly/SyPci08>)
- CI 9: Brand Identity (<http://bit.ly/SyPci09>)
- CI 11: Integrated Planning (<http://bit.ly/SyPci11>)
- CI 13: Facility Planning (<http://bit.ly/SyPci13>)
- CI 14: Managing Change (<http://bit.ly/SyPci14>)
- CI 15: Strategic Action (<http://bit.ly/SyPci15>)

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