

Mission, Values and Vision

Some of the most overused and misunderstood words in the planning lingo are mission, vision and values. Yet most people can relate to a personal vision, their personal values, and their mission in life even if they are not expressed in those words. Used appropriately, they can provide inspiration and momentum to a business.

Mission is what you want to achieve by starting the business. This must be reexamined and refreshed periodically if an organization is to remain dynamic.

Mission statements describe the overall purpose of an organization: what you do, who you do it for, and how and why you do it. It sets boundaries on the organization's current activities. Reviewing the mission gets an organization back to basics. The essential activity of determining whom you serve can be a wake-up call for organizations that have started to skew their activities to meet the needs other stakeholders (such as their funders or lobby targets) and not their actual clients.

Values are clear in everything you do, how you operate. Articulating values provides everyone with guiding lights, ways of choosing among competing priorities and guidelines about how people will work together.

A values statement reflects the core ideology of an organization, the deeply held values that do not change over time. It answers the question, "how do we carry out our mission?" Values are what your organization lives, breathes and reflects in all its activities.

Vision is what keeps us moving forward, even against discouraging odds. For example, a business may envision a community where every person has access to their product. Vision is the most powerful motivator in an organization. If it's vivid and meaningful enough, people can do astounding things to bring it to realization.

A vision statement describes an ideal future. It answers the question, "what impact do we want to have on society?" The vision of a business conveys a larger sense of organizational purpose, so that employees see themselves as "building a cathedral" rather than "laying stones."

On the next page is a good example of well written mission, vision and values statements from the American Cancer Society:

Mission

The American Cancer Society is a national, community-based organization of volunteers whose mission is the eradication of cancer and the enhancement of the quality of life of people living with cancer.

Values

These serve as guidelines for our conduct and behavior as we work towards our vision.

- Quality - our focus is on the people we serve (cancer patients, their families, donors, and the public) and we will strive for excellence through evaluation and continuous improvement.
- Caring - we are committed to serving with empathy and compassion.

Vision

Creating a world where no American fears cancer.

Every organization is unique in its history, culture, and mission. Every mission, values and vision statement should reflect that uniqueness; there is no standard model appropriate for every organization. Any outsider (e.g., a consultant) should be involved in a process only as a facilitator. The real work of defining your business can only be done by an organization's leadership, in collaboration with staff, focus groups, community groups, peers, or whoever else leadership deems necessary to the process. A process in which an outsider played a key decision-making role is sure to be about something, but not about the organization.

Often the hardest part of the process is honestly determining what your business is. For instance, suppose your business provides a payroll processing service. In its simplest sense its business is providing financial convenience to its clients. The company performs a task that other companies would rather not do. Seeing the business in this light, provides a broader picture of financial convenience extending beyond simply doing the payroll. Why not add bookkeeping, tracking and collecting receivables, and personnel consulting? In this way, the planning process not only is a process for achieving goals, but prompts questions that may turn into opportunities.

When two or more people work together, the difficulties of achieving goals multiply. Everyone has their own idea of how to make the vision happen. Individual abilities must be taken into account for a group to work together optimally. What this means practically is that group members need opportunities to exchange ideas and make decisions about how to achieve the mission, values and vision.

One way to focus such a meeting is to lead a "guided fantasy" of the group's activities five or ten years down the line, then discuss the ideas it brought up. Doing an exercise like this can encourage people to develop their visions, loosening imaginative powers rather than falling into a polarized argument. A common mistake is to think you can determine your mission without changing anything you're doing. A mission is about making changes in the way you do business. If stating your mission, values, and vision hasn't changed anything, it hasn't worked.