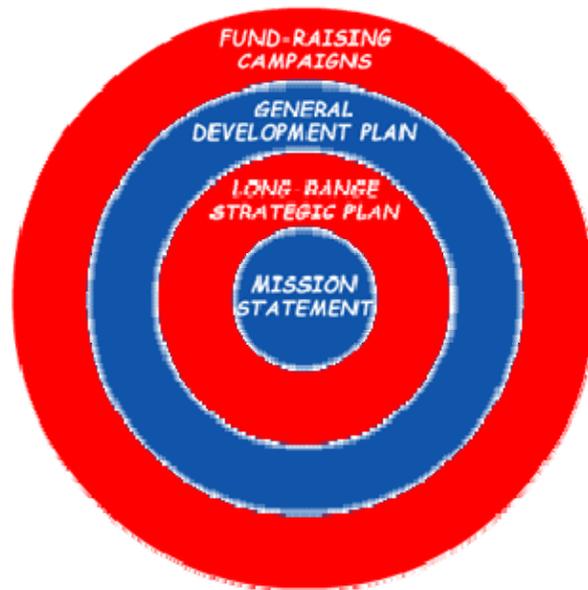


Don't Make Your Organization's Statement Of Purpose A "Mission Impossible"

We read in all of the right publications and we are told by the experts that a non-profit organization's mission statement should be contained on the back of a business card, declared in as few words as possible on the organization's letterhead, etc., --- and even, as a national authority states, fit on a T-shirt.

Because such brevity suggests simplicity we could be led to conclude that the process required to create or to rewrite a mission statement is likewise a brief exercise. That is far from the truth. But take heart, while deliberate and comprehensive it must be, the mission statement development process is not incomprehensible. All you need in order to do the best job possible is to have a board of Trustees leading the way and working effectively together, as they take into account the core values and the outlook for their organization --- which is subsequently distilled as the mission statement.

Your Nonprofit Organization's Mission Statement: The 'Center' Of It All



The Mission Statement declares 'why' an organization exists, and is the only foundation upon which a long-range strategic plan (the blueprint for carrying out the organization's 'business') can be developed.

The long-range strategic plan, with its clearly stated and defensible programmatic initiatives and their respective costs, allows for the creation of the fund-raising plan from which specific fundraising campaigns are organized and launched to secure annual, capital, endowment, sponsorship, and underwriting funds. An organization's mission statement IS the center of it all.

Your Mission: It's Not What You Do, But The Difference You Make

Because of its fundamental importance in the life of nonprofit organizations, volumes have been written on mission statements, and any library or bookstore with a strong business and management section will have more than a few feet of shelf space devoted to the subject. I urge you to develop an understanding of the mission statement development process and to make sure your organization has a clear mission statement which is reviewed regularly.

No matter what your position or role in your organization's fundraising efforts, the mission statement is the single most important thing you must understand. The mission statement outlines the organization's values, purposes, hopes and dreams --- its priorities. Printed on the back of a schedule, gracing the first page of an annual report or emblazoned on a lobby wall, it purports to delineate the whys and wherefores, explain the purpose, and elucidate both value to and uniqueness in the community. It is, or should be, a statement of an organization's reason for being and its strengths. As such, it is the primary statement in the litany of fundraising

The mission of a nonprofit organization comes from its core competitive advantages. The mission statement must be clearly articulated, fully understood, and completely embraced by all constituencies. It must demonstrate the difference an organization will make for those it serves, rather than merely describing what it does. And a mission statement needs to communicate all of this in as few words as possible.

Mission Statement Criteria

1. Establish boundaries --- The "bounds" of the service delivered in reasonable terms regarding types and numbers of people and geographic limits. Describes WHY the organization exists, not what methods are used. Defines clearly the "business" the organization is in. Basically, the organization asks itself, "What is our reason for existence?"
2. Act to motivate board, staff, volunteers, and donors --- In designing or revising the mission statement, all constituencies must have input. Changes come about because either the environment changes or the needs of one or more of the constituents change. Short enough to remember and easily communicate. Strong enough to inspire.
3. Help in the process of evaluation --- The mission statement helps in the process of organizational evaluation. Unlike a commercial business, whose delivery and quality of its products and services can be readily judged, the measure of the value of a nonprofit's service is often much harder to define. A non-profit's end "product" value is mostly unmeasurable. They rely almost solely on reputation and trust. That is why mission statements are often unclear to the public at large, and argued among non profits themselves. It is a formidable challenge for an organization's mission statement to serve as a measure against which results and benefits of the services provided can be evaluated.

And there are the inevitable differences of emphasis placed on those three separate mission statement criteria from organization to organization. That is why you should not arbitrarily compare your organization's mission statement --- either favorably or unfavorably --- to the mission statement of another nonprofit organization, no matter the apparent similarities of the two organizations.

Mission Statement Checklist

(Adapted from The Center for Nonprofit Organizations)

-- Ends, not means.

Does your mission statement address what difference your organization will make for those you serve, or does it merely describe what your organization does? Remember, your mission statement doesn't relate how, but rather why. It should focus on the results your organization accomplishes through its programs and services.

-- Effort.

Does the language used in your mission statement elevate effort to effect? (Words such as try, seek, influence, or encourage suggest staff organizes activities around righteous exertion rather than results.)

-- Verbs.

Does a verb -- any verb -- figure prominently in your mission statement? Even when they don't equivocate as the ones mentioned above, verbs ordinarily refer to something that is to "go on," rather than the intended OUTCOME. Beware of your verbs!

-- Nouns embodying activities.

Does your mission statement use nouns that signify a type of "means" rather than an outcome? Beware of words such as advocacy, education, program, and service.

-- The unidentifiable.

Check carefully to make sure there is no technical language or jargon -- meaningless to the outside world -- in your mission statement.

-- Brevity.

Is your mission statement too long? Does it ramble, making it difficult to locate the main point? Burying the mission in two or three padded paragraphs will be sure to weaken its power to guide and shape your organization. -- Accuracy, not cosmetics. Is your mission accurate? Or does it embroider or glorify your organization's intentions to make them SOUND better, loftier, more extensive, or more glamorous than they are?

-- Too broad or too narrow.

Your mission statement should be broad enough to allow for growth and expansion, but narrow enough to keep the organization clearly and strongly focused. Does it allow for your organization to be "all things to all people," or, on the other hand, restrict the organization from meeting changing needs?

-- Net value added.

If your organization is a federation or another type of membership organization, or if your board has authority over other boards, does your mission statement deal with the additional result intended beyond what the members of subsidiaries would have produced themselves anyway?

-- Uniqueness.

Does your mission statement focus on what is unique about your organization? It is important to consider your mission in light of other similarly situated organizations, and to ensure that your organization "stands out in the crowd."

Creating A New Mission Statement Or Rewriting An Existing One

Comparing your mission statement to the Center For Nonprofit Organization's checklist provided above, will help you with the evaluation of your present mission statement, or it will aid in the expeditious writing of a new one. You might have everything in order and be ready for writing or rewriting a mission statement, and you might need to engage an experienced writer who will fashion the document for you based on your input. You usually can find the right person by checking with nonprofit or for-profit consultants in your area who specialize in long-range - strategic planning. (In addition to strategic planning expertise, the "right" person will also have in-depth understanding of the fund raising process.) If there is a local Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) chapter in your area, ask their officials for leads to the right people.

If you do not have the background material necessary to write the statement yourself or to turn that information over to a writer, you will most likely need an expert consultant to facilitate the basic mission development process with you. The development process usually involves the following :

- Define your organization: What is the "end result" of your organization's efforts? What value is the end result to your constituency --- to those you serve? What value is the end result to the community?
- Seek "outside" opinions and impressions of why your organization exists and who it serves; likewise, seek evaluations of the quality and integrity of your programs and services. Undertake a "market" study among your clients, their families, and others of influence and affluence in the area you serve. Collect as much input as you can and use it to help define your organization's reason for being.

- Convene a few board members to review the results. Identify the language used most frequently by different constituencies (and it will be there, I promise!) for use in the mission statement. Work to integrate the words into a "living and breathing" expression of passion and dedication rather than the stiff and formal language of a "document." Be sure to work to ensure that the organizational expectations are not diminished as you strive to infuse them into the mission statement.

New And Forming Organizations Need To Beware Of The "Founder's Syndrome"

Founders who bring new ideas to the 'table' develop a mission statement for their new organizations as the embodiment of their own vision and ideas, usually based upon a personal experience or passion.

Quite often the organization's clients/users, donors, volunteers and staff play largely a passive role, responding largely to the founder's passion.

A Remedy For 'Founder's Syndrome'

To succeed in today's nonprofit "marketplace," a new organization must be able to attract board members, other volunteers, audience, donors, and staff. And it does that through a shared vision and imparting "ownership" of the organization to others. A shared vision that speaks to and appeals to a diverse constituency is critically important to success of any nonprofit organization.

Stay On The Mission Statement "Course"

Your mission statement is working at its best when it clearly and firmly guides the board in making effective decisions about the organization's future. It motivates and challenges the staff to meet well-defined and shared goals. And it is the beacon of hope for the people the organization directly serves. It is the responsibility of leadership to see to it that the organization always operates within the confines of its mission.

Those are my views on the subject. What are yours? I welcome your comments and suggestions. Tony@raise-funds.com

Tony Poderis

Addendum

Examples of a Mission Statement

In the article you have just read, I pointed out that mission statements usually have three criteria working in varying degrees which (1), Establishes boundaries (2), Motivates board, staff, volunteers and donors (3), Helps in the process of evaluation.

There are the inevitable differences of emphasis, some very wide, placed on those three separate mission statement criteria from organization to organization. That is why we should not arbitrarily compare our organization's mission statement---either favorably or unfavorably---to the mission statement of another non-profit organization, no matter the apparent similarities of the two organizations. That is why, being an outsider, and literally and figuratively distant, I do not attempt to evaluate mission statements. When I am asked by non-profit organizations to do so, I can only refer such requests to a reading my article so they can revise or construct their own mission statements as they should---from the inside--- knowing fully the core values of their own organization as no one else would.

Nonetheless, with all of the above caveats in mind, consider these two versions of mission statements for application to the same organization. Use it as a rough guide.

--- The Mission Statement of "The Golden Harvest Food Bank"

(1) We provide food to six area agencies. feeding programs which collectively serves over one-thousand meals per day to the hungry.

(2) Our feeding program to the hungry sustains health, good nutrition, energy, human dignity, and the opportunity for individuals to meet their full potential.

If you were a donor to The Golden Harvest Food Bank, which mission statement example would give you the most satisfaction regarding the food bank's use of your money?

The answer quite clear. You need only to observe that one merely provides the "means" for the GHFB to carry out its mission, while the second IS the mission, as it clearly proclaims the "ends" --- the organization's reason for being.