

# Demystifying the Mission Statement

Why is something so **important** so **difficult**? Here's plain talk about how to make your mission statement genuinely useful.

By Jean Vogt

**T**he creation or revision of the mission statement for a nonprofit organization looks so simple on the surface. Yet, this very basic and important project can take many months of laborious and often conflicting discussion by the governing body and management staff, or, according to Drucker, can "cause controversy, argument, and disagreement."

Indeed, many organizations throw up their hands and say: "Forget it! Let's just operate with the mission statement that we put in our Articles of Incorporation way back when we first incorporated." It is the intent of this article to provide a solution to the mystery of the mission statement and to help clarify its importance to your organization.

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## WHAT IS A MISSION STATEMENT?

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The mission statement, or purpose, of your orga-

nization is the broad description of its reason for existence. It is the single statement that differentiates your organization from other organizations in the community. It is the source from which all of your organizational plans and dreams, strategies, objectives, policies, and outcomes flow. It is the vehicle for the empowerment of your staff to focused action. Without a single, concise mission statement, the numerous and varied parts of your organization do not function cohesively and you give mixed messages to your various audiences.

The mission statement should flow from and be in congruence with the organization's values and its Articles of Incorporation. It should be broad enough that it need not be changed too frequently, yet specific enough to describe the organization. Some experts suggest that it be incorporated into the organization's bylaws, for "safekeeping," so that it doesn't get lost, and so that it is accorded its proper degree of importance. (Since some states mandate a boilerplate set of bylaws for not-for-profit corporations, consult with your attorney before making any bylaw changes).

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## WHY IS A MISSION STATEMENT IMPORTANT?

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Even Deming and Drucker agree that the mission statement is important. Deming discusses the need for "constancy of purpose," while Drucker notes that a single mission provides for a "common vision" and a "unity of direction."

To see just how important your mission statement is to your organization, take a look at the various leadership functions of your organization (and all nonprofit organizations): board development, long-range and strategic planning, program and fiscal development, quality improvement and pro



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gram evaluation, and human resource management. Ask yourself these questions:

### 1. Board Development

- Do members of our governing body know what the role of the organization is?
- Do we select new board members to meet the ever-changing needs of our organization?
- Does the board provide consistent leadership and appropriate oversight and make wise decisions?

### 2. Long-Range and Strategic Planning

- What is our organization going to do? To or for whom? By when? Why?
- How will we know when we have met these goals?
- How should we position our organization as society and our community changes?

### 3. Program and Fiscal Development

- Who are our markets and our customers? What do they want?
- What services are we going to add or delete? Why?
- How are we going to raise the money needed to support these services?
- What are we going to tell our potential donors?

### 4. Quality Improvement and Program Evaluation

- Do those we serve “get better” as a result of our services?
- Are our markets, customers, and clients satisfied with the services that they receive?
- Do our services have the desired outcomes?

### 5. Human Resource Management

- Do our staff use their skills and talents to work toward organizational goals?
- Are staff excited because they are contributing to our organization’s success and toward progress and outcomes for the people we serve?
- Do staff members have mission-related performance objectives for the next year?

## Without a single, concise mission statement, the numerous and varied parts of your organization do not function cohesively.

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If your organization does not have a mission statement or if your current purpose statement is woefully outdated, you won’t be able to answer these questions. Until your organization has a mission statement which includes the following three elements, you will not be able to answer these questions.

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### CONSTRUCTING A MISSION STATEMENT

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Buruss suggests that a mission statement should be “sculpted,” should be a “portrait in words,” so that it is remembered by its audiences. Vittitow advocates for “a simple, focused statement of why the organization exists.” Most experts agree that a mission statement should contain the following three elements:

1. identification of the market, customers, clients, or those for whom services are provided
2. the end or goal toward which services are delivered
3. enumeration of what services are going to be provided.

Look at these three elements a little more closely. **Who are your markets? To whom will you provide services?** In describing this first element for your organization, you will want to define the target of your services—for example, homeless people, people with disabilities, minority children, single parents receiving welfare, and so on. You will also narrow this market somewhat, to specify the catchment area which you serve—for instance, the county of X, the nation, Y neighborhood, etc. An appropriate example of this element would then be: *Adults with physical or mental disabilities who live in X county of Y state.*

Now move on to the second element of your mission statement: **What is the end or goal toward which you deliver these services?** In constructing this element, you will want to state what you expect to happen to those whom you serve, as a result of

your service. It is not enough to help people in need; your organization exists to help people in need achieve some personal and socially valued goal. For example, your mission statement may say that you wish *to help those you serve to become more financially and vocationally independent.*

The final element of your mission statement follows logically from the first two and describes what your organization is going to do or **what services you are going to provide** to your target population to achieve the desired end or goal. Your organization has selected these services based upon the expressed need of your target population and the outcomes you strive to achieve. For example, you may state that you are going to *provide counseling, case management, skill training, job placement, and follow-along services.*

Now put your three elements together into your sample purpose or mission statement: *The purpose of ABC Nonprofit, Inc., is to provide counseling, case management, skill training, job placement, and follow-along services to adults with physical or mental disabilities who live in X county of Y state to help them become more financially and vocationally independent.*

***NOW THAT WASN'T DIFFICULT!***

When you have the formula for constructing your mission statement and you are the only person working on this project, it *isn't* difficult. However, your organization is just that—an organization, a group of individuals, both board members and management staff, each of whom has a different view as to the mission of the organization. Couple this diversity of opinion with the natural resistance to change and you can understand the potential problem. What is the solution?

Two pointers may be of help in this process. First, it is important to recognize that there is never only one correct mission or purpose statement and that a decision will be made, perhaps not by consensus, but that it is the intent of the organization to have a mission statement. Second, it may ease your mission statement development if all parties to the process focus first on your customers, markets, or consumers. After all, it is because of your mutual concern for these people that you have all come together in your organization in the first place.

The screenshot shows a web browser window titled "AGENCY SYSTEMS". The navigation menu includes "Computers", "Networks", "Software", "Support", "Solutions", "Technology", and "Expertise". The "Software" menu is expanded, listing services such as Case Management, Consumer Based Plans, Services Tracking & Billing, Consumer Activity & Payroll, Fiscal Budget Accounting, Quality Assurance Measurement, and Program Evaluation System. A secondary menu lists "IPASS", "Unitz/Plus", "AS/CAPS", and "AS/Financial". A sidebar on the left lists "Vocational Rehabilitation", "Early Childhood Intervention", "Community Mental Health", "Total Computer Solutions For Non-Profit Agencies", "Customers Nationwide", "Free On-Site Demonstrations", and "(800) 685-6006 - Call Today!". The bottom right of the page features the Agency Systems logo and contact address: "P.O. BOX 37410 • 7645 PRODUCTION DR. CINCINNATI, OHIO 45237". A "ON OFF" button is visible at the bottom center of the browser frame.

## HOW TO USE YOUR MISSION STATEMENT

When your mission statement has been developed, approved, and "stored" for safekeeping, you are ready to use it.

First, your mission statement should be used in communicating with all your markets and audiences, both within and outside the organization. These include your governing body, staff, volunteers, and those you serve, along with referral and funding sources, donors and potential donors, collaborating organizations, and the community at large. Because a verbatim recital of your mission statement may not communicate effectively to each of these various audiences, paraphrase it in different publications and messages. For example, a paraphrase of the sample mission statement developed above that is to be used in a newspaper article might read as follows: *ABC helps people with disabilities learn to work and get jobs.*

Second, you are also ready to answer the questions posed earlier and to address your board development, long-range and strategic planning, quality improvement and program evaluation, and human resource management functions. From your mission statement come your organizational goals, objectives, and activities—that is, your long-range and strategic plans. Programs are developed to satisfy the mission statement, and funds are generated to support these programs. You can use your mission statement to assess the satisfaction of those you

serve and the results of the services you offer; if needed, you can make program improvements based on those results. Through your mission statement, staff know what the organization is striving to do and how they can contribute. And the governing body and management provide leadership toward the accomplishment of the mission.

To cite Drucker once again: "Defining the purpose and mission of the (organization) is difficult, painful, and risky. But it alone enables (an organization) to set objectives, to develop strategies, to concentrate its resources and to go to work. It alone enables (an organization) to be managed for performance." ■

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