



Lead. Create. Make a difference.

Guide to Writing Powerful Vision and Mission Statements

“When you know who you are; when your mission is clear and you burn with the inner fire of unbreakable will; no cold can touch your heart; no deluge can dampen your purpose.”
Chief Seattle.

Understanding your organization’s core purpose, vision, and mission with “piercing clarity,” to use Jim Collins’ phrase, is leadership work. People whose work brings that purpose, vision, and mission to life are organizational leaders regardless of their positions or titles. However, if you have a senior leader title, it’s also your job to develop the statements that allow people to understand the underlying reasons for your work. And I believe it’s your job as a leader to give everyone in the organization the chance to be part of this conversation.

Step 1: Design the process of engaging staff members in reviewing or writing your mission and vision statements.

The process that works for your organization will vary depending on the size of the group. It’s my experience that this process is a crucial first step toward building a culture of engagement. Inviting people into the conversation, listening to what they have to say, and valuing their different points of view improves the final result. It also supports everyone in discovering the way their day-to-day work is part of the mission and moves the organization toward the vision. It is a step toward finding meaning and purpose in everyday practice.

“A team is not a group of people that work together A team is a group of people that trust each other.”

Simon Sinek

I recommend that you use an iterative process with an active feedback loop that allows everyone the opportunity to engage. The final decision rests with the leadership team, but no one should be surprised by the final result, because everyone has had a chance to see different versions, suggest changes, and see how the statements change from beginning to end. Yes, it takes time. But that time is what allows you to do more than come up with a statement that sits on the web page and no one ever looks at again. That investment of time is what creates the culture of engagement, brings ownership of the mission and vision, and builds trust. In other words, it's the work of building organizational leadership.

Step 2: Define your 'why.'

Here are three questions to help you define your why.

Why do you do what you do?

Why is that work important?

Why does it matter to us, to the world?

My 'why' is the idea that higher education is transformative and that people who are part of institutions of higher education, whether students, faculty, or staff should have the opportunity to learn and grow while they are part of our organizations. They should leave with more opportunities to learn, lead, create, and make a difference in the world around them. In the worlds of Robert K. Greenleaf, they should become "...healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous..." because they have been part of our organizations. Understanding your personal 'why' goes a long way to helping define your organizational 'why.'

Core Purpose: To transform lives for the benefit of society.
The University of Texas at Austin

Step 3: State your mission.

Here are three questions to help write your mission statement. If you already have a mission statement, use these three questions to test your current statement.

- What do we do?
- How do we do it?
- For whom do we do it?

Remember a good mission statement describes current reality in a way that inspires people to do great work. It also creates the parameters within which you work - we do this, but not that. However, it doesn't just describe the activities of your organization. It defines the thread of purpose running through everything your organization does to remind everyone they are working toward the same end, on the same mission.

Remember, make it concise. Aim for no more than twenty-five words.¹ A word limit pushes us to pay attention to our word choice rather than defaulting to a list of tasks. It requires us to be thoughtful and deliberative.

The American Red Cross prevents and alleviates human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors.

Step 4: Develop your vision

Here are three questions to help you write your vision statement or to use to test your current version.

- What are we working toward?
- What difference do we want to make?
- Why is this important?

A vision statement describes the future state you are working to create. It should be aspirational, audacious even. What will be different for your organization, your community, and the world if you accomplish this work?

¹ Yes, twenty-five words is an arbitrary number. Try to hit it anyway. Too much longer and you're making lists and it becomes difficult to remember.

It's not a list of dreams and possibilities. It is a promise to yourself, to your organization members, and to the people you serve. It is a way to define the future you wish to create. It is an invitation for others to join in. It should be inspiring, exciting, bold. And, like the mission statement, no more than twenty-five words.²

Writing a vision statement challenges us to stretch our thinking from the humdrum of everyday work. It requires us to understand our purpose and whether or not our work moves us toward that future. Imagine a better future resulting from the work you are doing. Write it down. Commit to it. Share it. Be excited and use it to make a difference in the world!

[Alzheimer's Association: A world without Alzheimer's disease.](#)

Step 5: Lead Your Organization

Now comes the challenging work - resisting the idea that you've gotten this done and you can move on to the next task on your list. Your mission and vision statement need to be front and center on your webpage. Even more important, they need to be front and center in your work. Talk about it. Help people find ways to connect their work to the mission, vision, and purpose. Share the statements with stakeholders. Invite new employees into the work. Use them to define and guide your day to day work.

Many organizations also have lists of values that guide their work. Articulating specific values is important, but when you do the work described here, the values of the organization should become clear. At that point, you can decide whether you need a specific list or not. And the same challenge applies here. If you are going to define your values, do something with them beyond making a list for the webpage.

Engaging your colleagues in the work of determining your purpose, your vision and your mission is critical leadership work. Done well, it guides your decisions, builds your culture, and provides meaning to your work. It's worth the time. It is work that makes a difference. It is leadership.

² See above.

Resources

https://www.bluleadz.com/hs-search-results?term=mission&type=SITE_PAGE&type=BLOG_POST&type=LISTING_PAGE

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Greenleaf, R.K., (1991). "The Servant as Leader." Robert K. Greenleaf Center: Indianapolis.

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