

## Chapter 1

# Defining Vision and Mission

*Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare.*  
—Japanese Proverb

*It's kind of fun to do the impossible.* —Walt Disney

A clear vision and a well-defined mission are central to every nonprofit organization's success. Vision is the organization's optimal goal, the reason for its existence. Mission is what the organization plans to do in order to realize that vision. Vision is a view of the desired future, while mission describes the present and what is being done to close the gap between the two. An organization's history can thus be seen as a series of missions realized since its founding.



An organization's vision binds its membership, staff, and leaders together in their work; it communicates the organization's purpose and needs to its constituents, and sets the standard against which all plans, decisions, and actions must be measured. Defining both vision and mission is fundamental to an organization's creation and subsequent growth. Time must be devoted to articulating them clearly and powerfully. As the organization moves toward and perhaps even realizes its vision, these concepts may need to be redefined or expanded.

## Vision and Mission Statements

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. . . .

These words from the United States Declaration of Independence describe the founding fathers' *vision* for America. In the same way, vision statements for nonprofits and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the world provide the vital focus that gives their work meaning, scope, and direction. Vision statements put into words the essence of an organization's beliefs and values, and define its place in the world. They may be short and simple, but their message must be clear and powerful enough to attract people's attention and inspire their support. It is these words that will move members, donors, and volunteers to rally behind an organization's efforts—or to ignore them. Chosen wisely, a vision statement's words can echo far beyond the ears of the individuals or groups being targeted.

While vision statements express an organization's optimal goal and reason for existence, *mission* statements provide an overview of a group's plans to realize that vision by identifying an organization's service areas, target audience, values, and goals.

The following statements highlight the difference between vision and mission:

### ***Biloxi AIDS Service Organization***

**Vision:** Our ultimate goal is a world without HIV/AIDS.

**Mission:** The mission of the Biloxi AIDS Service Organization is to help people both infected and affected by HIV/AIDS to secure adequate nutritional and health support to enhance their lives.

### ***The Latin American Guild for the Arts (LAGA)***

**Vision:** LAGA's vision is enhanced by a desire to maintain a proud cultural institution where the arts are accessible to all who believe in the joy and the riches of culture from Latin America and Spain. This vision is carried on through resolution and determination to be counted among the best.

**Mission:** The Latin American Guild for the Arts is a Philadelphia-based, multi-disciplinary, nonprofit organization committed to the presentation, promotion, documentation, and preservation of the arts and cultures of Latin America and Spain.

## The Importance of Vision and Mission Statements

With so many programs to develop and deliver, and so much money to raise, why should start-up nonprofits devote valuable time to stating what appears obvious? And why should mature organizations redefine what they've already been doing for years?

An organization's vision and mission are vital to its creation and subsequent growth. Far beyond merely projecting an organization's image or listing its programs, vision and mission statements differentiate one group from another. They establish the long-term direction that guides every aspect of an organization's daily operations, from informing decisions to providing highly effective tools for creating strategies and carrying them out—overriding any short-term considerations based on individual concerns or temporary circumstance. Vision and mission statements also promote shared values and expectations within an organization. Finally, they signal an organization's intent, and its commitment to worthy goals that deserve support.

Vision and mission statements are frequently drafted quickly for a new organization's bylaws, or for its application for federal tax exemption. Leaders of a fledgling effort should, however, make every effort—early on—to find the words that express their binding sentiments to the general public with the greatest resonance. In the case of a new effort, defining vision and mission enables the group to take its next step—establishing goals, the measurable achievements that move an organization forward.

Vital, up-to-date vision and mission statements are also indispensable for older, established organizations. Their statements should be reviewed periodically and, as appropriate, updated to reflect changes in society, and in the forces affecting them. A vision realized, for example, may suggest that it is time to create a new one and move on to other issues, constituencies, or locales. The March of Dimes, whose founding vision was the eradication of polio, is an excellent example. Discovery of the polio vaccine signaled that the organization's original vision would soon be realized. The March of Dimes then formulated a new one—a world without birth defects—and shifted its focus to an entirely different area of human suffering, and, in a sense, founded itself anew.

Older, established institutions may also, from time to time, experience the symptoms of fading vision, including declining membership, lack of public interest, or dwindling revenues, yet not recognize their vision is outdated and needs updating. Vision statements must be living documents that evolve in response to change and provide ongoing direction and inspiration for an organization's work.

## Creating Mission and Vision Statements

This chapter's opening quote was the work of the American colonies' Second Continental Congress, which assembled in Philadelphia in 1776. Most of the delegates were bound together by a

shared vision—freedom and self-determination—which Thomas Jefferson then articulated in a vision statement for the future United States: the Declaration of Independence. He also described the Congress's mission: to declare independence from England.

The same process of drafting a nation's blueprint also applies to creating vision and mission statements for nonprofits. In both cases, a group with shared values meets to effect change and articulate its vision and mission, hoping that these statements will inspire their constituencies to action and that, over time, the group will be able to achieve its mission and realize its vision.

In an organization's founding stages, the task of drafting vision and mission statements should be shared by members of its core group. Each person will have a contribution to make, and spontaneous comments from those closely associated with the effort generally provide the best raw material for developing the final wording. Interested people outside the group can also play a part. Based on their experience or expertise, outsiders will frequently have insight into what is of critical importance and what is doable.

How can several individuals participate in the process at the same time? Invite a number of them to a special meeting with the stated intention of developing vision and mission statements. Ask the participants to consider the following question before the meeting so all can be prepared to make thoughtful contributions: "What would you like to see this organization accomplish and how do you think it can do so?" A less desirable but still serviceable approach is to ask one person to draft the statements and circulate them before the meeting. Regardless of which method you choose, the process of drawing from various sources will strengthen the final product.

Developing vision and mission statements with the organization's key internal and external players also serves to underline the importance of the statements and deepen the participants' commitment. This will, in turn, create a more powerful and visible identity for the organization and move its members to purposeful action. The following is a useful guide for achieving these results.

#### *One Way To Draft Vision and Mission Statements*

1. Announce a special meeting for a small number (five to fifteen) of those who share your vision and may be willing to become involved. To ensure maximum attendance, check in advance whether daytime or evenings, weekend or weekdays, are best. Offer to arrange a lift to the meeting if you sense that easy transportation might ensure the participants' attendance. Stress the importance of the gathering in writing and follow-up conversations. Tell your group that you are ready to set the direction of the fledgling organization by putting into words the ideas you've been discussing. Let them know that each has a unique contribution to make and that you value their input.
2. Select a meeting space that is accessible and comfortable; the walls should provide enough room for everyone to post a large sheet of paper. Make sure you have a sufficient supply of poster-size paper, marking pens, and masking tape.
3. Before the meeting, send a short letter to all the members of the group. Include the sample vision and mission statements of several nonprofits as guides. Ask your group to think about your organization and jot down some ideas before they come to the meeting. To help them understand the difference between the statements,

explain that a *vision* statement should answer the following questions: What do you hope to accomplish? What are the end results you would like to see? What are the changes you would like to effect in the society around you? To what end are your efforts focused? Simply stated, what would you like to see happen as a result of your efforts? Explain that a *mission* statement should answer these questions: What activities, programs, or services do you plan to undertake to accomplish your goals? How would you characterize these efforts? Are they service-related, advocacy-focused, or public education-oriented? Basically, the mission statement must outline how you plan to accomplish your stated aims.

4. The chair or facilitator opens the meeting by expressing thanks and reviewing the tasks that lie ahead. For example: "Our goal is to leave this meeting with clear statements of our vision and mission. We'll use the same process to create both statements. Let's start with the vision statement." The chair should then ask each person to write a statement expressing what he or she believes is the principal goal of the organization. Ask everyone to think about the concepts that strike them as crucial and to disregard for the moment any concerns for style or grammar. "Right now," you should explain, "we're searching for content. Let's concentrate on ideas; we'll get to the precise wording later." Take some time for questions and then ask everyone to write whatever comes to mind on his or her individual poster sheet. You can tell them, "Don't censor your thoughts. Write down as many words, phrases, and ideas as you can." Allow as much time as the group needs to finish, then invite everyone to read his or her own statements aloud, just as they were written.
5. Using a blackboard or paper, the chair should then record the most frequently mentioned thoughts and idea, as well as those that may have been mentioned by only one individual but that speak to everyone present. The chair's role here is crucial, for intelligence, intuition, and a keen sense of group dynamics must be used in deciding which phrases best convey the concepts the whole group perceives as central to the organization's vision.
6. After listing the words, expressions, phrases, and sentences the group agrees are most important, the chair should then ask for a collective effort to answer the question, "What would we ultimately like to change in the world?" Again, group members should not be concerned about grammar or style at this juncture, only concepts. The draft vision statement that develops can be refined later by answering the questions in the following section.
7. The group should then develop a mission statement using the same process. Working vision and mission statements will have been developed, and an increased sense of unity and commitment created among the participants.

#### ***Fine-Tuning Your Statements***

Once working vision and mission statements have been agreed upon, check them by asking the following questions. For both vision and mission statements:

1. *Are they clear and concise?* People can be inspired to act by a minimum of rhetoric. Powerful messages often are best conveyed with very few words. The vision statements of the Isabella Geriatric Center and International Planned Parenthood provide examples that are both brief and meaningful: "To provide the finest care to older adults" for the former, and "We believe every child should be a wanted child" for the latter.
2. *Do they demonstrate a commitment to serving the public good?* To obtain and maintain tax-exempt status, which is akin to governmental approval for any charitable venture, an organization needs to show how its activities are charitable (see Chapter 2 for more on U.S. federal tax exemption). While the word "charitable" is usually defined in a broad sense by the Internal Revenue Service in the United States and its counterparts throughout the world, applicants must clearly demonstrate that their work is designed to serve the public good.

The following vision and mission statements of the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH) clearly focus on the public good:

**Vision:** A decent, safe, affordable home for every Northern California resident is the ultimate goal of NPH.

**Mission:** The Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH) strives to preserve, develop, and manage quality housing, along with appropriate supportive services, to improve the lives of those in need, as well as revitalize and enhance communities and neighborhoods, through the support and promotion of nonprofit housing development corporations.

3. *Do they accurately reflect the values and beliefs that sustain your efforts?* The statements communicate an organization's beliefs and put them to work by mobilizing others into action. These beliefs constitute an organization's value system and might differentiate one group from others working in the same field, or reveal critical differences in approach or method.

The vision and mission statements of AVSC International illustrate this point:

**Vision:** We believe that individuals have the right to make informed decisions about their reproductive health and to receive care that meets their needs. We work in partnership with governments, institutions, and health care professionals to make this right a reality.

**Mission:** AVSC International works worldwide to improve the lives of individuals by making reproductive health services safe, available, and sustainable. We provide technical assistance, training, and information, with a focus on practical solutions that improve services where resources are scarce.

4. *Are they powerful?* One of the primary uses of vision and mission statements is to motivate and inspire others. The strength of these statements is their ability to touch the hearts of those whose support you hope to obtain. They should highlight the most compelling reason for people to rally behind your cause. Make sure yours communicate with impact. Do not confuse rhetoric with power.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I have a dream" speech etched the vision of the American civil rights movement into the consciousness of the 1960's—and of the decades since.

Primarily for the mission statement:

1. *Is it realistic?* The mission statement should suggest clear parameters with regard to geographic scope, targeted constituency, and programmatic thrust. It should answer the question, "What can we realistically expect to accomplish if our work is successful?"

The mission statement of the International Rescue Committee, Inc., paints a clear picture of the intended results of its work and provides the basis for measuring the organization's performance, as does the mission statement of Caregivers:

The International Rescue Committee, Inc., addresses the needs of refugees. In the United States, the Committee provides services to refugees through domestic resettlement. These services include job training, English-speaking classes, and programs to help refugees.

Caregivers' mission is to make it possible for frail elders to maintain a reasonably independent lifestyle in the familiar and cherished surroundings of their own homes. Volunteers provide assistance such as transportation help, minor household chores and grocery shopping, assistance with reading and paperwork, and companionship. Our goal is to facilitate a long-term friendship between a homebound elder and a volunteer, so that the elder may have a stable, consistent, and reliable source of support.

2. *Does it indicate for whose specific benefit your organization exists?* An effective mission statement clearly identifies an organization's clients—the specific individuals it plans to serve. Begin by identifying which constituencies your organization plans to target, now or in the future. Be as specific as possible and avoid such phrases as, "serving the general public" (unless that is really true). Then define your prime constituents by age, sex, geographic locale, minority group status, income, or any other category, and specify the services to be provided. The mission statement of Hadassah—The Women's Zionist Organization of America—addresses all these points:

Hadassah Medical Relief Association Inc. was founded in 1912 to assist Israel by providing medical services, medical research and teaching, services for immigrant Jewish children and youth, and education and vocational training.

The mission statement of the Idaho Black History Museum is similarly clear:

The mission of the Idaho Black History Museum is to educate individuals of all races about the history and culture of African Americans with special emphasis on the Idaho African American experience.

In creating mission statements nonprofits should focus on communicating “WHAT services they will provide, WHO will receive those services, WHEN and WHERE services will be provided, and HOW the effectiveness of services will be measured. All of these considerations must be determined within the context of the ethical values of the organization.”<sup>1</sup>

### Putting the Statements to Work

After some careful polishing for style and grammar, your organization will be ready to unfurl its newly created banners and put them into action. You will be able to find many uses for your statements. They provide integral, consistent language for all of your printed materials, including brochures, programs, and newsletters. They are also important elements of proposals to corporations and foundations, and direct-mail fundraising appeals. You may even choose to include them on your letterhead. Depending on the particular audience you are approaching, you may elect to vary the exact wording, but your original statements will always provide good starting points and basic, useful scripts for supporters when describing your organization to others.

However an organization decides to communicate its vision and mission, it must put the words into action. How well an organization lives by its word will largely determine how well it is supported. Paying close attention to how you communicate your organization’s vision and mission both internally and externally, combined with success in bringing the words to life, will ensure your own vitality and continued growth. This is equally true for organizations that are twenty-five years old and those that have just begun their work.

### Tips

- Your organization’s vision and mission statements should guide every aspect of your programs and operations; they provide a truly liberating component to your work, as they are, together, the steady compass that helps keep you on track.
- Revisit your founding statements periodically to make sure they continue to resonate with the times and inspire others to take action.
- Create personal vision and mission statements for yourself.

---

1. E. Jane Rutter, *The Self-Sustaining Nonprofit: Planning for Success* (Columbia, MO: Grants Link, Inc., 1997).

### Developing Effective Vision and Mission Statements

1. Use the answers to the following questions as a guide to drafting appropriate statements for your organization. If your group is already in existence and has operative vision and mission statements, write them down below and then review them in light of these questions:

#### *Vision*

- What are the values or beliefs that inform your work?
- What would you ultimately hope to accomplish as a result of your efforts?

#### *Mission*

- How do you plan to work toward this broad vision?
  - For whose specific benefit does the organization exist?
2. Weave together your responses to the above questions into two statements that communicate your organization's vision and mission:
  3. Evaluate your statements in light of the following considerations:
    - Are the statements clear and concise?
    - Do the statements reflect your values and beliefs?
    - Do the statements demonstrate a commitment to serving the public good?
    - Are the statements powerful?
  4. Jot down possible changes that you can make in light of the above responses.
  5. Now modify your statements in ways that would strengthen them.
  6. Share this draft with three people outside your organization for their comments. Be sure to include at least one person who is not familiar with your issues.

## Additional Resources

### *Publications*

Barthel, Diane. "The Role of 'Fictions' in the Redefinition of Mission." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 26 (December 1997): 399-420.

Brinckerhoff, Peter C. *Mission-Based Management: Leading Your Not-for-Profit into the Twenty-First Century*. Dillon, CO: Alpine Guild, 1994. 258 pp.

Guidebook for leadership in nonprofit organizations. Sections cover trends in the nonprofit sector, characteristics of successful nonprofits, board responsibilities and recruitment, management, marketing, planning, financial empowerment, flexibility, and handling change. Lists resources. Indexed.

Campbell, Bruce. "Do Your Donors Understand Your Mission?" *Fund Raising Management* 30 (August 1999): 47-48.

Discusses research based on donor feedback, which implies that a nonprofit organization's mission is often misunderstood by its donors. Gives suggestions for a research plan that organizations can use to ascertain how informed their donors are, and the changes they need to make in order to communicate their mission most effectively.

Espy, Siri N. "Marketing Your Mission: Do You Use These Three Key Strategies? If Not, You'll Have Trouble Fulfilling Your Organization's Mission." *Nonprofit World* 14 (September-October 1996): 22-23.

Explains how to develop a marketing orientation with three necessary elements.

Gehrke, John. "Organizational Alignment and Focus." *Advancing Philanthropy* 6 (Spring 1998): 39, 42-43.

Analyzes four essential elements of nonprofit organizations: mission/vision, staff, strategies, and people the organization serves; stresses the need for these elements to be aligned independently as well as with each other.

Leet, Rebecca. *Marketing for Mission*. Washington, DC: National Center for Nonprofit Boards, 1998. 24 pp.

Levine, Judy. "Why People Give: The Importance of Mission-Driven Fundraising." *Grassroots Fundraising Journal* 13 (June 1994): 6-8.

Radtke, Janel M. "How To Write a Mission Statement." *Grantsmanship Center Magazine* 36 (Fall 1998): 30.

---

Sheehan, Robert M., Jr. "Mission Accomplishment as Philanthropic Organization Effectiveness: Key Findings from the Excellence in Philanthropy Project." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 25 (March 1996): 110-123.

Vogt, Jean. "Demystifying the Mission Statement." *Nonprofit World* 12 (January-February 1994): 29-32.

Provides concrete steps for constructing a nonprofit mission statement.