Mission to Vision
Defining Your Nonprofit’s Purpose
Stating Its Intention

Understand the drivers
- The issues are likely to have come to you—presented themselves as causes demanding a response. Strong emotions are often attached to them.
- Knowing and understanding the issues—in the context of the community served—are essential to building an effective organization.
- The issues may grow and change. To remain relevant, your nonprofit will have to do the same.

Primary Topics
- Mission
- Vision

Surely there’s more to it than that…. 

Find the path to your vision
- Issue
  - because
- Mission
  - we will
- Planning
  - analyze
  - prioritize
  - strategize
- Action
  - engage
  - evaluate
- Vision
  - achieve

Master mission distinctions
- Mission
  - Magnetic North
  - Abstract
  - Static
  - Enduring
- Mission Statement:
  - Lively Expression
    - Purpose
    - We are here because…
    - Action
    - We will do these things…
    - Result
    - Our goal is to achieve…

Master vision distinctions
- Vision
  - The destination
    - Clear
    - Ambitious
    - Optimistic
    - Rational
- Vision Statement:
  - Succinct Expression
    - Definition
    - We intend to…
    - Challenge
    - We can accomplish…
    - Inspiration
    - We will succeed…
Expect some long discussions

I'm not sure how to put it into words, but I'll know it when I see it.

—I have made this [letter] longer, because I have not had the time to make it shorter.
—Blaise Pascal, "Lettres Provinciales", 1657

Anticipate the issues

Know the givens
- What do we do?
- What does everyone feel passionate about?
- What must be included to avoid misrepresenting the organization?

Know the hot buttons
- What uncertainties are likely to need the most attention?
- Where is there dissent?
- Are there topics or perspectives that are considered taboo?

Identify the participants

Who will participate in the process?
- The board owns the mission; they make the final decision.
- The staff has everyday responsibility for achieving the mission. They have critical information, and you want the buy-in their participation will earn.
- Constituents (such as clients or funders) can bring a valuable perspective.

Create a task force of people who are interested in both process and outcome. Keep it small; keep it agile.

Define the process

- A task force of the most creative thinkers and writers available drafts an initial statement.
- Task force presents the draft to the board for general comment on message and tone.
  - Caution! Wordsmith detour ahead!
- Task force incorporates board comment into a second draft.
  - If you have access to a professional writer, use it now.
- Task force presents the second draft for preliminary approval.
- Task force makes any necessary adjustments.
- Task force presents the mission statement for the board to adopt.

Structure the discussion

- Identify the key questions to be considered
- Review the process
  - The goal
  - Topics to be covered
  - Ground rules for participation
  - How decisions will be made
- Vary your means of exploring information to accommodate different personal styles

If you have the means, invest in a professional facilitator.

Agree on the ground rules

We are pursuing a shared goal
- All ideas are welcome
- I will listen carefully to what I resist most
- Equal participation from everyone is key
- There are no taboo topics
- I will uphold the confidentiality agreement (if there is one)

Encourage productive disagreement; you’ll have a better outcome.
To unify the group and advance the effort, focus on the goal.
Tackle the questions

Open questions will encourage discussion.
- What needs to be done that only we can do, or that we can do better than anyone else?
- Who benefits from our products/services and how?
- How do we accomplish our work?
- What do we value most?
- How broad or narrow is our focus?
- What are the most important questions for your nonprofit to address?

Use what you’ve created

Congratulations! You’ve got a mission and vision statements. Use them to:
- Define your organization to the world
- Guide your decision making
- Inspire your constituents (clients, community, board, staff, funders)
- Promote your cause

Consider others’ mission statements

Organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.
- Google
- ...provide relief to victims of disasters and help people prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies.
- The American Red Cross
- ...to strengthen the nonprofit sector by advancing knowledge about U.S. philanthropy.
- The Foundation Center
- To enable people and businesses throughout the world to realize their full potential.
- Microsoft

Plan to achieve your vision

Strategic plan
- Agreed upon priorities and broad means of achieving them over the next ~three years
- Tool for evaluating progress toward significant goals

Business plan
- Organization-wide activities to take place during the business year, as supported by the annual budget
- Tool for evaluating staff performance at individual and team levels

Personal plan
- Each staff member’s plan for his/her own performance
- Tool for evaluating individual performance and growth

Consider others’ vision statements

A world without Alzheimer’s disease.
- Alzheimer’s Association
Current and future media and telecommunications technologies promote, and do not impede, democratic values.
- Media Access Project
Every child will be a wanted child.
- Planned Parenthood
A personal computer in every home running Microsoft software.
- Microsoft

Take action

Implement your program activity
- Deliver products and services
- Monitor progress
- Adapt and improve based on what you learn
- Share learning with others

Connect to your community
- Seek collaborative opportunities
Advocate for your cause
- Educate your audience and the general public
- Educate lawmakers
Are we there yet?

How will we know when we’ve achieved our vision?
- Keep asking yourself how close you are, over and over.
- Ask your clients, donors, members of the community—anyone with a genuine interest in your nonprofit.
- Learn from your successes and your failures; modify your activity for constant improvement.
- Don’t be afraid to say, “We’ve done it! Our work is through.”

For more information

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