

Not Much to See When It Comes to Vision Statements

By Mark Graham Brown

Every organization needs some kind of plan, but they don't necessarily need a mission and vision statement.



Don't kid yourself about mission statements. Putting a bunch of words together and pasting them on the wall does not change a thing.

Someone organizes an off-site strategic planning meeting for all the key executives. One of the first tasks is to create a mission and vision statement for the organization. A management guru in the 1980s decided that writing these magic sentences will somehow keep an organization more focused on what they are good at doing.

A mission statement is supposed to answer the question: **What does the organization do?**

A vision statement is supposed to answer the question: **What is the most important thing for the organization to accomplish in the next 3-5 years?**

Ideally both statements should be crafted by the CEO or a single executive, but rarely is this case. Organizations today like to do everything in teams in order to get "buy-in" from everyone. The fallacy is that even though a team may have spent 4-8 hours agonizing over some vague paragraph or sentence, no one leaves happy with the end product. The final statements are often compromises and end up getting so watered down that any real meaning is usually lost.

Some organizations actually have good mission statements, like Disney's: **"We make people happy."** It is short, memorable and reminds everyone why the company exists. The problem with this mission statement is that it might apply equally well to Anheuser-Busch. Beer makes people happy too! Most guys I know are a lot happier with a six-pack than a day at Disneyworld.

Come to think of it, Anheuser-Busch used to have amusement parks too, before they sold Busch Gardens to Sea World. So Disney's mission of making people happy fits Anheuser-Busch quite well.

A good mission statement is specific enough so that it would not apply to 10 other companies, but not so specific that it limits an organization from exploring new ventures or markets. For example, the old Northrop Corporation was in the aircraft business. The new Northrop Grumman is in the defense business, and aircraft are only one of many different types of products they offer.

A vision statement has a different purpose. It is supposed to create a picture of where the organization wants to be, or what it wants to accomplish for the future. In tough times, a vision might not focus on attaining a lofty growth goal, but focus more on survival.

A Navy organization I worked with was being studied for possible closure. Their vision was, **"Still here next year."** This was a very clear vision to everyone - survival is sometimes the most important thing. Once you achieve that, then you can figure out something more to focus on. This might be an appropriate vision for many banks and insurance companies today.

The funniest vision statement I've seen recently (which was pointed out to me by my colleague Bernard Marr) is Hilton's: **"To fill the earth with the warmth and light of hospitality."** I don't know about you, but I haven't felt much of that warmth and light on my last few stays at Hilton's.

What's the Proposed Benefit?

Writing mission and vision statements is supposed to force an organization to think hard about what it does and what it wants to accomplish for the future. After creating these statements and communicating them to others, the following benefits are supposed to occur:

- Higher levels of employee engagement as they see how their jobs fit into the company mission and vision
- Greater focus on things that are critical to success
- Individual goals and objectives linked to the mission and vision
- Greater alignment of processes and plans
- Linkage of key performance metrics with the vision and mission
- Improved decision making by using the mission and vision for guidance

What Really Happens?

Mission and vision statements get plastered around on posters, plaques and wallet cards after being unveiled in an "all-hands" meeting. Employee's eyes glaze over as they ponder the meaning of trite, vague statements such as:

- "World-class"
- "Value-driven"
- "Leading provider"
- "Customer satisfaction"
- "Employer of choice"

...and other hollow words and phrases that characterize most mission and vision statements.

What really happens to most of these statements is that they are forgotten and absolutely nothing changes in the organization. If the company is good at marketing before writing the mission and vision, they are still good at marketing. If their service was second-rate before, it is still second-rate. Putting a bunch of words together and pasting them on the wall does not change anything.

For years, at the beginning of school every morning we would say the Pledge of Allegiance. Most of us had no idea what it meant, why we had to say it, and it had zero impact on any of our behavior. Mission and vision statements are not really harmful, but they don't do much good either.

One of my favorite management gurus is Scott Adams, creator of the Dilbert comic strip. He defines a mission statement as a **"long awkward sentence that demonstrates management's inability to think clearly."** This definition fits most of the mission and vision statements I've seen.

Action Plan

If you don't have a mission or vision statement, I wouldn't worry too much about creating them. Every organization needs some kind of plan, but they don't necessarily need a mission and vision statement. If you have mission and vision statements that are either so polluted with jargon and buzzwords that no two people can agree on what they mean, or statements that are so generic that they could apply to any organization (for example, "supplier of choice to our customers, investment of choice for our shareholders, and employer of choice for our employees"), it's time for a major re-write.

Give the job to your CEO or big boss, along with a list of buzzwords that cannot be used. These statements need to be written in plain English so that everyone understands them. Good mission and vision statements have the following characteristics:

- Concise
- Focused on one or a few things versus everything
- Inspirational – make employees feel good about supporting them
- Memorable – wallet cards stay in the wallet
- Realistic – not everyone can be number one or the best.

Keep in mind that having an outstanding mission and vision statement really won't do much unless you do a bunch of other things to link goals, objectives measures, plans, strategies and consequences to them. In other words, having a clearly focused mission and vision is like laying the foundation of your new house – there is still a heck of a lot of work left to do to turn a slab of cement into a house. However, a cracked or shaky foundation will never lead to a solid house.

*Mark Graham Brown has 33 years of experience helping organizations measure and improve performance. He is the author of many books, and this article is based on a chapter in the upcoming book: **Killer Analytics: Top 20 Metrics Missing From Your Balance Sheet (Wiley, 2013).***