

A Clear and Compelling Mission

By Brydon M. DeWitt, President

"If you didn't exist, would somebody invent you?" That question was appropriately asked many times during the remarkable career of the late Dr. Robert Stuhr, a good friend and mentor for many years. The question was and is not meant to be impudent, but to cause organizational leadership to think seriously about the reason the nonprofit exists and functions today. Do the needs the organization was created to meet still require the same attention? What has changed? Have the clients and program changed without revising the mission statement? Do Board members know what the mission is?

A corollary to the above question is: "What do Board and staff members *believe* your mission to be?" Sometimes the problem is that the very length of the mission statement makes it difficult to remember. At other times, the mission was not properly introduced to each new Board and staff member, assuming that they already knew or would find out by reading the materials they were given.

A good exercise to discover what your Board and staff members know about your mission is this -- at an appropriate meeting of each group, pass out a half sheet of paper asking each person to write down what he or she believes is the mission of the organization. The results will provide fodder for productive discussions and may set the stage for a review of the mission statement.

At a nonprofit some years ago, just such an experiment was conducted with Board and staff members to determine if they could articulate the sense of the mission if not the exact wording. The nonprofit was engaged in a variety of services to the inner city, from alternative education to pregnancy counseling. The list grew over time because the executive director encouraged staff members to try new ideas, no matter whether they necessarily flowed from the mission statement. It became important, however, to be able to communicate correctly the organization to its own constituents and to engage others in knowledge and support of the nonprofit to know how the chief volunteers (the Board) were talking about the organization to friends, colleagues, fellow country club members, Rotarians, etc. Therefore, at a Board meeting, members were given a slip of paper and asked to write down the mission statement. These responses were collected and revealed that not one Board member was correct and no two answers were the same. Knowing this, the nonprofit began to be serious about defining itself in terms of the reality of what it had become.

When beginning to provide consulting services or conducting development audits for clients, it is always important to interview each Board member individually. The first question asked concerns the member's understanding of the nonprofit's mission. The answers to that question provide an especially revealing insight into the organization's ability to define, fund, and operate its programs of service.

Lack of understanding and miscommunicating the mission statement is the more common problem. Sometimes, though, there is precise understanding of the

mission on the part of the leadership but a steadfast unwillingness to change the nonprofit's mission in spite of new realities. The unwillingness to change, adapt, and expand thinking about dealing with new possibilities have resulted in organizational demise.

Mission statements are normally reviewed, edited or changed as part of strategic planning that occurs every three to five years. However, the environment in which nonprofits operate is changing more quickly today than in previous times. It is critical that every nonprofit review its mission statement annually to make certain that it accurately and briefly describes who you are and why you are.

An effective mission statement should be as succinct, as poignant as possible, and no more than fifteen words. Longer than that, and Board and staff members and other volunteers will not be able to remember it. One of the best presently being used is that of Second Baptist Church in Richmond, VA: *"A loving community, transformed by Christ, for unbounded service."* Some of the worst are contained in college catalogues, many of which go on for several pages. As an exercise, pick up most any college catalogue, read the mission and highlight the key words that get at the main reason the institution exists. Applicants and parents should not have to work that hard, however, to learn why that high educational institution is special.

The mission statement is just that -- a simple statement about core reason your organization was created written in plain language that is easy to be understood and remembered. Anything other than that (explanations, bullet points, etc.) is just clutter that obscures the reality of why you are and who you serve.

Creating/Recreating Your Mission Statement

There is more than one approach to analyzing and either confirming your mission or writing a new one. Usually, there is a sense on the part of the CEO and other top staff members that the mission statement is unwieldy, unmemorable, or not descriptive of the organization's current program and emphasis. In rare instances, one or more Board members will raise the issue. In any case, when this realization occurs, these methods can be productive:

- An ad hoc committee can be appointed by the chair of the Board to review and create a new mission statement to be recommended to the Board at a certain future date. The committee can be configured in a number of ways, but likely will include the CEO, the chief development officer, and a couple of Board members. The chair of the Board is always an ex officio member of all Board committees. Sometimes, others are added to the mix from students or clients served as well as one or two key supporters.
- The full Board and top staff members, usually in an annual retreat, can be used either to review/confirm the mission or to rewrite it.

- The strategic planning committee is the most usual group to examine the mission statement as one of the first orders of business. Since the mission is the basis for everything in which a nonprofit is engaged, it is vital to make certain this foundational statement is in place before moving to setting strategic objectives.

Whichever method is chosen for your organization, it is helpful to have one person serve as a facilitator or bring an experienced facilitator in from the outside. A good technique to begin is to ask each person in the group -- individually and one at a time -- to give one word that describes the mission of the organization. Go around the room in this fashion until all of the words have been exhausted and are written on a board or flip chart for all to see. You will notice similarities between some of the descriptive words, and the facilitator will help bring consensus around the fundamental words that should make up the mission statement.

A number of organizations have a mission statement and a vision statement. In the view of this writer, one good mission statement is all any organization needs. Usually, the impetus for creating a vision statement comes from the feeling that something is missing from the mission.

Using Your Mission Statement

When you have created the right mission statement, you want everyone to know it -- and it can be used in a number of ways. Some of these are:

- In or near the masthead of your hard copy and e-mail publications;
- Posted within your organization at key spots where staff, clients, and visitors will see it;
- Speaking it at the beginning of Board and other volunteer committee meetings;
- Addressing it when making presentations to civic and religious groups, explaining how it is being given life through the organization's work;
- Discussing every program of the nonprofit in terms of how it is helping to meet the organization's mission.

Excerpted from Brydon DeWitt's book: [The Nonprofit Development Companion – A Workbook for Fundraising Success](#). Published by John Wiley & Sons, it is part of the AFP Fund Development series.