

Center for Results-Focused Leadership

Strategies to strengthen results in public-sector and nonprofit organizations



Quick Summary

A mission statement helps staff and external stakeholders know what an organization does and why it does it. To be sure, mission statements sometimes get a bad rap as something put on the wall and not really used. But results-focused organizations realize the value of both having a well-crafted mission statement and using it as an important part of the organizational culture.

Strategy Details

Q1. What's a mission statement?

A mission statement helps staff and external stakeholders know what an organization does and why it does it. And let's be candid, mission statements sometimes get a bad rap as something created and maybe put on the wall, but not really used. Sometimes that's true, but results-focused organizations realize the value of not only having a well-crafted mission statement but using it as an important part of the organizational culture.

Q2. What are the characteristics of a well-crafted mission statement?

One of the most useful guides to creating mission statements -- for both government agencies and nonprofits -- comes from Professor Sharon Oster's book *Strategic Management in the Nonprofit Organization*. She explains that a mission statement should serve three functions in an organization:

- **Setting boundaries:** The mission statement should define the scope of an organization's activities, providing it with focus and helping it move forward when there are competing internal or external ideas about what the organization should be doing.
- **Motivating staff:** The mission statements should motivate staff by conveying the core values of the organization, either explicitly or implicitly. It can also motivate external stakeholders, partners and funders.
- **Helping evaluate organizational performance:** The mission statement should help define success for the organization, which in turn helps it to examine and evaluate its performance.

Oster's three functions of a mission statement can be helpful criteria when organizations decide to create, review or update their mission statements. That includes asking:

- How well does our mission statement set boundaries about what we *do* as an organization and what we *don't* do? Could the same language in our mission statement apply to other organizations or does it seem specific enough to our own scope of work?
- How motivating is the language of our mission statement? Could it be made more inspiring, lifting up the broader purpose of our work?
- How clearly does our mission statement define success so that we can better judge how well we're doing as an organization?

Q3. How long should a mission statement be?

There's no one answer to that question, but mission statements that are very short are more like taglines than mission statements, while mission statements that are too long are unlikely to be high on motivation. As Peter Drucker advises in his book *Managing the Nonprofit Organization*, "One of our most common mistakes is to make the mission statement into a kind of hero sandwich of good intentions. It must be simple and clear. As you add new tasks, you de-emphasize and get rid of old ones. You can only do so many things." In short, the right length is about finding the sweet spot, which is usually just a few sentences.

As just noted, some organizations -- and they're typically well-known companies -- have very short mission statements. For example, TED's mission is "Spread ideas," while the airline JetBlue's is "To inspire humanity -- both in the air and on the ground." And Microsoft's is, "To empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more." By Oster's criteria, all three of these statements are strong on motivation, but weak on setting boundaries and defining success. However, they're so short that they're very memorable. Our advice is that public-sector organizations should develop fleshed out mission statements, which will be more operational than tag-lines -- but, if it's useful to them, they can create a short tagline as well.

Q4. How should a mission statement be created?

The process of creating a mission statement can have important value in itself, as a way to build consensus within an organization about what the organization does (and doesn't) do and what success looks like. As a result, getting broad input from staff about the mission statement -- creating it or updating it -- can be helpful. That can include discussions at leadership off-sites and workshops with employees and volunteer teams delegated to lead the effort and report back to leadership.

Q5. Once created, how should a mission statement be used?

In his book *Mission-Based Management*, Peter Brinckerhoff's suggests using a mission statement in several ways, including:

- **As a management tool.** That includes using the mission statement in leadership discussions around questions such as: ‘Which of the three options that we have before us is most responsive to our mission?’”
- **As a rallying cry and staff motivator.** Especially in challenging times, a mission statement can be a motivator for staff and stakeholders, reminding them of the importance of the organization's work.

Brinckerhoff is writing for a nonprofit audience, so he also suggests that the mission statement can be useful for both volunteer recruitment and for fundraising, both of which benefit from being able to convey a clear sense of mission. In a government context, the parallel would be recruiting staff and ensuring financial support from appropriators.

Q6. How can make a mission statement a part of your organizational

To get the most benefit from a mission statement, it needs to be known by the organization and its stakeholders. It's why Brinckerhoff emphasizes ensuring that the mission statement is visible. As he writes:

“Excellent organizations know their mission. It’s on the tip of their tongue, and you can ask nearly everyone in the place what their mission is...and given you reasons why *they* are the essential link in the chain to get the mission realized. How does this happen?...The mission needs to be visible everywhere.” This includes major organizational documents—annual reports, public relations material, staff orientation manual (with an emphasis on why the mission is so important), personnel policies, strategic plans—and as a daily tool used by the senior leadership.”

He notes that it, even if the mission statement is very visible, it takes time -- months if not years -- for a mission statement to become ingrained within the organization. As a result, "you need to lead the charge for a long, long time. As new staff and board people come on, they will know no other organization than one driven by the mission, and it will begin to be culturally ingrained.”

Q7. How can leaders support the mission statement with their actions?

A final useful piece of advice from Brinckerhoff is around putting actions behind your mission. He writes:

“You [a leader of an organization] need to be seen *living* the mission statement. Once you publicize and invest in your mission statement, you hold yourself up to a higher standard. *You* have to use the mission daily, visibly, and consistently. *You* have to embody its ideas. If the mission says to be culturally sensitive, *you* have to be the most educated and sensitive person in the organization. If the mission [is]...to be an advocate for children...*you* have to articulate and be a living symbol of the missions. People will be

skeptical of the need or value of a revamped mission, and you have to live the mission. Do it, don't just say it."

Q8. What about vision and values statements?

Vision and values statements can be additional powerful tools. Vision statements are aspirational: They describe what the organization is trying to achieve in the long run -- details that could make a mission statement unwieldy long. Values statements, meanwhile, convey an organization's core principles and philosophical ideals, helping inform and guide the decisions and behaviors of the people inside the organization and signaling to external stakeholders what's important to the agency or nonprofit. Put another way, the vision statement shares what beliefs and commitments an organization's work will be guided and informed by.

Q9. Can we walk through Oster's criteria with some examples?

Example 1: Nike

Let's start with a company that everyone knows, before turning to a public-sector example. Here's Nike's mission statement:

Our mission is what drives us to do everything possible to expand human potential. We do that by creating groundbreaking sport innovations, by making our products more sustainably, by building a creative and diverse global team and by making a positive impact in communities where we live and work.

Turning to Oster's criteria, Nike's mission statement seems fairly weak on setting boundaries: Things like "expanding human potential" or "creating groundbreaking sport innovations" are very broad, although as a huge company they may not want to limit their scope too much. In terms of motivating staff, Nike's mission statement seems very strong, including having goals around sustainability, diversity and impact that are inspiring. And in terms of helping evaluate organizational performance, this one seems quite strong too, since the aspirations that are part of its mission statement could be turned into performance metrics.

Example 2: A state homeland security office

Now let's turn to some public-sector examples. Here's a mission statement of a state's office of homeland security:

The Governor's Office of Homeland Security is a coordinating office. GOHS' role is to advise the Governor, lead the development of policies, priorities, and strategy for homeland security in [state name], and assist state agencies and local government in the implementation of their core homeland security and public safety missions. GOHS is also the primary liaison to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and other federal

partners, and oversees coordination of federal homeland security grant funding in the state.

By Oster's criteria, the statement is quite detailed about what the office does, making it strong in setting boundaries. It's not as strong, however, on motivating staff, since the mission statement doesn't have much emotional resonance. (That could be strengthened by describing the big picture goal related to keeping people safe.) Finally, the statement seems weak on helping evaluate organizational performance, since it's more about process than outcomes.

Example 2: A city employment services office

Here's an example from a city's employment services department: "The Department of Employment Services' mission is to connect city residents, job seekers, and employers to opportunities and resources that empower fair, safe, effective working communities."

Using Oster's criteria, the criteria of setting boundaries seems a bit weak, since the mission statement doesn't say how the department accomplishes its mission. In terms of motivating staff, on the other hand, this criterion seems strong, since it highlights the end goals of the department in a way that has the big picture in mind. And finally, in terms of helping evaluate organizational performance, the statement is so broad that it's not a straightforward tool for evaluation, yet the goals of connecting "residents, job seekers and employers to opportunities and resources" could be a useful basis for specific performance metrics.



Additional Resources

- **Gov Innovator podcast interview:** [Designing a well-crafted mission statement](#): Sharon Oster, Yale School of Management



Customized Assistance

Please [contact us](#) if your organization needs assistance in developing a mission and/or vision statement or in facilitating a process of staff and stakeholder development of them.