

**Making a Mission Statement That Matters:
Five Practical Considerations to Help Companies and Organizations
Develop, Revise and Use Mission Statements Effectively**

By Karen L. Utgoff

An effective mission statement can help to keep your company or organization on its desired long-term course despite the detours and tradeoffs required to overcome obstacles along the way. To serve this function it should be one aspect of on-going attention to mission, with leaders and managers constructing and using the mission statement to:

- **Communicate** the purpose of the organization to both internal and external stakeholders on an on-going basis.
- **Inspire** employees and others to help achieve that purpose.
- **Guide** the organization's decisions and actions to keep it on course without unduly limiting tactical flexibility.

"...only by having a meaningful mission — and pursuing it with passion — will companies survive and increase the value they can deliver to customers, employees, and their shareholders."

Bill George, Former Chairman & CEO
Medtronic, Inc.

"The Company's Mission Is the Message"
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Writing and putting to good use a truly effective statement is a challenging task. Unfortunately, once an organization has had a disappointing or frustrating experience with mission development, there is a tendency to dismiss mission statements and efforts to create them as consultant mumbo-jumbo. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to outline important practical considerations to help small to medium-sized companies and organizations develop, revise and use mission statements successfully.

Whether part of something larger or a standalone initiative, a well organized and facilitated effort increases an organization's ability to successfully develop a mission statement. The first step is deciding to create or revise a mission statement. If you are starting from scratch, the question is fairly simple: will the process and resulting statement help you to manage and lead your organization more effectively? If a mission statement already exists, ask yourself:

- How long has it been since the last reconsideration? While some mission statements endure for many years, it is good to (at least) reaffirm an existing statement every three to five years.
- Is the current statement still suitable or has your organization outgrown it? A once effective mission statement can become too limiting, too broad or irrelevant due to growth, retrenchment or changes in the environment.
- Will the process and resulting statement help you to manage and lead your organization more effectively? Ideally, everyone in an organization is aware its purpose and direction, and acts accordingly.

If the decision is made to move forward, consider the following five factors before you begin:

Make the meaning of paramount importance. To be meaningful a mission statement must fit its organization properly. Like a good pair of shoes it should give support without squeezing or slipping off. Steer clear of overly grandiose or motherhood-type statements such as “The mission of XYZ Inc is to make the world perfect.” Avoid being overly narrow, specific or unduly constraining: “The mission of XYZ Inc is to do the one thing we do now and never change.” The emphasis on meaning can provoke uncomfortable discussion but is far better than leaving fundamental issues unaddressed.

Commit to going beyond words to deeds. A mission statement that promises high quality will become meaningless (no matter how compelling the wording) if its company habitually delivers poorly made products and/or unreliable service. Meaningfulness must be achieved and continually demonstrated by the organization’s decisions and actions.

Outline a mission development process that is deliberate and suits your organization. Design the overall process before work begins and explain it through normal internal communications mechanisms. Be sure to include:

- An explanation of why you are undertaking mission development and how the results will be used. This is especially important for organizations that have been frustrated by such efforts in the past. Mention ideas, information and data that are expected to frame discussion and decision-making.
- A well-defined timeframe and schedule that describes the entire anticipated process from kick-off to conclusion with opportunities in-between for input and discussion. The schedule specifies when meetings will be held, what preparation will be required, and what results will be forthcoming (e.g., generate ideas, write drafts, give feedback on drafts, finalize the statement). This is helpful even when you expect only a few meetings to be necessary.
- A list of participants including roles such as information providers, opinion givers, advisors, writers and decision makers. This is critical to avoid the “all things to all people” trap that can result in a too loose mission statement, while assuring broad-based input and varied perspectives. Construct the list and roles based on your organization’s culture.
- A process champion should be designated as responsible for the integrity of the process. Ideally, the person charged with this role will be responsible for design as well as all aspects of process facilitation and execution. It is critical that the champion be objective regarding outcome.

Be conscious of style and scope. A mission statement can be very short and limited strictly to the core purpose of the organization. Longer formulations are broader. When a long form is used, the statement should be described as mission plus values, strategies and/or core capabilities. For flexibility some companies use an easily reduced long form that begins with the short, self-contained mission statement followed by bullets listing strategies, capabilities and/or values. It is not necessary to commit to one form or another at the outset; however, awareness of these options will help to structure draft writing. In some cases one form will be clearly preferable based on specific characteristics and needs of the organization.

Create linkages to near-term goals and objectives through regular management reports. It is not necessary for the mission statement to be directly and quantitatively measurable; however, related goals and objectives should be. This is critical to the translation of mission into action. When reviewing mission statement drafts, ask how each version will support the definition of clear, measurable, time bound, ambitious yet realistic goals and objectives.

Once the mission statement is in use, keeping this connection in mind helps to bring depth and context to goal setting and subsequent management reporting, providing greater understanding of obstacles and opportunities. A mission statement that includes the aspiration “to be the market leader in our industry” will be translated differently depending on the

company. Market share in units or dollars, revenues, growth rate, product innovation and/or key customers are each possible indicators of market leadership; thus the discussion of what it means to be a market leader informs the choice of goals and actions while making the mission more meaningful. When goals, objectives, and actions are viewed in light of the mission, the mission is reinforced and the organization strengthened.

Expect implementation of the mission statement to be an on-going effort. Once your new mission statement has been approved, thank those who participated for their help and promptly put it to use. The first step will be to purposefully spread the word, so that the statement can begin to communicate, inspire and guide. Consider who needs to hear, in what order, and through what media. If the mission statement represents substantial change, expect that it will cause anxiety. Be proactive in addressing expected concerns from employees, customers, suppliers, or other stakeholders. Change management techniques may be helpful.

After the word is out, and internal and external communications materials (e.g., employee orientation information, press release boilerplate) are updated, the real work of managing, leading, and living by the mission begins. This is achieved every time the mission informs your organization's actions and those actions put the mission into practice.

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Many organizations have found a mission statement to be a useful management and leadership tool. When thoughtfully constructed and made increasingly meaningful over time, it serves as a polestar to keep everyone moving in the right direction even when direct supervision is not available or appropriate. For organizations just beginning development of a first mission statement or for those considering revision of a longstanding mission in response to or anticipation of change, the above suggestions are offered as food for thought as they move forward to create and use mission statements that communicate, inspire, and guide.

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