

Vision and Mission - platitude or inspiration?

What's the difference?

There is much misunderstanding - and some scepticism - around vision and mission statements. Are they both necessary? What's the difference anyway? And don't such statements just get put on the wall, then ignored?

The first thing to say is that it is not the *statement* that matters, it is the concept it is intended to articulate. It does not matter if every employee - or even the trustees - cannot word-perfect recite the mission and vision statements like some mantra. What matters is that they know what the organisation is for, and what it is trying to achieve.

And this is the difference. 'Mission' is what the organisation is *for*, it's primary purpose. And 'Vision' is the goal it is trying to achieve - in relation to society, or its beneficiaries, or itself. So Mission is about doing, and Vision is about being.

Who and what are they for?

Vision and Mission Statements should not be confused with strap lines, advertising slogans and the like. The most important audience for your Vision and Mission are the organisation's Trustees, Senior Management Team, and staff. They need to understand exactly what the organisation is for, and where it is headed. And by extension they need to know what it is *not* for, and what is not relevant. Well-crafted vision and mission statements are not so much 'catchy' as clear.

Beyond these internal audiences, your vision and mission statements may be of interest to supporters, funders and other stakeholders, although more commonly they will be on the receiving end of the aforementioned straplines, advertising slogans etc. Interestingly these are more likely to be 'catchy' than entirely clear! These are designed to attract attention, whereafter the organisation is able to start to get across more complex messages.

The Vision and Mission Statements will inform every aspect of the organisation's Strategic Plan - they are the starting point. They serve as a beacon and a yardstick, to help maintain clarity of purpose, and relevance of activity.

Prospective employees - at every level - will want to join an organisation that has a clear sense of purpose and direction. So an inspiring vision and mission can also serve as a very effective recruitment tool.

More than words

The challenge of Vision and Mission Statements is that they have to be *lived*. The idea of putting them on the wall is to make them part of daily life in the organisation. The problem can be that they simply become part of the wallpaper!

The Chair of Trustees and Chief Executive in particular, but in fact anybody in the organisation, should regularly ask "Are we living the vision and mission? What does this mean in practice?" On a regular basis - perhaps every six months or so, it can be helpful to introduce an initiative, activity, question something that will encourage everyone to take a fresh look at the vision and mission, and whether their activities are still contributing towards it.

Still not exciting?

Is your vision or mission a little lacklustre - or indeed entirely lacking? Then some quality time is called for. Most likely this will take the form of an Awayday or Retreat for Trustees, Senior Management Team, all the staff - depending on the organisation's size and culture. This should be planned carefully and facilitated skilfully, so that it is not simply an exercise in wordsmithing, but an in depth exploration of what the organisation is *really* for, and where it is heading.

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