

## BUILDING A VISION AND MISSION STATEMENT

- WHAT IS A VISION STATEMENT?
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We have all seen organizations whose purpose we never quite understood; we know they are out there, in our town, doing something - but we're not quite sure what. They may have a purpose we could learn about, but we've never taken the time to do so; it's always been more effort than it was worth.

If we got closer to these organizations, we might be surprised to learn that even some of their own members aren't entirely sure of the organization's goals; they only know about a specific project they are working on at that moment. Very often, these organizations end up slipping quietly away; they lose their momentum, they lose their funding, and finally, the organization is gone, with no one other than staff really noticing much.

Chances are, these organizations never had well-defined *vision and mission statements* to help clarify and communicate their purpose. Developing these key elements is crucial to the success of any community initiative, and understanding how to do so is the purpose of this section.

Creating your vision and mission statements are the first two steps in the VMOSA action planning process we discussed in the previous section of this chapter. In the next few pages, we will look more closely at what these statements are, why they are important, and how an organization can develop them. Does that make sense to you? Then let's go!

### WHAT IS A VISION STATEMENT?

Your vision is your dream. It's what your organization believes are the ideal conditions for your community; that is, how things would look if the issue important to you were completely, perfectly addressed. It might be a world without war, or a community in which all people are treated as equals, regardless of gender or racial background.

Whatever your organization's dream is, it may be well articulated by one or more *vision statements*. Vision statements are short phrases or sentences that convey your community's hopes for the future. By developing a vision statement or statements, your organization clarifies the beliefs and governing principles of your organization, first for yourselves, and then for the greater community.

There are certain characteristics that most vision statements have in common. In general, vision statements should be:

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Community Toolbox, University of Kansas, <http://ctb.ku.edu>

- Understood and shared by members of the community
- Broad enough to include a diverse variety of local perspectives
- Inspiring and uplifting to everyone involved in your effort
- Easy to communicate - for example, they are generally short enough to fit on a T-shirt

Here are some examples of vision statements that meet the above criteria:

- Caring communities
- Healthy children
- Safe streets, safe neighborhoods
- Every house a home
- Education for all
- Peace on earth

#### WHAT IS A MISSION STATEMENT?

The next piece of the puzzle is to ground your vision in practical terms. This is where developing a *mission statement*, the next step in the action planning process comes in. An organization's mission statement describes *what* the group is going to do and *why* it's going to do that. For example, "Promoting care and caring at the end of life through coalitions and advocacy."

Mission statements are similar to vision statements, in that they, too, look at the big picture. However, they're more concrete, and they are definitely more "action-oriented" than vision statements. Your vision statement should inspire people to dream; your mission statement should inspire them to action.

The mission statement might refer to a problem, such as an inadequate housing, or a goal, such as providing access to health care for everyone. And, while they don't go into a lot of detail, they start to hint - very broadly - at how your organization might fix these problems or reach these goals. Some general guiding principles about mission statements are that they are:

- *Concise*. While not as short as vision statements, mission statements generally still get their point across in one sentence.
- *Outcome-oriented*. Mission statements explain the fundamental outcomes your organization is working to achieve.
- *Inclusive*. While mission statements do make statements about your group's key goals, it's very important that they do so very broadly. Good mission statements are not limiting in the strategies or sectors of the community that may become involved in the project.

The following examples should help you understand what we mean by effective mission statements.

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- "Promoting child health and development through a comprehensive family and community initiative."
- "To create a thriving African American community through development of jobs, education, housing, and cultural pride."
- "To develop a safe and healthy neighborhood through collaborative planning, community action, and policy advocacy."
- "Promoting community health and development by connecting people, ideas and resources."  
(This is the mission of the Community Tool Box)

## WHY SHOULD YOU CREATE VISION AND MISSION STATEMENTS?

Why is it important that your organization develops vision and mission statements like those above?

First of all, because these statements can help your organization focus on what is really important.

Although your organization knows what you are trying to do to improve your community, it's easy to lose sight of this when dealing with the day-to-day hassles that plague all organizations. Your vision and mission statements help members remember what is important as you go about doing your daily work.

Second, your vision and mission statements let other individuals and organizations have a snapshot view of whom your group is and what it wants to do. When your vision and mission statements are easily visible (for example, if they are on the letterhead of your stationary), people can learn about your organization without having to work hard for the information. Then, those with common interests can take the time necessary to learn more. Clearly, this can be very helpful when you are recruiting other people and organizations to join in your effort.

Finally, vision and mission statements are also very helpful in having members who are focused and bound together in common purpose. Not only do the statements themselves serve as a constant reminder of what is important to your organization, the process of developing them allows people to see the organization as "theirs." It's common sense: people will believe in something more completely if they had a hand in developing it.

There are many other reasons to develop vision and mission statements as well. For example, having clear and compelling vision statements can:

- Draw people to common work
- Give hope for a better future
- Inspire community members to realize their dreams through positive, effective action
- Provide a basis for developing the other aspects of your action planning process: your mission, objectives, strategies, and action plans

Having a clear mission statement can:

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- Convert the broad dreams of your vision into more specific, action-oriented terms
- Explain your goals to interested parties in a clear and concise manner
- Enhance your organization's image as being competent and professional, thus reassuring funding sources that their investment was (or would be!) a smart choice

## HOW DO YOU CREATE VISION AND MISSION STATEMENTS?

Armed with a better understanding of vision and mission statements, it's time for your organization to develop them for itself. If your group has already developed vision and mission statements, you might wish to look at them in light of the criteria we discussed above. If members of your organization feel your current statements could be improved upon, this process can be used to modify them. Ready? Let's go!

## LEARN WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO PEOPLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

As developing your vision and mission statements is the first step in developing the action plan that will guide your effort, it is especially important that these first steps are well grounded in community beliefs and values. Knowing the important issues in your community is vital for the development of a strong, effective, and enduring action group.

Therefore, one of the first steps you should take when developing the vision and mission of your organization will be to define the issue(s) that matter most to people in your community. How do you go about doing so?

There are many different ways you can gather this information, including:

**Conduct "public forums" or "listening sessions" with members of the community to gather ideas, thoughts, and opinions about how they would like to see the community transformed.**

In public forums or listening sessions, people come together from throughout the community to talk about what is important to them. These meetings are usually led by facilitators, who guide a discussion of what people perceive to be the community's strengths and problems, and what people wish the community was like. Someone usually records these meetings, and a transcript of what is said provides a basis for subsequent planning.

**Hold focus groups with the people interested in addressing the issue(s), including community leaders, people most affected by the issues, businesses, church leaders, teachers, etc.**

Focus groups are similar to public forums and listening sessions, but they are smaller and more intimate. Generally speaking, they are comprised of small groups of people with similar backgrounds, so they will feel comfortable talking openly about what concerns them. For example, the members of a group are generally about the same age, are of the same ethnic group, or have another common experience. They

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are used in much the same way as public forums, and also use facilitators and recorders to focus and take notes on the work done.

Your organization may choose to hold focus groups with several different groups of people, to get the most holistic view of the issue at hand. For example, if your organization is involved in child health, you might have one focus group with health care providers, another with parents or children, and still another with teachers. Once you have a rough mission statement, you might again use a focus group to test it out.

**Obtain interviews with people in leadership and service positions, including such individuals as local politicians, school administrators, hospital and social service agency staff, about what problems or needs they believe exist in your community.**

Often, these individuals will have both facts and experiences to back up their views. If so, you can also use these data later if and when you apply for funding, or when you request community support to address the issues. More information on this topic can be found in Chapter 3, Section 12: Conducting Interviews.

Of course, these different ways to gather information from you community aren't mutually exclusive. In fact, if you have the resources, it makes sense to do all of the above: to have some time for the community at large to respond, then spend more time in focus groups with the people you believe might contribute greatly to (or be most affected by) some of the issues brought up in your community listening session. And finally, some one on one time with community leaders can only serve to strengthen your knowledge and purpose; remember, there are undoubtedly many people in your community who have been wrestling with the same issues you are now looking at for a long time. Take advantage of that experience; you don't want to reinvent the wheel!

#### DECIDE WHAT TO ASK

No matter if you are talking to one person or 300, your purpose is the same: to learn what matters in your community. Here's a list of questions you might use to focus your discussions with community members. These questions may be used for individual interviews, focus groups, public forums, or in any other way you choose to gather information.

- What is your dream for our community?
- What would you like to see change?
- What kind of community (or program, policy, school, neighborhood, etc.) do we want to create?
- What do you see as the community's (or school's, neighborhood's, etc.) major issues or problems?
- What do you see as the community's major strengths and assets?
- What do you think should be the purpose of this organization (or effort)?

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- Why should these issues be addressed?
- What would success look like?

When your organization is questioning people, the facilitator should encourage everyone to allow their most idealistic, hopeful, and positive ideas to shine through. Don't worry right now about what's practical and what's not - this can be narrowed down later. Encourage everyone to be bold and participate, and to remember that you are trying to articulate a vision of a better community, and a better world.

#### DECIDE ON THE GENERAL FOCUS OF YOUR ORGANIZATION

Once members of your organization have heard what the community has to say, it's time to decide the general focus of your organization or initiative. First of all, what topic is most important to your organization and your community? For example, will you tackle urban development or public health issues? Racism or economic opportunity?

A second question you will need to answer is at what level will your organization work. Will your organization begin only in one school, or in one neighborhood, or in your city? Or will your initiative's focus be broader, working on a state, national, or even international level.

These are questions for which there are no easy answers. Your organization will need to consider what it has learned from the community, and decide through thoughtful discussion the best direction for your organization. We suggest you open this discussion up to everyone in your organization to obtain the best results.

Of course, if your organization is receiving grant money or major funding from a particular agency, the grant maker may specify what the general goal of your group should be. For example, if your group accepts a grant to reduce child hunger, at least part of its mission will be devoted to this purpose. Even in these circumstances, however, the community should determine the ultimate vision and mission that will best advance what matters to local people.

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## DEVELOP YOUR VISION AND MISSION STATEMENTS

Now that your organization has a clearer understanding of what the organization will do and why, you are in a prime position to develop the statements that will capture your ideas.

As you are looking at potential statements, remember to keep them broad and enduring. Vision and mission statements that are wide in scope allow for a sense of continuity with a community's history, traditions, and broad purposes. And vision and mission statements that are built to last will guide efforts both today and tomorrow.

### **Vision Statements**

First of all, remind members of your organization that it often takes several vision statements to fully capture the dreams of those involved in a community improvement effort. You don't need - or even want - to have just one "perfect" phrase. Encourage people to suggest all of their ideas, and write them down - possibly on poster paper at the front of the room, so people can be further inspired by the ideas of others. As you do this, help everyone keep in mind:

- What you have learned from your discussions with community members
- What your organization has decided will be your focus
- What you learned about vision statements at the beginning of this section

If you have a hard time getting started, you might wish to check out some of the vision statements in this section's Examples. You might ask yourself how well they meet the above suggestions.

After you have brainstormed a lot of ideas, your group can discuss critically the different ideas. Oftentimes, several of the vision statements will just jump out at you - someone will suggest it, and people will just instantly think, "That's it!"

You can also ask yourselves the following questions about vision statements:

- Will it draw people to common work?
- Does it give hope for a better future?
- Will it inspire community members to realize their dreams through positive, effective action?
- Does it provide a basis for developing the other aspects of your action planning process?

A final caution: try not to get caught up in having a certain number of vision statements for your organization. Whether you ultimately end up with two vision statements or ten, what is most important is that the statements together give a holistic view of the vision of your organization.

### **Mission Statements**

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The process of writing your mission statement is much like that for developing your vision statements. The same brainstorming process can help you develop possibilities for your mission statement. Remember, though, that unlike with vision statements, you will want to develop a single mission statement for your work. After having brainstormed for possible statements, you will want to ask of each one:

- Does it describe *what* your organization will do and *why* it will do it?
- Is it concise (one sentence)?
- Is it outcome oriented?
- Is it inclusive of the goals and people who may become involved in the organization?

Together, your organization can decide on a statement that best meets these criteria.

#### OBTAIN CONSENSUS ON YOUR VISION AND MISSION STATEMENTS

Once members of your organization have developed your vision and mission statements, your next step might be to learn what other members of your community think of them before you start to use them regularly.

To do this, you could talk to the same community leaders or focus group members you spoke to originally. First of all, this can help you ensure that they don't find the statements offensive in any way. For example, an initiative that wants to include young men more fully in its teen pregnancy prevention project might have "Young men in Asheville are the best informed" as one of their vision statements. But taken out of context, some people community members might believe this statement means young men are given better information or education than young women, thus offending another group of people.

Second, you will want to ensure that community members agree that the statements together capture the spirit of what they believe and desire. Your organization might find it has omitted something very important by mistake.

#### DECIDE HOW YOU WILL USE YOUR VISION AND MISSION STATEMENTS

Finally, it's important to remember that while developing the statements is a huge step for your organization (and one you should celebrate!), there is more work to be done. Next, you have to decide how to use these statements. Otherwise, all of your hard work will have happened for nothing. The point is to get the message across.

There are many, many ways in which your organization may choose to spread its vision and mission statements. To name just a few examples, you might:

- Add them to your letterhead or stationary

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- Use them on your website
- Give away T-shirts, or bookmarks, or other small gifts with them
- Add them to your press kit
- Use them when you give interviews
- Display them on the cover of your annual report

...and so on. Again, this is a step that will use all of your creativity.

#### IN SUMMARY

Developing effective vision and mission statements are two of the most important tasks your organization will ever do, because almost everything else you do will be affected by these statements. We hope that this section has allowed you to feel more confident now in your group's ability to create successful and inspiring vision and mission statements. Remember, think broadly and boldly! Good luck