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Nonprofits Need to Be Clear about Their Guiding Ideas

By Jay W. Vogt



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Every nonprofit organization needs a clear set of “guiding ideas”—mission, vision, and values—that help their leaders and staff say “Yes!” to some things, and “No!” to everything else. Collectively, these guiding ideas get top billing in a strategic plan, but they truly come alive when used day-to-day to make better decisions about what to do and how to do it.

A clear mission is critical to avoiding “mission creep,” in which your organization takes on projects that slowly drain its focus and vitality over time. A clear vision motivates your board and staff and communicates your direction to the community. Clear values remind your organizations’ veterans how things are done and bring newcomers on board quickly.

Consultants use these terms differently, so start by building a shared definition of what these terms mean to your organization. There is no one right answer, so getting a shared understanding is more important than getting it “right.” Here is how I define mission and vision:

Mission Answers Two Basic Questions

An organization’s mission should answer two basic questions: 1) Who do you serve?; 2) What is your ultimate aim, or end result?

Peter Drucker, the management theorist, said the answer to the first question is your “primary customer.” Donors, for example, would be a “secondary customer.” They’re important, but they’re not the reason that your organization exists. The second question is equally simple: the answer is the reason your organization exists. (Interestingly, if your organization actually accomplished the reason it exists, it could likely go out of business.)

The mission of the [Massachusetts Audubon Society](#), for example, is to protect the nature of Massachusetts for people and wildlife. It tells us whom the Society serves and its ultimate aim. And it meets another Drucker test: it fits on a t-shirt!

Some will say, “But what do they do?” Ask the Society, and its staff will tell you: “conservation, education, and advocacy.” Important as those three items are, they are means—and subject to change—so they are not included in the mission.

You can buff up your mission with a “mission tune-up”: gather key stakeholders and ask them to:

- Deconstruct how your current mission answers these questions
- Generate alternatives (if they are needed)
- Build a better one

Visions Can Be Realized within a Finite Time

An organization’s vision is a compelling aspiration or significant achievement that the organization can actually reach in five to 15 years.

Achieving this vision is not a reason to go out of business but just an opportunity to create a new vision!

Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*, has written extensively about vision. His term, “Big Hairy Audacious Goal,” or “BHAG,” for a visionary goal has worked its way into everyday planning use. A good vision motivates people in the organization and helps them see the overall importance of what they do every day.

In Natick, for example, the **Morse Institute Library** was housed in an historic structure before it set a vision of completing a renovation and expansion that would bring the library into the 21st century. At the same time, the new facility would preserve the past and be an anchor in the center of the community. It took the library's leadership many years, but when they opened their new building and redefined their role in the community, their vision was complete. In their next plan they set a new vision of creating a virtual library online that would offer services 24/7, a vision that they have already substantially realized.

Jim Collins says the best vision exists at the intersection of your passion, your economic engine, and what you do best relative to your peers. Finding that special fit energizes an organization. I often use the "grounded visioning" method, which envisions a future grounded in the characteristics and actions that the organization embraces when it is at its best. To find articles about this method, just search online for "grounded visioning" or [click here](#).

Other Guiding Ideas

Once your vision and mission are clear, you can begin defining your organization's values, which describe what matters most about how you do what you do. To complement the values, write a set of core beliefs that are central to your work. An organization that operates a food pantry, for example, might adopt the core belief that "no child should have to go to bed hungry."

With a clear understanding of your organization's guiding ideas—mission, vision, values, and beliefs—board and staff more easily work together toward common goals. Funders and the community are more likely to support an organization that is able to clearly communicate its goals and the ways it plans to achieve those goals.

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