Few things are as important – and as complicated – as creating a mission statement. Before you launch into writing one, or if you need to refine an existing one, follow these tips and guidelines for a mission statement that is creative, defining, and strategic for your organization.

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Don’t begin by trying to write a mission statement. First, focus on the mission itself. What are you trying to do? Why was your organization founded? Sometimes it is hardest for those closest to the work to see all that you do, or what it means to those you serve. In our monitoring of the many details we lose sight of the big picture. What would others say you do? Why do you do it?

Why we do something is often tied to what we believe, as in: we believe all people are valuable, or, we believe that having beauty and inspiration around us make us better people and create more integrated societies. The mission statement of Infant Crisis Services in Oklahoma City combines both their “what” and their “why.” Their mission is to provide life-sustaining formula, food, and diapers to babies and toddlers in times of crisis...Because no baby should go hungry.

To discern your own mission statement, ask those closest to you to describe what they see you do, and how they might describe to others what your organization does. Try asking those questions at a board meeting, or kicking off a staff meeting by asking your team to share why your organization exists -- and listen for the words they use.

1. Ask those who work closest to the agency (staff and board) to share the phrases they use in describing what your organization does.
2. Collect the phrases as a list.
3. A leadership team or executive committee brings together similar phrases and prioritizes the concepts.
4. This should result in 3-5 “key phrases” that can then be used to guide the formation of a mission statement.

A good mission statement contains both why we do what we do, and what we do. It can and should change as the organization develops and adjusts how it fulfills its mission. Consider the YMCA’s mission statement which has likely had many iterations since it began in 1844: To put Christian principles into practice through programs that help healthy spirit, mind and body for all. The words you use to describe how your agency is fulfilling its purpose – i.e., mission statement – should change over time. It is best practice to review the mission statement every 3-5 years and evaluate if the phrases are still serving as a guide for the organization.

If you have a mission statement, ask if it distinguishes you from other organizations. In a blind screening test, where your mission statement was among three others, without identifying which is which, would a person be able to tell which mission statement is yours?
**DEFINE WHAT YOUR ORGANIZATION DOES**

In nonprofit organizations, we focus so much on helping and serving others we sometimes forget about what drives our mission and the culture. Our culture is the environment we are creating for our employees, board members, volunteers, and clients. Good organizations are good for their employees and volunteers too or they won’t last.

Qualities like fairness, diversity of people and ideas, respect, creativity, innovation, healthy conflict, and empowerment really matter. And, since every organization says that they value these things, how do you actually do these is part of your culture and may inform your mission statement. You might also adopt a values statements or a Code of Ethics. Standards for Excellence recommends that an agency have:

1. A mission statement that guides decision-making. Ideally a short (7-8 words) statement that defines your organization’s purpose.
2. A vision statement which describes your aspirational future or “big picture” it aims to fulfill.
3. Values and/or Code of Ethics which defines the culture of the organization.

Is your workplace family friendly? Flexible with work time? Even though the values of an organization may shape the culture, some of that can be reflected in the mission statement. This can create a culture where your employees and volunteers become the best advocates and ambassadors for what the organization is trying to accomplish. Consider this mission statement by the Monterey Bay Aquarium which takes the culture and ambassador expectation and incorporates it into the mission statement:

*To inspire conservation of the ocean. And we couldn’t do it without you.* – Monterey Bay Aquarium

**USE VERBS**

When it’s time to finally begin to write, focus on the action verbs that represent what you are trying to do. Common verbs are **build, transform, beginning, creating**. For example, the Oklahoma Center for Nonprofits’ mission statement is **building better communities through effective nonprofits**.

Other verbs like leading, illuminating, aligning, communicate teamwork and verbs like preserving, fostering, solving, focus on community impact. Verbs emerging from the technology industry like pivot, curate, engineer, and leverage communicate initiative. Make a list of the verbs and select those that describe the actions your organization takes in the community. Verbs paint a visible, mental, picture. The Oklahoma Historical Society’s mission is three simple verbs: **collect, preserve, share**.

Consider Neighborhood Services Organization: **transforming lives and encouraging independence through safe, healthy homes, dental care, and nutrition**.

DVIS, based in Tulsa has this for a mission statement: **rebuilding lives affected by domestic violence and sexual assault through advocacy, shelter, counseling, and education**.

Ardmore Literacy Coalition: **a collaboration project between three agencies – has as its mission: working together for a more vibrant and successful Ardmore, Oklahoma**.
Whatever you’ve written up to this point, go back and cut back the wordiness. Show it to other people and listen to their feedback. A good mission statement is simple, often as few as 7-8 words. If a mission statement is longer, it may be hard to remember and even harder to agree upon what is important. Much of the confusion, dissension, dissatisfaction, and turmoil that characterizes dysfunctional nonprofit organizations stems from disagreement about the mission (BoardSource, The Nonprofit Board’s Role in Mission, Planning, and Evaluation, boardsource.org, 2016). If you have a mission statement, and if it is longer than a short sentence, ask board members and staff what words or phrases are especially important to them.

It may be that within a wordy paragraph is the real heart of the matter and essence of the mission. In some nonprofit organizations, it may not be possible to edit the mission statement. In this case, adopting a motto or phrase can create the same distinction. The “phrase” at Cargo Ranch in Shawnee is **It’s all about the kids**, and their expectation that this will be a place where kids who face challenges and obstacles can discover just how much they matter.

Examples:

**Planting, preserving, and promoting Tulsa’s urban forest.** -- Up With Trees, Tulsa

**Enriching and inspiring children of all ages by creating fun learning opportunities.** – Leonardo’s, Enid

**Help for today, hope for tomorrow.** – The Urban Mission, Oklahoma City

**Equal rights for LGBT individuals and families through advocacy, education, and alliances.** – Equality Center, Tulsa

**Supporting and improving mental, physical, and holistic wellness for our nation’s active military, veterans, and their families.** – Warriors for Freedom, Oklahoma City

**USE, USE, USE**

Board meetings, staff retreats, community events, and social media all offer good opportunities to convey mission. It should inspire the public, lay the groundwork for advocacy, communicate to donors, and create pride among board members and staff. Most importantly, a mission statement is critical when making important organizational decisions. Staff and board members should ask themselves, “how will this opportunity help us....” Before determining whether or not it is an action they should take or have the resources to fund it.

The Standards for Excellence Code of Ethics for the Nonprofit Sector states that

**A nonprofit should have a mission statement that is a clear and formal statement of the organization’s purpose as defined and approved by the board of directors. The organization’s activities should be consistent with its stated purpose. A nonprofit should be able to articulate how its mission is supported by a statement of the organization’s vision and strategic goals.**

In other words, it isn’t enough that an organization has a mission statement, it has to use it and build the framework for its programs and leadership based upon it.
It’s a good idea to revisit the mission statement every three to five years to evaluate whether the words still define the focus, activity, and purpose of the organization. Times change, communities adjust, programs grow, shrink, merge, and evolve. Keeping the mission statement fresh, and not getting too locked into how the organization may have regarded its mission statement before, will establish the organization as an organization willing to innovate and stay current.