

Writing a Mission Statement.

While a mission *statement* might be re-written from time to time, the mission itself stays the same. The mission of St. Ambrose University is the same today as it was when it began over 125 years ago. *To transform the lives of students and faculty by engaging in continuous education* might be a mission statement for a small Christian college. The mission helps us see the bigger picture and to understand how our day-to-day work is contributing to a higher cause, something greater than ourselves, something that benefits society.

Some of us work day in and day out without reflecting on what contribution we are making to the community or to society. We hunger for a sense of purpose. Purpose reinforces the dignity of workers and the dignity of our work. It builds determination and gives meaning to the forty plus hours that we spend each week at work.

In the 1980s, it was rare that an organization would have a mission statement. They were absent or hidden in a strategic plan that rarely saw the light of day. Mission statements have become more common. Foundations, corporations and grant-making organizations like United Way require not-for-profit agencies to include their mission statement in a grant proposal. I have helped more than 100 organizations to write mission statements, including schools, parks, farmers' markets, churches, various branches of government and groups working on economic development, health care, social services, international marketing and heating and air conditioning.

When writing a mission statement, make the process very interactive. Set up group forums so that all employees, board members and other key stakeholders have an opportunity to participate. Explain the three components of a mission statement (business, purpose and values, as explained in Leadership Exercise One and give examples (as attached to this website). Put them in groups of four or five people. Ask them to identify key words and phrases that ought to appear in the business phrase, the purpose phrase and the core values.

After they identify these words and phrases, invite people to get up in front of the whole group and talk about what they mean. Write the words and phrases on a flip chart or white board as they are presented to the large group. Create a ballot and ask people to vote for each section: business, purpose and values. Designate one person to use the results to draft a mission statement. Recruit two people to act as a sounding board for that writer. Bring the draft back to a representative body for further discussion and approval.

The interactive process of writing a mission statement can be more beneficial than the final *product* (the mission statement itself). Seeing and hearing your colleagues talk about

professionalism, quality, safety, service, respect, collaboration and innovation can be a very powerful experience. Seeing and hearing each other explain how the organization contributes to the common good is very inspiring. When done in a participative manner, the process of writing a mission statement builds commitment to the mission itself.

Leadership Exercise: How Can We Write a Mission Statement?

- 1. Mission starts with *Purpose*.** To write a purpose phrase, ask participants to identify words and phrases that answer the question, *How does our work contribute to the common good?* Make sure you are focused on the *social benefit*, that is, how does your work contribute to the overall benefit of society?
- 2. Mission includes the Core *Business*.** To write the business phrase of your mission statement, ask participants to identify words and phrases that answer the question, *What products, services or programs do we provide?* Make sure you focus on what the organization *does*.
- 3. Combine the Purpose Phrase and the Business Phrase.** Open your mission statement with the purpose phrase, such as “to beautify our neighborhood”. Connect it to the business phrase, such as “by planting trees”.
- 4. Embellish with Core *Values*.** The core values decorate your mission statement. Core values answer the question, *What do we believe in?* Make sure these are unique to your organization.

Inset Quote: ***Caution: Wordsmithing is not a large group activity!*** Get one person to write a first draft. Circulate the first draft to two or three others for further editing. Bring it back to the large group for approval.

Figure Four: Sample Mission Statement

The Quad City Symphony Orchestra (QCSO)

*The QCSO enriches the culture of the local community
by providing orchestral music and music education of the highest artistic quality.*

Below the bottom line. The first half of the QCSO mission statement is the purpose statement. The business statement follows the word “providing”. The core value is *artistic quality*. You will want to reflect carefully on your core values. My friend John Kiley and I have developed an interactive process for teams and organizations to identify and articulate core values (See Chapter Four). This process has the added bonus of enhancing commitment to these values.

Corporate businesses are beginning to recognize the advantages of identifying the mission that goes *below the bottom line*. Leaders are discovering the social purpose behind their profit-making enterprises. Pharmaceutical companies are *finding cures for diseases*. Agricultural businesses are *feeding the world*. Engineers are *creating solutions to our energy dependence*. Highway construction companies are *improving public safety*. And so on. By reframing our work as something that contributes to society and to the common good, we add purpose and meaning to our lives and to those who work with us.

Examples. A pharmaceutical company might say, “We improve health (purpose) by providing the highest quality medicine (business).” For an agricultural business: “We feed the world (purpose) by providing the latest technology for farmers (business)”. For an engineering firm: “We create solutions to the energy shortage (purpose) by designing buildings that are energy efficient (business).” For a construction company: “We improve public safety (purpose) by building quality highways (business).”