

## Visioning to Set New Directions

Setting a vision is one of the highest governance responsibilities for volunteer leaders. A compelling vision is a promise to the future and a call to action for association and nonprofit leaders and stakeholders.

Because the stakes are so high and the words will come to mean so much, a vision can be challenging to create. Fortunately visioning is only necessary when an organization needs to make a significant course change—something volunteer leaders might not do more than once or twice in a decade.

**Three Distinct Purposes for Visions.** While most vision statements will end up being some blend of these three purposes, it helps to consider these distinctions to find a compelling vision that is right for an organization's next stage of evolution.

- **Statements of Identity**—who we aspire to be. These visions define what the profession, field or industry will be when it lives up to its highest levels of accomplishment. If a field is evolving rapidly or changing in important ways, vision statements can reset the identity.
- **Statements of Intent**—what we aspire to change. These statements identify the important changes an organization wants to lead in the world. They are a call to action to the profession, field or industry.
- **Statements of Desired Outcome**—what difference we will make in society. These visions explain how society will benefit through the work and values of a profession, field or industry. When the association's members do their best, the outcome benefits everyone.

**A Vision Larger than the Association.** Signature i counsels associations to be the leaders in representing their members' interests; and therefore their vision can set the direction for their entire field and not just the association. This advice can be difficult for leaders who believe the association should only speak on its own behalf. And they are reinforced in this concern by standard strategic planning advice that visions should be limited to the organization. It's a philosophical point we have conceded to some clients, but it is one we will continue to make: associations do have the right to use their power to organize and lead their field of interest.

**Some Process Steps in Our Visioning Methodology.** Every bit of analysis of strategic issues, dialogue with leaders and members and discussion about current and future priorities are

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factored into developing a vision statement. We listen carefully for vision elements— aspirational language, desired outcomes, dreams. Sometimes we use different exercises to prompt people to share vision elements. Then we get agreement on the vision elements—the phrases and ideas that will be woven into the vision statement. We hate writing by committee as much as you do, so we typically take the actual vision drafting offline with a small group of leaders rather than tie up the board’s time in wordcrafting. In strategic planning retreats, we try to turn around a first draft overnight to get board reaction and additional guidance. We listen carefully, work fast, and revise with patience and grace until everyone is satisfied with the expression of their vision.

**Eight Tips on Vision Drafting.** A recent client asked for specific guidance to help its visioning task force craft a compelling vision. After failing to find something that captures what we consider good practice, we created this list of tips.

1. *Dare to be bold, even at the risk of a near miss.* A near miss still yields more progress than aiming low and playing it safe.
2. *Take all the time you need to do great things.* A vision can take 10 years or more to achieve; manage expectations if you do set a target date.
3. *The more succinct the vision, the more memorable it will be.* Too few words can fail to communicate; too many words and ideas just confuse people.
4. *Let your vision introduce and define you.* Good visions are not borrowed from someone else’s clichés; say something distinctive about who you are and what you want to do that defines you.
5. *The clearer your priorities are, the more powerful the vision will be.* Resist the temptation to be all things to all people; emphasize what’s most important and trust this will be sufficiently inclusive.
6. *Connect with the hearts and hopes of the followers and guide them to the future.* Acknowledge the reality people face while envisioning what the future could hold.
7. *Speak to the public rather than sing to your choir.* Jargon, insider language and concepts will mute your message; use language the public will understand.
8. *Take responsibility for your future.* You are the main actors in this drama whether you say so explicitly or not; people must understand you expect to lead these changes.

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