



What is a Vision Statement? Why Nonprofits Need Them

Does your organization have a vision statement or vision in mind? One of the greatest dangers facing nonprofits is not economic, generational, or even legal...it's the gradual drift into complacency. The work becomes a collection of tasks rather than a force for good. It's the same for any industry or profession, but in the field of cause work, the risk and potential loss are significant because the risk is shared not only by the organization's team but by the community they serve.

So, how do we maintain the vision? In the midst of change and pressure, how do we ensure our team is all sharing the same vision?

Your vision should exist outside a frame on the wall or a page in the handbook.

As I write this, I think back to the 1990s and the prevalence of Successories. Motivational artwork...usually of a nature scene and one aspirational term. The decor of the day, these pieces adorned office walls everywhere. Although they were hung with good intentions, in my experience, most became the inspiration for snarky office jokes. Perhaps it was the fact that businesses were purchasing prefab values that led to the backlash. Team members want to see values lived out, not published or printed for wall decor.

Don't get me wrong, documenting your mission and vision statements is important, but in an ideal world, it's something written on people's hearts, as well as in their orientation handbook.

A decade or so ago, I worked for a very large publishing house. New team member orientation was done in batches of 3-10 people at a time. During one of my first onboarding sessions, the HR director asked our group of six who could recite the organization's mission statement. I immediately scanned the room, looking for expressions of confidence or smirks from my new peers...nothing. In fact, they all looked panicked. Recalling the narrative of the statement was easy, but I wasn't 100% sure about each word or the order. Something is better than nothing, right? I timidly raised my hand and recited a paraphrased version of the statement. I hit the major

parts but undoubtedly did not get it verbatim. The HR director praised my effort and explained, “You’re not 100% correct in the wording, but you nailed the sentiment.”

Stating your vision is not about the words, but it is about understanding.

It's hard to see the horizon when you're in the trenches.

Nonprofit work culture is the tyranny of the urgent. If your days are like mine, no sooner do you take your third cup of coffee and it's lunchtime. It's a blur of decisions, opportunities, struggles, and task work that has to get done. Beneath the busyness, lack of capacity, budgets, and good intentions are a thousand small decisions that cumulatively steer the trajectory of your work.

Sure, we do the strategic planning routine, but let's be honest...where does that plan exist? A file cabinet, a pad of window-sized post-its, or a shared drive...right? A year cannot be steered by one day of planning. A vision cannot be maintained when it isn't acted on daily.

Create a vision that captures today and tomorrow.

Great vision statements build off the work we're doing today by [casting a vision](#) of that work maximized in the future. For example, look at these examples of great vision statements:

Tesla: To accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy.

World Vision: Our vision for every child, life in all its fullness.

Now, I'm certain the world is not fully embracing sustainable energy, but we're getting there.

I'm also certain there are still millions of children struggling in this world, but World Vision is helping.

A vision statement is not an endpoint or a status. It is an ideal for today, and for many days that will have a great cumulative impact. Like Tesla and World Vision, great organizations prepare statements that allow for inclusivity in the solution and speak to action. Whether you're actively working for your program's purpose or doing the behind-the-scenes work to make it possible, it should align and further your vision.

The danger zone for most nonprofits is fundraising. There are all sorts of ways to raise support and make money that can take an organization outside its vision and purpose. A strong vision influences every area of work—from development to direct

services. The more of a correlation you can create between your appeals and your purpose, the more authentic your vision will become.

Ways to keep your vision visible:

Recite it. Remember starting every school day with the Pledge of Allegiance? Do the same with your vision statement before your board and operational meetings.

Develop a decision-making test for your organization that includes reference to your vision and mission. If it doesn't pass the test, it doesn't happen.

Call out excellence. Reward employees and volunteers when they do things that embody the vision and mission of your organization.

Mission, vision, values...what does it all mean?

A vision statement is your destination, a mission statement is your map, and your values are your guideposts.

Before we get into the trifecta of corporate culture listed above, remember: don't get caught up in semantics. Whether it's your mission statement, vision, values, or a mantra, the goal is to have an easily understood defining purpose. Trying to fit your organization's culture into one of these buckets is work you don't have time for. That said, here's an explanation of the role each could play:

Vision Statement: A guiding purpose. The ideal that your mission and values build toward.

Mission Statement: The actions your organization will take to achieve its vision. (Note: this doesn't need to be ALL the actions...keep it short and easily memorized.)

Core Values: The fundamental beliefs that guide decisions and actions in your organization.

Less may be more, as it's a lot to ask of any team to memorize this many things. Most importantly, your leadership should reflect the ideal you're asking your organization to achieve.

Final thought: These times, they are a-changin'

World Vision's vision makes no mention of poverty or water. Tesla's vision doesn't include any reference to privatized space travel or vehicles. Their visions are broad enough to allow for the possibility of achievement and satisfaction of their missional work. In a world where ideas move from conception to commodity in a decade, be

careful to not think too small. Think in terms of an overarching purpose that recognizes that there are always ways to do more good.

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