



How to Create a Mission Statement in 11 Steps

There are many ways to create a mission statement, but we have found that simplicity is the key. This does not mean you should rush. A mission statement is serious business and determines how money, people, and other resources will flow to your organization.

One method for constructing a mission statement is a simple formula: 1) Who will benefit from your work? 2) what change in the world do you seek? 3) how will you plan to do these things? By tackling those three questions you may arrive at a mission statement. Alternatively, you may consider the following process as another path to creating a mission statement. Then, do a gut check and refine as needed.

You can create a mission statement in-person in a few hours or over the course of months. If you craft the mission statement in person, consider having it facilitated. If you are doing it with some or all people remotely, consider creating a survey or prompts and really asking people to take dedicated time to complete the task of generating words that reflect the values and goals of the organization. This is not to be done asynchronously. People should be talking in real-time.

1. Pull together the key people who will help you draft the mission statement. I strongly advise that you not do it alone. Only invite people whose opinions you really value but try to include the whole board. You can invite others like donors and staff and weight their opinions accordingly.

A good mission statement comes from an aspirational place of what success looks like when you solve the problem you are tackling. It should be concrete but still ambitious. It also comes from shared values. A vision statement is also aspirational and imagines what the world looks like when the mission is complete.

2. The next step is to get clear about the organization's values and purpose (what problem are you trying to solve in the world?) Normally, this happens during one or more brainstorming sessions or group conversations. Don't assume all your stakeholders share the same values, goals or purpose. I once led an organization where most of the board believed our work was to combat bullying, but several on the board believed that our purpose was to prevent suicide. This could have spelled big problems if the board didn't settle the issue and get aligned. Lack of clarity on the mission leads to confusion, frustration, and misalignment.
3. After you generate a robust list of organizational values, try to shrink the list by grouping them together into similar themes. If there are 30 values on a whiteboard

or on a piece of paper or on sticky notes around the room, try to force the 30 terms into 6 or 8 value-themes. For example, “energy,” “enthusiasm,” and “dedication” can all become “passion” or something like that.

4. Now use the same process for aspirational goals. How will the world be different because of your work? Try to generate a good list of 6-10 goals from participants. Keep these separate from the values list. Feel free to use sticky notes to reorganize them or [Jamboard](#) if doing online. Group them by theme or category.
5. Now that you have a list of organizational values and a list of aspirational goals, it is time to begin narrowing them. Start reviewing the list of organizational values to narrow them to **core values**. This means you will want to narrow your values, through conversation and voting, to no more than 5 key core values.
6. Now narrow your aspirational goals to 3 **core goals**. The act of narrowing forces prioritization, strategy, and decision-making. Trust the process.
7. Break into small groups and use the goals and values to generate 3 draft mission statements that include the language of the goals or values, or the spirit of those goals and values. Remember...not too narrow and not too broad. Meaningful! Try to keep a mission statement to one sentence, even though many organizations have mission statements that are 1-2 sentences with bullets. Aim for brevity. You want a mission statement you can memorize. If you want to embellish it later, fine.
8. Bring the groups back together and read them without judgment. Put them where everyone can see and digest them. Now it's time to interrogate the options with the sole goal of doing what is right for the organization, not your own ego. Work as a team to discuss the words, phrases, or assumptions that are awesome, and which rub people the wrong way. Be clear these critiques aren't personal.
9. This next step is the hardest. I believe you have two main choices: A) Send the final task of drafting the mission statement to a committee smaller group. Drafting high stakes language in a larger group is fraught and may even be a waste of time. The full board still must approve any mission statement. B) Give yourselves a full 1-2 hours to hash it out as a group. If it doesn't come together within 2 hours, send it to the committee. Tip: Don't do this step when everyone is exhausted. You may even want to give people 24-48 hours to simmer on the final options.
10. Put the draft mission statement through the ringer. There are two tests to use. A) Ask “Why?” 5 times after hearing the final mission statement. The point is to get to the bottom of things. Your actual final mission statement might exist right below the surface, you just need to polish it to see it. Asking these questions gets you deeper. It might mean a small revision, but rarely does this process send the mission back to the drawing board. Revisit step 2 also.

Example: “We will work to end poverty in Dallas.” Ask yourselves “why?” The answer might be “Because we want to ensure people are safe and healthy.”

“OK, why do you want that?” “Because we don’t want people to suffer.” Well, some people in poverty may say they are not suffering, so what are you really trying to solve and why? Keep asking “why” until you feel satisfied. This process stress-tests your assumptions and builds alignment. It might be good to capture notes on what people say during this stage. Maybe what you want is shared prosperity or to build wealth, and not end poverty.

This process peels back the layers of why your stakeholders are all aligned in this mission. The gist of the “whys” is your mission. What happens in this process is not just a new mission statement, but also organizational alignment.

11. At the very end of this process (and sometimes at the beginning) you can ask yourselves the following questions as a gut check:

- “Will this mission statement be broad enough so that if X, Y, or Z happens in the future, our mission statement will still be relevant or accurate?”
- “Is this mission statement narrow enough to be meaningful?” If your mission is to create kindness...many funders won’t take you seriously. Be more specific.
- “Is this mission statement written in a way that we will know when we have achieved our mission or is it too nebulous and never attainable?”
- “Is our mission statement inclusive of all people who want to join us?”
- “Will our mission be future ready? Will it withstand changing norms, laws, values and economic conditions?”

There are many other questions an experienced board or consultant can help you with in creating or re-creating your mission statement.

President Eisenhower once said, “Plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” The exercise you went through should have involved some give and take and some discovery about what drives your board.

Final thoughts. 1) Don’t overthink it. Mission statements are important, but they are not etched in stone. Revisit your mission every 3-5 years to see if it is still meeting your needs and that it is accurate. 2) Don’t create a Frankenstein mission statement that tries to salvage every word, idea, or concept heard during the brainstorming or narrowing. It’s tempting but the resulting statement feels weird and forced and people can tell. Keep it so simple that anyone can memorize and repeat it easily

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