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Mission and Vision

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Vision statements and mission statements are both based on the core ethical values of an organization and are essential to its success because they give it direction. Vision statements drive the long-term goals that determine where the organization would eventually like to be in the competitive landscape. Mission statements are more concrete and specific to an organization's competitive advantage; they are used to prioritize activities. Mission statement construction and the numerous benefits of a well-conceived mission are delineated below.

The concepts of mission and vision are linked and symbiotic, yet they refer to different constructs. Another way to conceptualize this difference is that a vision statement specifies *where an organization is going* and a mission statement gives an organization *direction on how to get there*. A best practice is for organizations to create both a vision statement and a mission statement, and to incorporate both into decision making. Corporate or management philosophy is comprised of vision, mission, and values in combination with leadership and the many constructs that create organizational culture.

Vision

Vision is future-oriented and describes where an organization would like to be positioned in the market in 5, 10, 15, or 20 years' time. It is a goal state embodying a long-term ambition of where an organization would like to be in the future relative to its competitors. Organizational vision is normally expressed through a simple one-line vision statement. These types of statement offer a strategic attainment goal that may be somewhat ideal or normative relative to real-world constraints, but offers inspiration to the organization to overcome barriers in a concerted effort. In that respect, vision statements are key drivers of organizational innovation, the commitment and motivation of employees, effectiveness, and success in the competitive arena.

What is the origin of organizational vision? Although vision statements may originate with key founders or visionary leaders, many scholars view vision as originating from organizational culture. Noting the connection to ethical values, the authors Larwood, Falke, Kriger, and Miesing (1995, p. 741) regard vision as a pattern of organizational values that underlies a unique visionary blueprint for an organization's future. The connection of vision to ethics is indeed a prominent and strong one because the values of the organization are the foundation of its drive and vision, explaining what that drive seeks

The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication. Robert L. Heath and Winni Johansen (Editors-in-Chief), Jesper Falkheimer, Kirk Hallahan, Juliana J. C. Raupp, and Benita Steyn (Associate Editors).

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DOI: 10.1002/9781119010722.iesc0111

to attain. Ethical values of an organization may, for example, include autonomy, innovation, value, efficiency, or market leadership. Clearly these core ethical values underlie and support a vision statement because many of them are expressed in it as goals.

The core ethical values of an organization are essential to determining how it sees itself in the competitive marketplace, and its strategic strengths become the very building blocks of a vision statement. According to Bowen (2016), values describe the core beliefs that guide every decision and offer a priority order for consideration. The organization's core ethical values support both its vision and mission. In addition, many ethical values are abstract constructs by nature so they pair well with the more abstract and future-oriented qualities of a vision statement.

If a vision statement is not expressed by a founder or leader, how does it arise, and who implements it? The executive level or senior management normally takes the lead in determining or refining organizational vision because of its close connection to strategy. Senior management is wise to involve employee publics/stakeholders at all levels of the organization when designing a vision statement. Qualitative research, discussion forums, employee surveys, and anonymous feedback forms can offer valuable insight into what people at all levels of the organization see as its desired visionary goal. Employees may see the potential of an organization differently than management does, and these stakeholders can provide valuable insights into potential long-term progress. Involving employees is so important that Talbot (2000, p. 12) called it a golden rule—everyone affected by a decision should be involved in the making of it, whenever possible and practical. Additionally, to include employees at all levels in the discussions surrounding the creation of a vision statement, or when revisiting a current vision statement, can create a level of employee commitment, “buy-in” in layman's terms, that enhances the future effectiveness of the organization in numerous ways.

The literature of organizational communication is rich with discussions of the interconnectedness of vision, leadership, and organizational culture; many of those studies also offer evidence of heightened success in real-world practice. Oswald, Mossholder, and Harris (1994), for example, found that salience of vision among managers offered higher levels of strategic involvement, resulting in heightened organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Vision salience was operationalized by measuring the *clarity*, *sharedness*, and *appropriateness* of organizational vision. Those constructs can be thought of as the means of connection between internal publics/employees and the organization's vision: They are how the vision becomes real.

Strategy and ongoing commitment also play central roles in determining the vision of an organization. Cornelissen (2004) explained that a vision or strategic intent is the desired future state of the organization. “It is an aspirational view of the general direction in which the organization wants to go, as formulated by senior management, and requires the energies and commitment of members of the organization” (p. 24). Once a vision statement is codified, it is essential for internal communication efforts to highlight the vision of the organization among all publics/stakeholders within it. Although these efforts tend to be sporadic, communicating about organizational vision should be ongoing. Not only should the vision statement be used in onboarding new employees or annual training, it should be a routine part of team discussions and strategic

management decision making. The vision statement of an organization should be institutionalized throughout its organizational culture so that it is alive, active, known, and frequently referred to, as opposed to being a forgotten part of a dusty policy manual. Vision statements should drive organizational culture.

Vision can be determined by asking the question *What is it that the organization is pursuing?* Narrowing down the core competencies and core values of the organization can lend insight into its competitive advantage in the marketplace. What is important is how that competitive advantage can be leveraged to create ideal or best-case-scenario future outcomes.

By their nature, vision statements are aspirational and idealistic—they are sometimes even radical, calling for the change or transformation of entire industries. Because they are long-term they do not need frequent measurement and evaluation, but may be revised every five years or so for *fit*, as markets, technologies, regulations, and competition change. However, their abstract nature makes vision statements relatively stable and unchanging beacons that allow organizations and all of the publics/stakeholders within them to have a common aim. Vision statements offer a driving force for the organization as well as a reason for motivation, commitment, and a cohesive sense of purpose.

The inclusion of a vision statement in management's strategic decision making is essential. The question *Where do we want to be in 5 or 10 years' time?* can often lend clarity to the question of determining priorities and organizing limited resources. Strategic efficiencies and competitive advantage can therefore be doubled-down upon and enhanced. The Microsoft founder Bill Gates had a radical vision statement, namely *to put a computer on every desk in America* (Borden, 1997, p. 8). The power of that vision is now evident. The competitive advantage of an organization can be honed by knowing exactly where it wants to go: An astute vision statement *drives* competitive advantage.

Mission

Mission is the pursuit of a goal that is unique to an organization's competitive advantage—its specific strengths and offerings relative to competitors—while again emphasizing its values. The best mission statements are general enough to drive the strategic pursuit of numerous organizational goals and a plethora of organizational objectives, yet are specific enough to focus and prioritize organizational activities and resources. Unlike vision statements, mission statements are normally several sentences long. Mission statements intend to answer the question *Why do we exist?* Mission statements help management to organize the hierarchy of priorities that an organization must face in daily and long-term operations.

Cornelissen (2004) used a stakeholder-values perspective to explain mission: "A mission is a general expression of the overriding purpose of the organization, which, ideally, is in line with the values and expectations of major stakeholders and concerned with the scope and boundaries of the organization" (p. 24). A mission is often referred to with the simple question *What business are we in?* Statements of core values and more specific goals and objectives often follow mission statements. The core ethical values of

the organization shape not only its vision but also its mission: what it seeks to accomplish, what is desired or rewarded in the organization, and where the efforts of each organizational member should be directed.

Focusing on the core competitive advantage of a business organization is key to creating a good mission statement. What is it that makes the organization unique? How is it different from competitors? What are the strengths that it brings to the marketplace? What is the distinguishing value of its product or service? In perhaps the most canonical publication on mission statements, Pearce (1982, p. 15) wrote that the company mission is a broadly defined, but enduring, statement of purpose that distinguishes a business organization from other organizations/firms of its type and identifies the scope of its operations in product and market terms. Abratt (1989, p. 70) saw mission as a distilled form of corporate philosophy that shapes strategic management.

As with vision statements, mission statements must be based on the ethical values of the organization. Those values normally include concepts such as honesty but become more specific in a mission statement. For example, do the organization's ethical values drive behavior toward innovation or cost efficiency, prestige market leadership or low-cost volume, high-value consistency or individual tailoring, or efficacy versus luxury? Further, which stakeholders should the organization prioritize? In its individual industry and market position, should its prior commitment be to consumer publics, business stakeholders, employees, or financial stakeholders? A well-organized mission statement can clarify the organization's competitive advantage, management strategy based on core values, strategic stakeholders, and priorities. In a management core of competing perspectives and limited resources, a well-defined mission statement *itself* can add to competitive advantage.

To illustrate this, imagine the different management priorities that would organize resources and decision making between these two divergent mission statements in agriculture:

We work diligently to be the world's low-cost leader in reliable, productive, and disease-resistant crops. (Organization A)

versus

We engage in the highest level of innovative research and outside-the-box thinking for vast advancements in each crop that we modify. (Organization B)

In this illustration, Organization A would prioritize cost efficiency, routinization, building upon the patents of others, and creating a reliable product with much consumer value built in. It would likely be a mid-to-late market entrant working on crops that are in steady demand. Conversely, Organization B would spend a great deal more time and resources on the laboratory science needed to alter specific crops and would be considered a market pioneer with a unique and more expensive product. Additionally, the core ethical values built into Organization A (value, reliability, output) stand in contrast with the core ethical values of Organization B (experimentation, innovation, leadership). Incentive structures in each organization would be different and employees would experience greater rewards by working in concert with organizational values (Bowen, 2015). This example illustrates how even a simple mission statement can change the overall priorities and operations of an organization.

Some mission statements are parsimonious, such as this example from Bose Corporation (n.d.): *We have a simple mission: think of better solutions, create better products, help people enjoy the things they love.* Such simple mission statements are often followed by an announcement of core values and guiding principles, such as, *Maybe the most important principle we live by is that innovation is not a destination, but a journey requiring new ideas from new players.* Other mission statements are more complex, composed of several bullet points or a few short paragraphs. The current trend in industry is for more detail in mission statements.

There are nine detailed categories that mission statements often discuss, specifying general goals:

1. target markets;
2. principal products/services;
3. geographic domain;
4. technological advantage;
5. economic goals;
6. philosophy;
7. identity;
8. reputation;
9. employee concern.

Not every mission statement contains all of these elements, as many are dependent upon industry, size of the organization, consumer or business orientation, strategic publics/stakeholders, competitive market position, and so forth. However, these nine categories offer a relatively complete and flexible framework that guides mission statement construction. A closer look at mission statement construction is warranted.

Construction of a mission statement

The key to a successful mission statement is its ability to focus an organization's priorities, decision making, and resources on the core components that drive its competitive advantage. A mission statement should help to hone the operations of an organization by minimizing or eliminating extraneous activities, allowing focus and teamwork, and driving organizational priorities and activities. There are several factors that go into the construction of a mission statement, each discussed below:

- founder vision;
- vision statement;
- research (internal stakeholders; external stakeholders and publics);
- analysis of core competencies in relation to competitive environment;
- environmental factors (regulatory, industry, technological, etc.);
- leadership and management style;
- core ethical values.

It is likely that an organization's *founder* or key leaders will have articulated their idea of a *vision* or *mission* statement to drive the organization. Often, that idea is enough of a starting point but, as with vision, internal stakeholders should be heard and have a voice and real input in creating the mission.

The *vision statement* of the organization, if one exists formally or informally, is a wonderful starting point for articulating a more specifically defined organizational mission. The vision statement drives where the organization is going and what values it will use to get there, so the mission statement can build upon that foundation by articulating core competencies. Those core competencies or focus areas comprise the competitive advantage of the organization and give it the ability to prioritize resources that further it toward that goal.

Research should be used to help determine, construct, or refine the mission statement. Research inside the organization with internal stakeholders should be conducted, employing both qualitative and quantitative formats. *Qualitative research* can generate in-depth understanding and answer "why" questions. It is important in the formative stages of assessing how internal stakeholders view both strengths and weaknesses of the organization. *Quantitative research* can be used to ascertain the extent of agreement with concepts across the entire organization and among employees at all levels. It is important to include an element of the research that is anonymous to generate candid input and feedback. Several rounds of data collection may be needed to refine potential mission statements and the findings of quantitative and qualitative research. It is unlikely that there will be complete levels of acceptance and agreement among every stakeholder group within the organization, but ongoing research can incorporate many of the interests of most stakeholders.

External publics and stakeholders may also be included in the research to understand how the organization is viewed from the outside by consumers, investors, etc. But more work needs to be done before a comprehensive mission statement can be adopted. A good mission statement is not simply a public-opinion-created document. Senior management must analytically scrutinize the competitive environment in which the organization operates, seeking to identify *core competencies* and growth opportunities based upon the organization's unique competitive advantage. Sometimes elements of the organization will be divested or sold in order to focus on a narrow competitive advantage. Other times, expansion becomes a part of the organization's mission. Finance, technology, competitive market growth potential, and even the regulatory and judicial *environment* warrant examination for their potential impact on the organization's mission. This portion of the analysis becomes even more complex when the organization is multinational or global.

Elements of *leadership style* and the organization's unique *management philosophy* should also be considered in developing the organization's individual mission. How hierarchical or authoritarian is the organization versus how decentralized or participative? Often the industry of a company lends itself more to one style than another—manufacturing firms, for instance, are often authoritarian and routinized with a high division of labor. What needs to be worked out, however, is the ideal for the industry that a specific organization belongs to when considered in concert with its competitive advantage and vision statement.

Core ethical values are the foundation of everything that the organization does, including its vision, mission, and operations. Core values allow those working within the organization to agree upon what is considered good, worthy, or meritorious. They allow common goals that offer guidelines for both individual and group behavior. Those values should be incorporated as the backbone of the mission statement to accentuate how they are being operationalized. They can also be used to help steady the organization in times of uncertainty or to help resolve dilemmas.

A concise, comprehensive, specific, articulate, and strategic mission statement emerges as the result of numerous considerations, analyses, and types of research. A well-conceptualized mission statement offers numerous benefits that can help drive the organization toward success.

Multiple benefits of mission statements

Mission statements are practical investments in the future of an organization for a number of reasons. As discussed above, they allow the prioritization of operations and resources. Mission statements also encourage commitment and motivation among internal publics and employees, and help to foster a collaborative, team-driven environment toward common goals. A voluminous amount of research has been published that shows the relationship between committed employees and overall organizational effectiveness. A strong organizational culture, organized by a mission statement known to all and driven by core ethical values, creates more effective employees and larger efficiencies of scale and cost reduction for the organization. A motivated workforce can offer a formidable competitive advantage, and the mission statement is key to driving that team effort toward common goals. Scores of researchers (e.g., Oswald et al., 1994) have argued that an articulate and well-defined vision is essential during times of organizational change, transition, or environmental turbulence.

Arguably an even greater value of mission statements is that they encourage the long-term formation of relationships with stakeholders/publics by allowing the organization to be known. A visible and often-referred-to mission statement allows both internal stakeholders and external publics to understand the priorities and rationale for management decisions.

Mission statements also have relationship outcomes because they underscore the credibility of the organization. An astute mission statement encourages consistency among management and in organizational behavior, minimizing distractions and forays into potentially problematic decisions. When a mission statement is used to organize and prioritize operations, a consistent focus on mission emerges. That consistency allows management to be known by external publics and internal stakeholders alike.

Over time, consistency allows the organization to meet the expectations of publics/stakeholders. Ethical organizational behavior has been conceived as a precursor to the formation of effective long-term relationships with stakeholders/publics (Bowen, Hung-Baesecke, & Chen, 2016). Given that the organization's behavior is ethical or values-driven, meeting the expectations of publics/stakeholders allows trust to emerge as a valuable component of long-term relationships. Organization–public relationships are built on trust, commitment, satisfaction, and shared control. Trust

is arguably the most important component of relationships because it can insulate an organization from negative events (such as crises, natural disasters, product failures), allowing it valuable time to research, explain, adapt, and recover while maintaining ongoing, trusting relationships with stakeholders. Mission statements are, therefore, an invaluable component of strategic management and a vital aid in building relationships between the organization and its stakeholders/publics.

Strategic use of vision and mission

Although they are often confused, the distinction is clear: A vision statement addresses the question *Where do we want to go?* whereas a mission statement addresses the question *Why do we exist?*

Although vision statements can be seen as optional they are exceptionally helpful in organizing the future goal state or visionary aspiration of an organization. Using a vision statement strategically can help the organization in long-term planning, scenario building, issue identification and analysis, resolving ethical dilemmas, and helping to determine the best allocation of limited resources. Vision statements allow an organization to operate consistently toward a future it has defined as successful and worthy of attainment.

Mission statements are not optional. It is exigent that every organization, regardless of size or industry, make a concerted effort to research, develop, codify, and institutionalize a strategic mission statement. At that point, the mission statement must be used in discussion of managerial dilemmas, routine decision-making, and problem-solving. For example, a management team evaluating options to address a problem could pose the question *Which of these options best supports our mission?* To help create competitive advantage and build teamwork and long-term organization–public relationships, the mission statement must become an essential fiber that is woven throughout the organization’s culture and pervades its operations.

SEE ALSO: Business Strategy; Core Values; Dominant Coalition; Leadership Communication; Strategic Communication, Ethics of

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