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Your mission statement is not a holiday turkey

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Boards sometimes create a mission statement similar to how we prepare a holiday turkey. They stuff as much as they can into the mission to satisfy everybody.

Our family turkey used to have a bread stuffing. Then somebody suggested an oyster stuffing. My niece wanted a ground beef stuffing with onions, so we decided to go half and half inside the bird.

Through the years we were influenced to try different cooking techniques. Oven roasting worked but the family said the kitchen was too hot. We moved to the deck for outdoor barbecuing, eventually it was deep-fried in a beer brine.

The results were always good, satisfying everybody at the table. (Dad probably should have said, "Sorry, this turkey can't be everything to everybody.")

Stuffing the Mission Statement

The board is responsible for adopting and advancing the mission. It should communicate the organization's purpose and distinguish it from others.

When directors are asked to recite the mission the room often goes silent. Someone might offer, "We are here to serve the members." Many statements are complex or too long to remember.

Boards create mission statements like we cooked our family turkey, hoping to satisfy everybody's tastes.

Here's what often gets stuffed into the mission.

History – "I think it ought to let people know the organization is over a 100 years, let's include the founding year at the start."

Values – One director said values should be inserted in the mission, "readers should know we value accountability and ethics."

Non-Profit – One might assume people know the organization is a nonprofit, but many missions begin with, "Our association, a non-profit organization, provides..."

Size – "Should we let people know we have more than a 1,000 members? Or we can include something impactful like representing 62 percent of the profession?"

Location – Some mission statements include location: "Headquartered on Main Street for a powerful presence...."

Goals – It's common to stuff the goals in the mission statement. For example, "We serve members through education, advocacy, events and networking." Goals should be in a strategic plan, not a mission statement.

I faced this mission recently: "The association was founded more than 80 years ago, we are located in the capitol city to do advocacy, supported by our political action committee, while improving the ethics, professionalism and operational dominance of members through education and our non-profit foundation, we promote member success."

I prefer a statement that has quick understanding and impact. The best are often short enough to tweet or fit on the back of a business card. One group allowed each of their 15 board members to offer one word in developing the statement, upon consensus it was short and agreeable.

An example of an association mission: "Advancing member interests [i.e. trade or profession] while protecting the public."