

Nonprofit Mission Statement



What is a Nonprofit Mission Statement?

Every organization needs to define its fundamental purpose, philosophy, and values. The mission statement clarifies the essence of organizational existence. It describes the needs the organization was created to fill and answers the basic question of why the organization exists. It is both aspirational and functional and describes the world you are creating through the organization's work.

Why Have One?

Nonprofit missions establish boundaries that frame the appropriate course of action. The mission statement provides the basis for judging the success of the organization and its programs. It helps to verify if the organization is on the right track and making the right decisions. It provides direction when the organization needs to adapt to new demands. Attention to mission helps the board adhere to its primary intent and helps during conflicts by serving as a touchstone for every decision. The mission statement can be used as a tool for resource allocation. A powerful mission statement attracts donors, volunteers, and community involvement.

How to Develop a Mission Statement

An effective mission statement is concise, to the point, realistic, operational, inspirational, motivational, informative, and even emotional. It is not abstract; the mission clearly states the purpose of the organization. It is forward-thinking, positive, and describes success. It is well-defined and focused so that the reader can identify with the statement. Nonprofit mission statements do not usually include programs but do reflect the expected outcomes and impact of such programs. It reflects the values and clearly enumerates the reasons why the organization exists.

Examples of Nonprofit Mission Statements

Think of what you are trying to accomplish rather than how you will do it.

YES: "We want to stimulate love of learning and reading in young people."

NOT: "Our mission is to provide free books to local schools."

YES: "We hope to enrich people's lives by helping to enhance their link to their past."

NOT: "Our mission is to assist people in searching for their roots and draw their genealogy chart."

YES: "We want to enlighten, excite, and educate the audience through dance."

NOT: "Our theater is the venue for the most contemporary and avant garde ballet creations."

Who Should Create or Revise the Mission Statement?

Creating a mission statement is a group effort. Board members, staff, members, donors, consultants, and constituents can provide valuable input during the creative process. The final wording should be approved by the entire board.

The mission statement should be paramount in decision-making and vision setting. It should be present on all electronic and printed communications. It should be mentioned in the articles of incorporation and the bylaws. Before joining the board, all potential board members should review the mission statement to verify whether their understanding of the mission, collective purpose, and values of the organization is compatible with their own passions. It should be reassessed on a regular basis and not forgotten in a binder with other board documents.

Here are five ideas to ensure a productive process to allow your board to create or revise, and then use your mission to advance the work.

1. Answer the question about the end result the organization hopes to achieve. Why does your organization exist?
The mission is why your organization exists, who you serve, and what you aspire to accomplish; it frames your part of the work in service to the collective purpose of the ecosystem. A mission statement expresses the human or societal need the organization aspires to create. As we learned in [Purpose-Driven Board Leadership](#), purpose is advanced in partnership with other community

organizations working toward similar goals.

2. Ensure that board members and the chief executive are aligned on the mission.
Mission should ultimately frame – but not include – program development, decision-making, policy setting, fundraising strategy, and all other related board actions, so it is essential to have a common understanding of the mission. Problems arise when the mission is not widely understood or used often enough in institutional decisions and evaluations.
3. Keep the mission visible, robust, nimble, and relevant.
Mission drives visionary strategic planning, and then goals and objectives spill down from vision and are validated by mission. A regular and consistent planning process helps the board and staff clarify the mission and make changes when necessary to keep the mission fresh, lively, and relevant. When the mission is reviewed regularly, programs are more likely to be mission-aligned, and if all board meetings have a mission moment (or two) that demonstrates how the organization is advancing the ecosystem's collective purpose, the potential for mission drift diminishes dramatically.
4. Offer opportunities for longer mission interaction.
Board retreats and board–staff retreats, offer good opportunities to convey mission, have generative discussions and make sense of the information being received. Community events offer the opportunity for external mission moments to inspire the public, lay the groundwork for mission-based advocacy, fundraising, and outreach. These events can also create pride among the board members who are present.
5. Consciously use mission as the basis for making tough decisions.
A focus on mission is critical when making important organizational decisions such as expanding a current program, introducing a new one, or considering the continuation of a program that is a financial drain but essential to the mission or evaluating a chief executive's performance in relation to mission advancement.

101 Resource | Last updated: December 27, 2023

Resource: *The Nonprofit Board's Role in Mission, Planning, and Evaluation*