

What Is a Mission Statement?

Every nonprofit organization must have a mission statement. It describes the purpose for which your organization exists. Without a clear mission statement, you may drift off course. With one, you can measure every activity against it. It will keep you clear-headed and out of trouble.

A great mission statement is also a great branding tool. Use it to promote your organization and to help convey the essence of what you are all about.

Essentially, your mission is your goal--your reason for being. Try answering the question, "Why did I start this organization?" The answer will be your first try at writing your mission statement.

To carry out your mission, you will develop tactics and objectives. All of these will be part of your strategic plan. But first, pay attention to writing a clear, succinct, and inspiring mission statement. It will pay off in the end and keep you from wasting time and resources on non-essential activities.

The Benefits of a Well-Defined Mission Statement

- **It focuses your energy and clarifies your purpose.** When you try to write your mission statement, you will find that you have to really define what you are going to do. Many questions will come up that must be resolved. For instance, who will you serve? And, who will you not? Are you concerned about just your local area? Or the whole state? Be careful to keep your mission narrowly focused to ensure that you don't bite off more than you can chew.
- **A well-defined mission statement can and should motivate board, staff, volunteers, and donors. It also helps attract people and resources.** A mission statement is not just for internal use or to submit to the IRS for tax-exempt status. It is a beacon that will attract people and resources to your cause. And, they will be the right people and resources. Make your mission statement compelling as well as clear. It will be your best public relations tool.
- **A good mission can help you get 501(c)(3) status.** If you plan to apply for tax-exempt status--501(c)(3) or some other IRS classification--the IRS will be looking at your mission statement to see if your organization matches its requirements for that type of entity. Know what you are applying for and draft your mission to match the requirements.

Some Tips for Writing Your Mission Statement

- **Bring in many perspectives.** Get lots of input from the community you plan to serve, as well as from your board, staff, and volunteers. This will help you develop a broad base of support. You can get this input through meetings, surveys, or phone calls. Ask people what they think or need in regard to the area of services you plan to offer.
- **Allow enough time.** Time spent now will pay off later. So, don't rush the process. Provide time to reflect on the information you gather, to write an initial draft, to allow key participants to read it, and to make changes.
- **Be open to new ideas.** This is especially important for the founders of the organization. You may have had tunnel vision while getting your organization set up, but now it is time to get some fresh perspective. Be open to different interpretations of what you should be doing and new ideas about how to accomplish your goals. Use brainstorming techniques to ensure that all ideas come forward freely. You can winnow them down later.
- **Write short and only what you need.** The best mission statements are short and state the obvious. Your statement's length and complexity depends on what your organization wants to do, but keep it as brief as possible. You should be able to use the statement frequently, so make it brief and succinct. As Tony Ponderis of the [Fund-Raising Forum](#) says, the mission statement should be "...short enough to remember and easily communicate. Strong enough to inspire."
- **Review your mission statement frequently.** The American Heart Association, for instance, reviews its mission statement every third year, but it is changed only every few decades. Cass Wheeler, long-time CEO of the American Heart Association, says in his book, *[You've Gotta Have Heart: Achieving Purpose Beyond Profit in the Social Sector](#)*, "The environment changes and the organization changes, so a periodic review is important to ensure that there is alignment of purpose and reality."

Examples of Real Mission Statements

Kiva - "To connect people through lending for the sake of alleviating poverty."

American Heart Association - "Building healthier lives, free of cardiovascular diseases and stroke."

Sierra Club/South Carolina - "To explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the earth; to practice and promote the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources; to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment; and to use all lawful means to carry out these objectives."

Humane Society of the United States - "To create a humane and sustainable world for all animals, including people, through education, advocacy, and the promotion of respect and compassion."

March of Dimes - "To improve the health of babies by preventing birth defects, premature birth, and infant mortality. We carry out this mission through research, community services, education and advocacy to save babies' lives. March of Dimes researchers, volunteers, educators, outreach workers and advocates work together to give all babies a fighting chance against the threats to their health: prematurity, birth defects, low birthweight."

The Tucson Arizona Boys Chorus - "To provide boys in the community an enriched educational experience through the study and performance of choral music."

SIFE (Students In Free Enterprise) - "To bring together the top leaders of today and tomorrow to create a better, more sustainable world through the positive power of business."

Homeboy Industries - "Jobs not Jails: Homeboy Industries assists at-risk and formerly gang-involved youth to become positive and contributing members of society through job placement, training and education."