

CRAFTING THE IDEAL MISSION STATEMENT FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

by Mary Legakis Engel

When Frances Hesselbein invited me to write this article, I asked her a simple question: “What do your readers need?” After a thoughtful pause, her answer was concise: “Hope.”

I set off on a 6-month journey to discover how I might instill hope for a nation and a world that are struggling. My hope with this piece is to inspire a single person to create a movement that does good. In a moment where Americans and many parts of the world are so publicly divided, I hope to create a flicker of hope in a single reader. I hope that reader is you.

I run an online women’s leadership summit every year. In October 2016, Frances Hesselbein was our keynote speaker. One of the participants asked Frances a question: “How do you handle getting an organization that is stuck in an old culture to open their eyes, open their doors, honor their past, but move forward and take everyone with them?”

Her answer was very practical. “We work very hard on our mission statements. We remember what Peter Drucker told us—your mission should fit on a T-shirt A short, powerful mission statement that is solely why we do what we do. A reason for being.”

At the conclusion of Frances’s talk, I made a promise. I promised Frances that I would visit her in New York and bring her a gift: a T-shirt with my mission on it. It took me two weeks of concerted daily effort to craft my mission statement. I researched. I went into deep self-reflection. I Googled. I consulted with my team (as Drucker advised, “Ask. Don’t tell.”). I consulted with thesaurus.com (multiple times). I eventually landed on a simple four-word statement (more to come on that later in this article).

What I discovered in my research was that several *Fortune* 100 companies (23% of them by my calculations) had really messed up this whole “mission” thing. I also discovered that socially oriented and charitable organizations only had it partially right. What was equally astounding was how these organizations have been flourishing despite the shortcomings of their mission and vision statements!

By sharing how I created my mission, I hope to inspire a single reader to do good. I’ll describe the difference between the ideal mission and a suboptimal mission. I’ll share how your vision serves to fuel your mission. I’ll show you how to create and define your own mission and vision in a way that attracts resources to help you make them a reality. Here we go ...

The Ideal Mission Statement

The results of my research revealed that not-for-profit and socially based organizations, as well as 71% of *Fortune* 100 companies, have what I would call outwardly focused mission statements. These are powerful, energized statements that create a sense of enthusiasm towards a cause. Here are a few mission statements from some of the world’s most powerful social and charitable organizations:

- *TED*: Spread Ideas.
- *The Humane Society*: Celebrating Animals, Confronting Cruelty.
- *Smithsonian*: For the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.
- *Wounded Warrior Project*: To honor and empower wounded warriors.
- *Best Friends Animal Society*: To bring about a time when there are No More Homeless Pets.

(Unless otherwise noted, mission and vision statements described in this article have been identified via each organization’s Web site.)

The outward mission statement creates a sense of contribution—that something good is being done for the world.

Three of the top five *Fortune* 100 companies have outwardly focused mission statements that describe what they do *for* their target subjects, much like those of the social and charitable organizations described above:

- *Walmart* (#1): Walmart helps people around the world save money and live better.
- *Berkshire Hathaway* (#2): The company’s mission statement is so short it doesn’t exist ... literally. No one can find it anywhere, and many have looked. However, Warren Buffett’s letter in the *2016 Annual Report* states what he hopes to accomplish: “It’s our job, though, to over time deliver significant growth, bumpy or not” (Source: www.berkshirehathaway.com/2016ar/2016ar.pdf).
- *McKesson* (#5): Together with our customers and partners, we are creating a sustainable future for health care. Together we are charting a course to better health.

Two of the top five companies stood out as being egocentric or internally focused. ExxonMobil (#4) and Apple (#3) describe what they do *to* their target subject, rather than what they do *for* society.

- ExxonMobil Corporation is committed to being the world’s premier petroleum and petrochemical company. To that end, we must continuously achieve superior financial and operating results while simultaneously adhering to high ethical standards.
- Apple designs Macs, the best personal computers in the world, along with OS X, iLife, iWork, and professional software. Apple leads the digital music revolution with its iPods and iTunes online store. Apple has reinvented the mobile phone with its revolutionary iPhone and App Store, and is defining the future of mobile media and computing devices with the iPad.

These self-centered statements feel incomplete—unexciting.

Here’s something interesting: Apple only recently changed its mission statement. The one created by Steve Jobs from the start was outwardly focused: “To make a contribution to the world by making tools for the mind that advance humankind” (Source: <http://panmore.com>).

com/apple-mission-statement-vision-statement). As the world continues to debate the relevance and quality of Apple products, it will be interesting to see where the company's new mission statement will take them.

In a world where impact has significance, an outwardly focused mission statement is highly relevant. So *what if you could have both—an inner and outer mission?*

Internally Focused Business Definition

Whereas the mission statement creates enthusiasm for the impact of your work, a business definition gives people clarity about the focus of your work—what you provide, or sell, *to* society—like ExxonMobil and Apple's statements currently describe. Your internally focused mission is also known as your *business definition*. According to Michael J. Kami, former business strategist for IBM and Xerox, your business definition answers the questions:

- Who is your customer?
- What does your customer need?
- What products and services do you provide to fulfill the customer's need(s)?
- Through what channels of distribution?
- In what geographic area?

The business definition is effective at aligning your team on the focus of their work, but is suboptimal without the outwardly focused mission statement. It lacks dimension. Likewise, the outwardly focused mission statement is incomplete without the business definition, which provides clarity and context to employees about what they are working on.

What does your customer need?

The ideal mission statement consists of both:

- A short, concise, outwardly focused mission statement that fits on a T-shirt.
- A more detailed, internally focused business definition that describes the work to be done.

A Short Case Study in Mission Definition

Anyone and any business can have the ideal mission statement.

The majority of the executive and life coaching market is here to do things to people—to transform people, to teach people, to coach people. I know this because I've met hundreds of coaches, and taught dozens of them as well. It's a massive industry, highly fragmented, with a wide variation of quality and type of service. As I am one coach in a vast field, it's important that I find a way to stand out.

I used to tell people what I do *to* people: I coach, I teach, I transform. There were numerous verbs that described what I sell to my clients. But now, I had to be very disciplined and critical of each word I chose. I made one critical shift. I switched from describing what I was selling *to* people to what I was doing *for* people.

One of my deepest beliefs is that managers and leaders have already been endowed with the capacity to be excellent. After three weeks of wordsmithing, exchanging notes with my team, and toiling over this word and that, I concluded that my mission is *to reveal excellence in managers*.

How to Create the Ideal Mission Statement

As a leader in a crowded marketplace, you must have both a mission and a business definition—it's imperative. If you're going to create (or re-create) a mission statement, you need some steps.

Step One: Start with magnitude. On which plane do you serve? Your mission can be as big or as small as you'd like. Dr. John Demartini, human behavior

Start with magnitude.

specialist, describes seven realms through which you can project your mission: your self, your family, your community, your city/state, your country, the world, and the universe.

Think of the stories you've heard about an individual whose mission it was to provide for their family, and nothing more. What about an individual whose mission it was to affect their city or state, like a mayor who revitalized a metropolis or an artist who brought fame to a small town? Think about a person whose mission it was to affect their country—like Gandhi or Mandela. Consider the mission of a person who has affected the world, like Walt Disney or Steve Jobs. And think about those people like Stephen Hawking and Albert Einstein whose work operates upon the universe.

Whatever your mission is, make it large enough so that you can, at a minimum, affect the one just before it. My mission is to reveal excellence in managers everywhere. I may never affect the whole world, but I might affect North America, or maybe even my own country, Canada. However, if I strive to affect the world, I will take actions that get me at least as far as the ends of my continent.

Step Two: Target your subject. Who in the world are you here to serve? The Humane Society serves animals. Walmart helps people. I help managers. Be specific.

Step Three: Describe your business definition, answering the following questions:

- Who is your customer?
- What does your customer need?
- What products and services do you provide to fulfill the customer's need?
- Through what channels of distribution?
- In what geographic area?

Step Four: Pick your verb(s). What do you do *for* your target subject? This can be the most challenging step: the verb captures the essence of your contribution. It can either infuse your mission with energy, or drain it of any significance. It can take days, and I've also known it to take months, for some organizations to choose their verb(s).

Step Five: Describe what you do *for* your customer in as few words as possible. Critically review every verb, adverb, pronoun, and noun in your sentence to ensure that it accurately captures the essence of what you do for your subjects. Note that this part has nothing to do with the actual customers who consume your services. It's about your target subject—the community, the world, the universe—the pets, the people, the environment. It transcends your current customer base.

Final Step: Put your mission in front of people. Share it with your team. Share it with your mentors, your coach, and anyone else who will listen and give you feedback.

My team thought our mission didn't feel consistent with one of our brand values: being original and edgy. My team said "revealing excellence in managers" was a little boring.

I concluded that the mission doesn't have to be exciting in and of itself. What's exciting is how you express it: The T-shirt style and image upon which it is written, the colors, and the language around it can add to the message. The only thing that matters is that it's true and that it resonates with you. If it resonates with you, you'll be able to explain it with excitement to those who are listening. And then more people will listen.

The Multiplying Effect of Vision

Your mission describes what you do for the world. Your vision describes what the world looks like once you've done it.

As I left my meeting with Frances, thrilled at the progress I had made with my mission, I couldn't help but feel like there was something missing. All this time

Your mission describes what you do for the world.

I had a vision for my company—I wanted to grow a coaching company that would be the destination for managers and leaders to get the help they needed. I wanted to be a multimillion-dollar company—a market leader. I was so proud I had a vision for my organization! And then I wasn't proud anymore.

As I had been researching how to create a mission that could fit on a T-shirt I realized there was this great divide between organizations that have internally focused vision statements (i.e., organizations that focus solely on market leadership or shareholder value) and those with outwardly focused visions.

Here are some of my favorite vision statements:

- *charity; water*: bringing clean and safe drinking water to people in developing countries
- *Tesla*: a sustainable energy economy (from Elon Musk's *Master Plan, Part Deux*, July 20, 2016)
- *Oxfam*: A just world without poverty
- *Feeding America*: To end hunger in America (paraphrased)
- *Human Rights Campaign*: HRC envisions a world where LGBTQ people are ensured of their basic equal rights, and can be open, honest, and safe at home, at work, and in the community

Overwhelmingly, company vision statements across the *Fortune* 100 (where they existed) described market leadership and shareholder value as their ultimate aspirational vision. Inspiring, I might suggest, solely to the companies' shareholders.

My research showed that only 40% of *Fortune* 100 companies describe their vision publicly. Of those companies, 77% have internally focused mission statements. Imagine if the \$12 trillion in revenues

generated by this elite list of businesses were channeled toward a compelling, outwardly focused vision of a brighter future, rather than their shareholders' pocketbooks.

I declared that I would create a bigger vision for my company that was outwardly directed. I looked at my values. I looked at my clients. I looked in my own experience as an employee, a manager, and a leader, and I looked at other organizations. I finally declared: *I envision a world where every manager loves their job, and every employee loves their manager.* An outwardly focused vision is a lot more exciting than an internally focused vision!

As with mission, I'd like to suggest that having both internally and outwardly focused vision statements are helpful. The outward vision gets people excited about the future—it creates forward movement. The internal vision sets performance expectations with your team, such as the focus on market leadership or shareholder value, as noted above.

How to Create Your Outward Vision Statement

Close your eyes and project yourself out 5, 10, 20, or maybe 50 years. Start to describe in your own mind what it looks like once you have fulfilled your mission. What is the change you create? What does the future look like?

Take those words and describe them to people. Get their reactions. Tweak if you need to.

Simple Is Powerful

What I want to leave you with is a sense of hope. There is nothing spectacular about creating a mission and vision that touches the hearts of many. What is spectacular is the number of organizations that get it confused, and still manage to grow and prosper despite the confusion. With this article, I hope to inspire you to tune into your mission and create your vision—your outwardly focused movement.

Put simply, what I'm asking you to do is:

- Create an outwardly focused Mission Statement: Why you do what you do. A reason for being.

*What I want to leave you
with is a sense of hope.*

- Create a business definition: A statement of who your customer is, what your organization provides to the customer, how, and where.
- Create an outwardly focused Vision Statement: A *visual depiction* of the ideal future state that generates anticipation and forward movement. If you can't draw it, or see it on a screen, or paint it on a canvas, it's not a vision.
- Create an internally focused Vision Statement: This sets performance expectations with your team.

If you don't like what exists today—if you are disappointed by recent events in politics, business culture, the environment, or something else—then your simplest and most effective next move would be to spend a few weeks defining your mission and your vision for how things could be different. Then spend a few weeks more communicating that to everybody you see. Gather the feedback, refine, and continue to communicate. The more people you tell, the more you'll find out whom your message resonates with, and you'll start to see the tide rise.



Mary Legakis Engel, founder and CEO of The Management Coach, has been advising, consulting, and coaching leaders and managers on effective management and how to grow their businesses while continuously engaging their employees for more than 15 years. As managing director and co-founder of the Global Women's Leadership Summit, she brings global experts to the online stage each year to advance thousands of women around the world. She also co-created The Emerson Suite™—a mobile management toolkit and platform to optimize team performance and drive results. Based in Oakville, Canada, Mary and her team serve leaders, managers, and organizations around the globe.

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