

QUESTION I



What Is Our
Mission?

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WHAT IS OUR MISSION?

Peter F. Drucker

- ❖ What is the current mission?
- ❖ What are our challenges?
- ❖ What are our opportunities?
- ❖ Does the mission need to be revisited?

Each social sector institution exists to make a distinctive difference in the lives of individuals and in society. Making this difference is the mission—the organization’s purpose and very reason for being. Each of more than one million nonprofit organizations in the United States may have a very different mission, but *changing lives* is always the starting point and ending point. A mission cannot be impersonal; it has to have deep meaning, be something you believe in—something you know is right. A fundamental responsibility of leadership is to make sure that everybody knows the mission, understands it, lives it.

Many years ago, I sat down with the administrators of a major hospital to think through the mission of the emergency room. As do most hospital administrators, they began by saying, “Our mission is health care.” And that’s the wrong definition. The hospital does not take care of health; the hospital takes care of illness. It took us a long time to come up with the very simple and (most people thought) too-obvious statement that the emergency room was there *to give assurance to the afflicted*. To do that well, you had to know what really went on. And, to the surprise of the physicians and nurses, the function of a good emergency room in their community was to tell eight out of ten people there was nothing

wrong that a good night's sleep wouldn't fix. "You've been shaken up. Or the baby has the flu. All right, it's got convulsions, but there is nothing seriously wrong with the child." The doctors and nurses gave assurance.

We worked it out, but it sounded awfully obvious. Yet translating the mission into action meant that everybody who came in was seen by a qualified person in less than a minute. The first objective was to see everybody, almost immediately—because that is the only way to give assurance.

IT SHOULD FIT ON A T-SHIRT

The effective mission statement is short and sharply focused. It should fit on a T-shirt. The mission says *why* you do what you do, not the means by which you do it. The mission is broad, even eternal, yet directs you to do the right things now and into the future so that everyone in the organization can say, "What I am doing contributes to the goal." So it must be clear, and it must inspire. Every board member, volunteer, and staff person should be able to see the mission and say, "Yes. This is something I want to be remembered for."

To have an effective mission, you have to work out an exacting match of your opportunities, competence, and commitment. Every good mission statement reflects all three. You look first at the outside environment. The organization that starts from the inside and then tries to find places to put its resources is going to fritter itself away. Above all, it will focus on yesterday. Demographics change. Needs change. You must search out the accomplished facts—things that

have already happened—that present challenges and opportunities for the organization. Leadership has no choice but to anticipate the future and attempt to mold it, bearing in mind that whoever is content to rise with the tide will also fall with it. It is not given to mortals to do any of these things well, but, lacking divine guidance, you must still assess where your opportunity lies.

Look at the state of the art, at changing conditions, at competition, the funding environment, at gaps to be filled. The hospital isn't going to sell shoes, and it's not going into education on a big scale. It's going to take care of the sick. But the specific aim may change. Things that are of primary importance now may become secondary or totally irrelevant very soon. With the limited resources you have—and I don't just mean people and money but also competence—where can you dig in and make a difference? Where can you set a new standard of performance? What really inspires your commitment?

MAKE PRINCIPLED DECISIONS

One cautionary note: *Never subordinate the mission in order to get money.* If there are opportunities that threaten the integrity of the organization, you must say no. Otherwise, you sell your soul. I sat in on a discussion at a museum that had been offered a donation of important art on conditions that no self-respecting museum could possibly accept. Yet a few board members said, "Let's take the donation. We can change the conditions down the road." "No, that's unconscionable!" others

responded, and the board fought over the issue. They finally agreed they would lose too much by compromising basic principles to please a donor. The board forfeited some very nice pieces of sculpture, but core values had to come first.

KEEP THINKING IT THROUGH

Keep the central question What is our mission? in front of you throughout the self-assessment process. Step by step you will analyze challenges and opportunities, identify your customers, learn what they value, and define your results. When it is time to develop the plan, you will take all that you have learned and revisit the mission to affirm or change it.

As you begin, consider this wonderful sentence from a sermon of that great poet and religious philosopher of the seventeenth century, John Donne: “Never start with tomorrow to reach eternity. Eternity is not being reached by small steps.” We start with the long range and then feed back and say, “What do we do *today?*” The ultimate test is not the beauty of the mission statement. The ultimate test is your performance.

Note

The preceding text is from Peter F. Drucker, *The Drucker Foundation Self-Assessment Tool: Participant Workbook* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), SAT2, pp. 14–16.

Question I

WHAT IS OUR MISSION?

Jim Collins

What is our mission? Such a simple question—but it goes right to the heart of the fundamental tension in any great institution: the dynamic interplay between continuity and change. Every truly great organization demonstrates the characteristic of *preserve the core, yet stimulate progress*. On the one hand, it is guided by a set of core values and fundamental purpose—a core mission that changes little or not at all over time; and, on the other hand, it stimulates progress: change, improvement, innovation, renewal. The core mission remains fixed while operating practices, cultural norms, strategies, tactics, processes, structures, and methods continually change in response to changing realities. Indeed, the great paradox of change is that the organizations that best adapt to a changing world first and foremost know what should *not* change; they have a fixed anchor of guiding principles around which they can more easily change everything else.

They know the difference between what is truly sacred and what is not, between what should never change and what should be always open for change, between “what we stand for” and “how we do things.”

The best universities understand, for example, that the ideal of freedom of inquiry must remain intact as a guiding precept while the operating practice of tenure goes through inevitable change and revision. The most enduring churches understand that the core ideology of the religion must remain fixed while the specific practices and venues of worship change in response to the realities of younger generations. Mission as Drucker thought of it provides the glue that holds an organization together as it expands, decentralizes, globalizes, and attains diversity. Think of it as analogous to the principles of Judaism that held the Jewish people together for centuries without a homeland, even as they scattered throughout the Diaspora. Or think of the truths held to be self-evident in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, or the enduring ideals of the scientific community that bond scientists from every nationality together with the common aim of advancing knowledge.

Your core mission provides guidance, not just about what to do, but equally what *not* to do. Social sector leaders pride themselves on “doing good” for the world, but to be of maximum service requires a ferocious focus on doing good *only* if it fits your mission. To do the most good requires saying no to pressures to stray, and the discipline to stop doing what does not fit. When Frances Hesselbein led the Girl

Scouts of the USA, she pounded out a simple mantra: “We are here for only one reason: to help a girl reach her highest potential.” She steadfastly steered the Girl Scouts into those activities—and only those activities—where it could make a unique and significant contribution of value to its members. When a charity organization sought to partner with the Girl Scouts, envisioning an army of smiling girls going door to door to canvass for the greater good, Hesselbein commended the desire to make a difference, but gave a polite and firm no. Just because something is a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity”—even a once-in-a-lifetime funding opportunity—is merely a fact, not necessarily a reason to act. If a great opportunity does not fit your mission, then the answer must be “Thank you, but no.”

The question of mission has become, if anything, even more important as our world becomes increasingly disruptive and turbulent. No matter how much the world changes, people still have a fundamental need to belong to something they can feel proud of. They have a fundamental need for guiding values and sense of purpose that give their life and work meaning. They have a fundamental need for connection to other people, sharing with them the common bond of beliefs and aspirations. They have a desperate need for a guiding philosophy, a beacon on the hill to keep in sight during dark and disruptive times. More than any time in the past, people will demand operating autonomy—freedom plus responsibility—and will simultaneously demand that the organizations of which they are a part *stand* for something.