

Why You Need Mission and Vision Statements



By Dr. Chance T. Eaton

Without continued awareness and intention, all things break down in time. We see this breakdown in all systems. For example, if you don't place awareness and intention into your relationship with your spouse, you begin to experience friction in the relationship. If you don't maintain a healthy lifestyle of sleep, nutrition and activity, your body is more susceptible to illness, fatigue and injury. In business, if you don't maintain upkeep on your machinery and equipment, you increase the likelihood of unexpected breakdown – also known as depreciation.

In physics, the concept is called entropy. It is a measurement of the disorder of energy of a collection of particles. Basically, the universe has a general trend toward disorder.

When I work with disengaged workgroups, it is pretty obvious to see that the team dynamics have broken down. Much like the concept of entropy, the team dynamics have trended toward chaos and disorder. This is evidenced by lower levels of trust, confusion around work expectations, and poor-quality products/services. If teams can't invest effort and intention in who they are and what they do, they will trend toward disorder.

My first advice for such groups is to stop, take a breath and revisit why they come to work each day.

This comes in the form of the team writing shared mission and vision statements. "Shared" means that everyone participates in the process. It is common that companies may already possess a mission and a vision, but I suggest that each team or workgroup also develop their own unique statements because they are unique in what they do, how they do it, who they do it for and where they are headed. Quality mission and vision statements remind us of why we get up and go to our job each day, they remind us of our similarities as a team and they remind us of where we are going – the aspirational and inspiring direction.

Mission Statement: The who, what, why, and how

The mission statement summarizes and defines a core purpose. It answers the who, what, why and how. It should be clear, concise, authentic and distinctive and apply to everyone in the workgroup.

Vision Statement: The where and how

The vision statement represents the desired and optimal future state. It describes what you aim to achieve, provides guidance and is forward-thinking and inspirational. It is meant to function as the North Star, stretching your capabilities and capturing ambitious aspirations. Effective vision statements guide and direct your mission.

Example

The following statements come from a food bank and are great representations of how mission and vision statements should be written.

Mission: Serving our neighbors in need by providing food in a respectful and dignified way and by working with others to eliminate hunger in the greater Our Town area.

Vision: Creating a hunger-free community.

As you read these statements, you will notice that the mission statement answers who the food bank serves (Our Town area), what they do (serve neighbors by providing food), why they do what they do (to eliminate hunger) and how they serve (in a respectful and dignified way). When I read this, I have no doubt about the food bank's core purpose, and the mission statement answers for me why their employees get out of bed and come in to do this important work.

Their vision statement goes right to the heart as it sets out the vision of a hunger-free community. Not only does it audaciously set the North Star; it also gets to the wow factor with its inspirational and achievable goal.

Common problems with mission and vision statements

The following are common problems I see in mission and vision statements:

1. They are written off-site by an executive team and exclude team input. When team members do not participate in the process, it is less likely that it will be embraced by the individual members. It is all too common for executive teams to go off on a retreat, hash out some statements and return with laminated cards and posters. Commitment will never take unless employees have a say in the team's core purpose and aspirational direction.
2. You can't distinguish between the mission and the vision. One test I perform is to isolate each statement and read it independently. If I read both similarly and can't differentiate between them, the authors have misunderstood what mission and vision statements are, leaving the team with vague descriptions. I've even seen situations where the mission and vision statements were written backwards, confusing employees.
3. They are too aspirational. I will commonly see language like "#1 in the world," "a world without..." and "the best." These are vague and often unrealistic. If your team can't resonate with their reality, they won't get behind it.

4. They aren't lived. Once the mission and vision are articulated, they need to become part of the business culture. I often see the statements placed on walls and laminated cards but rarely, if ever, hear them talked about. The whole purpose of mission and vision statements is to bring language to our core purpose and aspirational direction; you must use the statements to breathe life into the organization.
5. They are too long. When I see statements that take up multiple pages, I know it will be hard for employees to resonate with the message. The statements need to be short and to the point.

Just like natural systems, workgroups and companies will break down over time if they aren't nourished with purpose and direction. Creating mission and vision statements is a low-cost, high-return activity that can provide the ingredients to combat the general trend for all things to move toward disorder.



Dr. Chance Eaton has over a decade's worth of experience working in the field of learning and organizational development. Due to his unique educational and work experiences in finance, psychology, leadership and management, education, noetic sciences and agriculture, Dr. Eaton provides his clients with relevant business solutions grounded in theory and research. To learn more about Dr. Eaton's services, visit www.HCSInter.com.