

How to Create a Mission Statement in a Day

A White Paper from AchieveIt

Okay, we have to admit, our methodology actually takes longer than a day, because there is some prep work involved. Yet, with the right planning, you can gather your necessary information in advance and then conduct a one-day retreat that will allow you to emerge with an effective and powerful mission statement that resonates and inspires both internal and external stakeholders.

Preparing for the Retreat:

Step 1

Ask each of your participants to spend time pondering the fundamental reason why your organization exists. Ask them to think hard about it, focusing on how your organization serves your community, society, and greater good. Ask them to think beyond the physical walls of the office and consider how the organization changes the community in which you live. Ask them to carry around a notebook for a few days and jot down ideas that answer these questions.

Step 2

Once your participants have had ample time to ponder the question – “Why do we exist?” – ask them to select their very best answer. Ask them to record the answer on paper, and then hone their response until they

can state it in 10 words or less – roughly 60 characters in length. While this task might seem impossible, tell them to focus on the most critical element of their answer and strip away everything else that gets in the way.

Step 3

Have your participants submit their responses in advance of the one-day retreat. Reject any mission statements that exceeds 10 words; return these to their owners for additional refinements (but make sure they are resubmitted in time for the retreat.)

Step 4

Record each submission on individual Post-It™ notes; oversized 5x8 notes work best.

Day of the Retreat:

What you need:

1. The submitted statements, each recorded on a Post-It™ note.
2. Additional Post-It™ notes, preferably of a different color than the color used for the mission statements.
3. Markers.
4. Flip-charts, (if you are unable to stick your Post-It™ notes on a wall.)

5. Round stickers of two different colors, such as three-quarter-inch dots used to color-code files.

Step 1

Randomly stick all of your mission statements to the wall, or on the flip charts.

Step 2

Ask your participants to begin grouping mission statements by major themes. These themes are actually affinity groups. Do not ask them to identify the names of the affinity groups, nor should you allow them to consult with each other while they are completing this portion of the exercise. Rather, they should work silently and quickly. In addition, it is perfectly acceptable for participants to move mission statements that have already been affinity groups. Let them know if they see a mission statement in a group where they feel it doesn't belong, they can move the mission statement to a different group. The goal is to have each participant continuously moving mission statements from affinity group to affinity group until there is team consensus for the mission statement clusters.

Step 3

Once the mission statements have been grouped around similar themes, have the participants identify a heading – in three words or less – for each affinity group. Write the heading names

on individual Post-It notes (preferably of a different color than the mission statements) and stick them on the wall above their respective mission statements.

Step 4

Now that you have identified the name of each affinity group, ask the participants if the mission statements clustered under each heading still belong. Many times, once you identify the name of the affinity group, mission statements no longer fit well. Move statements that no longer fit the affinity group to another group. If needed, create a new affinity group with those mission statements that no longer fit, or eliminate them altogether.

Step 5

Give each participant dots of a single color to be used for “Monte Carlo voting.” The number of dots each participant receives should be based on the number of affinity groups that were identified. Provide each participant with dots equal to approximately half of the number of affinity groups, but no more than five dots in all. Once each participant has their dots, they are to stick them on the affinity group names that they feel best represent the organization’s mission. They can stick all of their dots on a single affinity group, spread their dots equally among affinity groups, or they can distribute their dots in any other combination they so choose. The more dots they place on an affinity group, the more they support that group. Once everyone has “voted,” count the number of dots for each affinity group. Select no more than two affinity groups to carry over into the development of the mission statement.

Step 6

Conduct a treasure hunt by giving each participant a single dot that is of a different color than those used in the Monte Carlo voting. Each participant is to search for a word or phrase in any of the mission statements (not the affinity headings) they find truly inspiring and place the dot on their selection. The idea here is to identify the hidden treasure within the individual mission statements presented. Count the number of dots for each word or phrase and select no more than three to carry over into the development of the mission statement. Write these words or phrases on Post-It™ notes.

Step 7

Take the affinity group headings selected and the hidden treasure identified and group them together on the wall. You will now have one or two affinity groups – each consisting of no more than three words – and as many as three “treasured” words or phrases. These represent the key concepts that will form your mission statement. More than likely, the number of combined words on your selected Post-It™ notes will not exceed 12, and there is a good chance it will be five to eight; your goal is to use the words and ideas to thematically frame your mission statement.

Step 8

There is an excellent chance the mission statement will virtually write itself, as what is presented from Step 7 will be so compelling the mission statement becomes obvious. If this occurs, your job is done. However, if this doesn’t happen, don’t despair. Push ahead by asking everyone to write an individual mission statement

using the key words and phrases that were previously identified. Remember, their mission statements cannot exceed 10 words. Give them as much time as required to complete this step.

Step 9

Once every participant has written a mission statement of



You should consider revising your mission statement if you answer “no” to any of the following Q’s:

1. Is it short (10 words or less) and sharply focused? Would it fit on a t-shirt? A bumper sticker? A billboard?
2. Do staff, management, and board members know the mission statement? Is it clear and easily understood?
3. Can you train around it? Does everyone in the organization know exactly how to fulfill the mission every day?
4. Does it define why you do what you do?
5. Does it provide direction for doing the right things?
6. Does it inspire your passion and commitment?
7. Does it say, in the end, what you want to be remembered for?
8. Have you revisited your mission statement in the last three years?

10 words or less – using the key words and phrases previously identified to guide their efforts – pair participants into teams of two. Each pair will share their individual mission statements with each other, combining their two mission statements into one. Once each pair has combined their mission statements into a single statement of 10 words or less, combine teams again. Each team will now consist of four people with two mission statements, which again will be combined into one. Continue this process until only two teams – and two mission statements remain.

Step 10

When you are finally down to two teams – and two mission

statements – have each team present their statement to the entire group. At this point, there is a good chance both mission statements will be very similar and easily combined into one. If this is not the case, give each participant one dot to place on the mission statement they prefer. Then, count the number of dots on each mission statement to identify the one that has the most support.

Even if your organization has a succinct, empowering mission statement, it should be revisited on a regular basis. If your organization conducts strategic planning, the mission statement should be discussed – and even evaluated – at the beginning of every planning cycle. Why? One of the fundamental purposes of strategic planning is to fulfill the mission; revisiting the mission ensures your strategic plan succeeds in that regard.

Viola! A Mission Statement in a Day!

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