

# THE ANATOMY OF A MISSION STATEMENT

(and how to write yours)

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**What is your organization's mission?** Go ahead and ask around. How easily can your staff answer the question? Board? Volunteers? Most beloved donors? What about you?

You already know this: developing a great mission statement is important. It's one of the first things you do as an organization. Like a watershed that begins atop a mountain and flows out over tributaries and streams toward the ocean, your mission statement is the source. It informs everything you do.

It can also be a mountain of a task. It takes time, focus and energy. Which is why many mission statements get put off. "We'll get to that at the next Board Retreat. We're too busy right now." They languish in limbo. There they remain: outdated, lumpy, ineffectual or, worse, confusing. If your mission statement no longer works, then change it.

I'm here to tell you that writing a good mission statement can be accomplished quickly, efficiently and successfully. All you need is some elbow grease and someone who knows how to write.

**Keep in mind that there is great variety out there among mission statements**, and there isn't really a right way to go about crafting one. But after working with several organizations on strategy, doing a lot of research on mission statements and watching carefully how the very best organizations handle them, I've come up with some best practices.

In the post-Twitter era, your mission statement needs to be concise, punchy, crystal clear. It should be memorable (meaning anyone can memorize it). A six year-old should be able to understand it, and your proudest benefactor should get excited by it.

**Here's the anatomy part.** Your mission statement should have four limbs:

- 1. Who you are**
- 2. What you do**
- 3. Who you do it for**
- 4. Where you do it (optional)**

That's it.

Don't put anything else in there. Say it simply, then stop. Don't get into how long you've been around, why you're better than the other guy, or how you do these things. (There are other places for that. Think of this as the beginning of a longer conversation.)

## ANATOMY EXAMPLE:

**Human Rights Watch** is dedicated to protecting the human rights of people around the world.

Who you are	What you do	Who you do it for	Where you do it
Human Rights Watch	is dedicated to protecting the human rights of	people	around the world.

See? It's simple and snappy!



## **Step 1: Gather input.**

This is crucial since it gives your constituents, all of them, part ownership in the process. It's much easier to carry out a mission that people are already supporting. There are several ways to gather input, and a board meeting or retreat may be effective, but also consider a survey or questionnaire that is distributed to staff, volunteers, board members, etc.

Ask questions like these, or come up with your own:

**Who are we? / What is our purpose? / Why do we exist? / How do we contribute to the world? / What do we want to achieve? / If we disappeared, what would be the lack? / Who do we affect? / Who depends on us? / Why did you sign up? / What resonates with you about our organization? / What is our legacy? / Where should we be doing our work? / What should we do in the future?**

**A note about input:** Input is crucial and valuable. You want to collect input. But clarify who the decision-maker is. Usually it's best if one person is responsible for final approval and sign-off. It's a group effort to provide the ingredients of the mission statement; it's far easier and more productive if one or two people take the ingredients and concoct the statement. If this is unavoidable, then be prepared to battle against a very watered down mission statement. Assign roles up front, make sure everyone knows who is driving this bus, how it's going to go, and then proceed.

## **Step 2: Compile the input.**

Read through the survey answers and jot down themes. One method would be to write down themes onto notecards and pin them up on the wall. Make a note card for each theme that comes up on each survey (so you'll have several notecards representing the ideas of a single survey respondent). When pinning up your note cards, group similar themes together. Soon you'll start noticing bunches of notecards for certain themes, and patterns will emerge. This is a very visual way to notice convergence. The cream will rise to the surface.

## **Step 3: Write a mission statement. Or twelve.**

Using our anatomy lesson (Who you are, What you do, Who you do it for, Where you do it), churn out several short mission statements. Use a partner if you want to, it usually is more fun and goes more quickly. At this point don't think about editing, just get some mission statements down on paper. Fight the urge to perfect them right away.

#### **Step 4: Retreat.**

Ever wonder why you get your best ideas in the shower (or on a walk, or while you're driving, or some other non-work activity)? It's because after pumping your brain full of information with a period of intense focus, your synapses actually require full relaxation and disengagement. Go play basketball or something. Don't worry, your brain is working away in the background putting connections together. Don't be surprised if the winning draft mission statement (or a combination of several) comes to you at a weird moment. Just be ready to write it down!

#### **Step 5: Return to the drawing board and craft your final mission statement.**

Congratulations, you've done it!

#### **Step 6: Review the final mission statement with your colleagues.**

Everyone will probably have little comments and suggestions. Don't worry about it. Just make sure there's a roughly positive consensus. If there's overwhelming dissent you probably need to go back to the drawing board.

That's it! You're done.

See how easy that was?

Now treat yourself to some  
pizza, you deserve it!

We collect mission statements. Please input your mission statement in the 100 Missions log at <http://scottmcdowell.us/anatomy>.

## Still need some guidance? Check out these resources:

Fast Company columnists, **Dan & Chip Heath** have some great advice about business strategy that can be co-opted for nonprofit use. Here's a pertinent example:

Say you've got restaurant in Centerville that serves outstanding thin-crust pizza. Your mission: To serve the tastiest pizza in town. But then the chef reminds you that he makes great ravioli—he's frustrated that your mission doesn't reflect it. So you zoom out: To serve the best Italian cuisine in town. But what about your great service? Your birthday parties? Your family-friendly decor? You keep expanding the mission to include all these pieces, until you end up with an unholy statement like this: To create cuisine-related solutions for regionally proximate families.

Likewise, **Seth Godin** writes semi-frequently about nonprofits, and not always about marketing.

**Boardsource** is always a wonderful, uh, source for nonprofit strategy. They've been at it a long time, and have compiled lots of free information. I always start there.

**Blue Avocado** is priceless when it comes to information on running a successful nonprofit and dealing with boards.

**Don't forget other humans.** Know someone who does this stuff well? Ask them for help! It's always best to get information from an actual person if possible!

**Don't forget to input your mission statement** in the 100 Missions log at <http://scottmcdowell.us/100missions> so it can be used as an example and others can benefit from your genius!

Any other questions? Track me down!

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