

BUILDING VISION IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

by
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One thing that most people don't know about organizational planning is that strategic planning is neither the first nor the most important step in the planning process. The highest step in the planning process is establishing a clear mission, articulating a vision of the future, followed by creating strategic plans to fulfill the mission and vision. This article is about building vision in associations and other nonprofit organizations. It focuses on the differences between mission, vision and strategic plans, and briefly outline the steps to successful visioning for a nonprofit organization.

MISSION, VISION AND STRATEGIC PLANS

Mission is the purpose for which the organization exists. A mission statement tends to be a paragraph or less, and is frequently broadly cast, and not compelling. A typical mission statement of an association of traffic light painters might be, "To promote the art and science of traffic light painting, and improve the safety and welfare of motorists and maintenance workers on public roadways." It may be accurate, but it doesn't exactly send chills up and down your spine.

Vision is an inspiring, long-term view of where the organization is headed. A vision statement includes a brief articulation of (1) core values, (2) core purpose, (3) a huge goal, and (4) a vivid description of what it will be like to achieve the goal. Any interested person looking at the vision statement, which should be less than one page in length, should immediately be able to identify with it, and know whether they want to be part of it or not. Vision remains fixed for decades at a time; it does not change with environment or circumstances.

Strategic Plans are specific, limited-time initiatives aimed at changing conditions, circumstances or beliefs, all in furtherance of achievement of the organization's mission and vision. Strategic plans should change periodically as past strategic goals are achieved, or as circumstances change to require that strategic plans be revised. The period of time between strategic planning meetings depends on the rate of change in that environment. Associations should generally have from three to six strategic goals. If it has more than six, the goals may not be big enough, or they might not be truly strategic.

Strategic plans are not operating plans. **Operating plans** set forth various ongoing programs and activities of the association, such as various membership services. For example, an association might have five major strategic goals, and does not include holding an annual trade show. The trade show is an existing, ongoing program – an *operating* program. However, if the association did not have an annual trade show, and it wished/needed to start one, doing so would be a *strategic* goal. Once the goal was achieved (i.e.: a trade show has been established and operates on an ongoing basis), it becomes an *operating* program.

Virtually every organization has a mission statement, and the majority of organizations have strategic plans. Most organizations do not have a clearly articulated vision. Yet, strategic planning without a vision is like building flying machine without a clear picture of what the machine must do, or what it will look like. The organization drifts, frequently changes course, and may be consumed by personal agendas and petty political squabbles. Under such circumstances, the machine will never fly (achieve greatness) without major divine intervention.

ABOUT VISIONING

Think about a few *great* enterprises, like Stanford University, Honda, Proctor & Gamble, Sony, Hewlett-Packard, Nordstrom, Nike and Disney, among many others. What do they have in common? They all have a distinct, articulated vision. Notwithstanding their humble beginnings, they all have committed themselves *very seriously* to their vision. In turn, the vision becomes a key element of the fabric and culture of the organization.

I believe that the model used by the enterprises mentioned above to build their vision can be applied to associations. With a few minor adaptations, I have done so with a handful of associations. The model I used was brilliantly written by James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, in their article entitled *Building Your Company's Vision* (Harvard Business Review, September-October 1996, Pages 65-77). The process is (drastically) summarized as follows:

THE VISIONING PROCESS

The visioning process entails identifying and articulating the core values and core purpose of the members of the enterprise; identifying and articulating a huge, daunting goal; and articulating a vivid description of what it will be like to achieve that goal. Each of these steps is briefly discussed below:

CORE VALUES

Core values are individual values held by your association members, and imputed to the organization. They are personal in nature, not organizational. They remain stable over time. They define what you stand for. They don't need to be created; they already exist. You would hold these values even if they proved to be disadvantageous or unpopular in some circumstances. Some examples are as follows:

Disney:

- * No cynicism
- * Nurturing/promulgation of wholesome American values
- * Creativity, dreams and imagination
- * Fanatical attention to consistency and detail
- * Preservation and control of the "Disney magic"

Sony:

- * Elevation of the Japanese culture and national status
- * Being a pioneer - not following others; doing the impossible
- * Encouraging individual ability and creativity

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Philip Morris:

- * The right to freedom of choice
- * Winning - beating others in a good fight
- * Encouraging individual initiative
- * Opportunity based: discourage entitlements
- * Hard work and continuous self-improvement

Nordstrom:

- * Service to the customer above all else
- * Hard work and individual productivity
- * Never being satisfied
- * Excellence in reputation; being part of something special

CORE PURPOSE

Core purpose means an individual's reason for being a member or his or her industry or profession, and the organization's reason for existing. It is simple and basic. Some examples are as follows:

3M: To solve unsolved problems innovatively.

Hewlett-Packard: To make technical contributions for the advancement and welfare of humanity.

Nike: To experience the emotion of competition, winning and crushing competitors.

Disney: To make people happy.

Sony: To experience the joy of advancing and applying technology for the benefit of the public.

HUGE, DAUNTING GOAL

A clear, compelling goal that will take from ten to thirty years to accomplish. Also called a BHAG (Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal), members must "get it" right away, without further explanation. It should be extremely challenging, energizing, and a catalyst to unity. Some examples are as follows:

Wal-Mart, 1990: Become a \$125 billion company by 2000.

Boeing, 1950: Become the dominant player in commercial aircraft and bring the world into the jet age.

Stanford University, 1940s: Become the Harvard of the West.

Nike, 1960s: Crush Adidas!

Honda, 1970s: We will destroy Yamaha!

City Bank, 1915: Become the most powerful, the most serviceable, the most far-reaching world financial institution that has ever been.

VIVID DESCRIPTION

A “Vivid Description” consists of a “full color” description of what it will be like to achieve the goal. For example, the vivid description used by Sony Corporation in the 1950s was as follows:

“We will create products that become pervasive around the world. We will be the first Japanese company to go into the U.S. market and distribute directly. We will succeed with innovations that U.S. companies have failed at - such as the transistor radio. Fifty years from now, our brand name will be as well known as any in the world, and will signify innovation and quality that rival the most innovative companies anywhere. "Made in Japan" will mean something fine, not something shoddy....”

PUTTING VISION TO WORK

The point of articulating each item above is to combine them into a single, brief document called a “vision statement.” The vision statement is enormously valuable as a stable point of reference (to guide the board or committees in making decisions that support the vision of the organization), as a recruitment tool (to grab the attention of like-thinking people in the industry), and as a rallying point for existing membership and leaders.

Perhaps one of the most dramatic visions in recent history was President John F. Kennedy’s vision of putting a man (an American, of course) on the moon by the end of the decade. It was a truly inspiring vision. You didn’t need to be a rocket scientist to know what it meant, and to support it. Enormous scientific and economic barriers had to be overcome, and in a limited time frame. No doubt about it, it was a daunting challenge for the entire world to observe. Notwithstanding the loss of the visionary leader himself, and not without tremendous difficulties, the vision was fulfilled.

Vision is the key to such organizational greatness. The first step toward greatness for your association is to build vision. With an articulated vision in place, with inspired leadership, with appropriate strategic plans, and with a unified membership, your organization will have a dramatically enhanced chance to achieve greatness.

This article has been a very brief description of a visioning process. Due to space restrictions, some important points have been abbreviated or omitted. For this reason, I highly recommend a careful reading of the Collins and Porras’ article referenced above. I also highly recommend the hiring of a professional visioning facilitator experienced with associations.

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