

What Is Our Mission?

Adapted from *The Five Most Important Questions*

By Peter F. Drucker

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. 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.

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, 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

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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

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.