

Strategic Planning in the Arts: A Practical Guide

Writing a Mission Statement

A clear, concise and complete mission statement is the foundation for any strategic plan. The mission should be aspirational. By answering the question "How does the organization define success," the mission optimizes the effectiveness of staff, donors and volunteers.

As overstated as it may seem, a concrete mission statement is the foundation for the entire strategic planning process. It sets the standard to which the organization aspires, now and in the future, and forces the Board members and staff to align themselves around a specific agenda. When the mission statement is crafted in a rigorous manner major disagreements can result, for this process entails making choices between: size and quality, recognition at home and national prominence, education and performance, art preservation and creation. There are no "correct" missions and simply creating a statement that embraces the whole world of possibilities may be comfortable, or politically expedient, but it doesn't contribute to the development of a clear path. In fact, many arts organizations only truly address their missions when they experience financial distress and are forced to cut back. The discussion concerning what to keep and what to discard at that moment is really a mission development exercise.

While drafting a mission statement can often be a frustrating exercise in semantics, the effort devoted to developing the specific wording should not obscure the importance of delineating explicitly the goals of the organization.

One efficient way of writing a mission statement is to ask the Board and senior staff members to make a list of all the potential elements of the mission. Parameters of the mission statement may include:

Product/Service

What product or service does the organization offer? While this may seem obvious at first, many arts organizations offer a diverse set of services. Opera companies may produce live performances, videos, lectures, publications, recordings and broadcasts. As electronic transmission of performances increases, the definition of the company's "product line" will become a more complex issue. The mission statement must include a reference to those services that are essential to the organization.

Quality

What level of performance is desired? This is a very important and difficult decision to make. While every arts organization aspires to high quality, it is unrealistic to expect a new contemporary art museum to build a world-class collection unless vast resources are available.

Audience

A substantial amount of effort must be devoted to determining the desired audience for each of the institution's services. Are the programs designed primarily for adults? for children? for a particular ethnic or religious group?

Geographic Scope

How much of the city/region/country/world does the organization hope to influence? The implications of this decision will have a tremendous impact on each element of the organization's operations. The mission statement should prioritize the importance of each relevant region. Remember that the organization need not serve every region in the same manner. The New York City Ballet offers regular live performances only in New York City and Saratoga Springs, yet serves the remainder of the country and the entire world with television broadcasts, videocassettes and occasional tours.

Repertory

The organization must decide whether there is a specific repertory from which it will choose the works it produces. The Ontological-Hysteric Theater, for example, presents a different repertory than the Hartford Stage Company. It is important to note that while critics may give kudos for adventuresome programming, neither the Ontological-Hysteric Theater nor the Hartford Stage is "wrong" when it comes to repertory. Each company has specific strengths and faces unique constraints that influence its choice of repertory. Similarly, a museum must decide if there are specific areas in which it wishes to collect and exhibit. There are clear differences between the collecting missions of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Pierpont Morgan Library.

Education

How strong is the company's commitment to education? While this is a subset of the product/service decision, it deserves special mention. It is popular with many funders to stress a commitment to educate. However, one must honestly address the organization's commitment in this regard. Those companies with a true desire to educate must be willing to devote adequate resources and to identify the target recipients: The audience? Young artists? Children?

While the answers to these questions will guide the organization's entire planning process, the mission statement need not include references to all of the issues raised above. It should contain only the guiding principles of the organization. After creating the master list of possible mission elements, apply a simple test to each of them: ask whether the organization would be "satisfied" if it accomplished everything but that one element. If the answer is "yes," that element does not belong in the mission statement. If the company would not be fulfilled without accomplishing that one item, it belongs in the mission.

Despite differences in the substance of many mission statements, all superior mission statements should be:

- **Clear:** There should be little room for interpretation; everyone reading the mission statement should come away with the same sense of its meaning.

- Concise: A short mission statement is easily remembered by staff, Board, donors and the public. A lengthy statement is hard to remember and, therefore, hard to use.
- Complete: The mission should address all the programming of the institution. It is difficult to rationalize devoting scarce resources to
- Coherent: The mission must make sense and the various elements must be complementary. A theatre company that performs avant-garde works but hopes to be the largest theater organization in a region is probably not going to accomplish both elements.

For example, a regional theater company has developed the following mission:

To establish a national reputation as a leading repertory ensemble theater company that offers world-class theater productions and education programs.

Notice that programs/services, educational programming and quality level are mentioned, while audience, fiscal performance, repertory and geography are not. This simple statement makes it clear what the organization is trying to accomplish in general terms. Other organizations develop much more substantial statements of mission. It is frequently helpful to expand on the mission by listing a series of objectives. For this theater company, these objectives might include:

- Increasing the number of productions offered;
- Developing new works;
- Producing a wide range of plays appealing to a variety of tastes;
- Exploiting all available performance formats including electronic media;
- Subsidizing ticket prices for certain audience members;
- Building a strong touring program;
- Creating a year-round company that permits artistic continuity and attracts the best talent;
- Improving and expanding the apprentice and intern programs;
- Attracting the best directors and designers; and
- Providing theater to the entire community including productions that appeal to specific age, racial and ethnic groups.

These goals provide a more concrete challenge to the Board of Directors and staff of the organization and establish a clear starting point for the planning process.