

VISION STATEMENT

What It is, Why You Need One, and Who Should Create It.

Key elements in meaningful, successful, and clear strategic thinking are vision, mission, and values of the organization. The mission guides the organization today; a vision statement reflects the impact of the organization in the years to come; and the values define the ethical guidelines and standards that direct all action. As it relates to strategic planning, visioning is a process of looking into the future, justifying and imagining the ideal place for the organization in ten to 30 years. Many sources equate this process to the creation of a vision of success.

WHAT IS A VISION STATEMENT?

A vision statement describes the future aspirations of the organization. It defines the dream, the long-term goal, and the unconditional direction where the organization is heading. The statement is not tied to future funding, obstacles of any kind, or present availability of resources. Its main enemy is shortsightedness and lack of innovation and creativity. Although it describes a desired state, it should not be totally unrealistic. With a reachable goal — however far the goal lies in the future — the vision statement is motivational and hopeful. For instance, it's unrealistic — no matter how noble these visions are — for one organization to expect to eradicate poverty in the world or make criminality disappear.

WHY HAVE ONE?

If the mission statement functions as a tool to help with everyday decisions, the vision statement guides the overall long-term thinking. Two organizations may have similar vision statements but very different mission statements. For instance, a homeless shelter and a job-training center for the unemployed have quite different missions but both may envision elevating decency and respectability in the lives of all community dwellers.

Without a clear picture of the desired future, without a strong vision, even a strong mission statement has its limits. The organizational vision keeps the mission on the right track. It reminds the staff and the board that even after they are gone, this organization will have a long-term purpose to keep on going. The mere process of creating a statement helps the board get focused. A vision statement has a team-building effect: It is created through a group process, and every board member must share the ideals and values of what lies ahead for their work.

WHO SHOULD CREATE AND REVISE THE VISION STATEMENT?

The board is ultimately responsible for setting the future path for the organization. During strategic planning, the board and the senior staff together can brainstorm, dream, and share their aspirations. It is beneficial to get feedback from constituents or other stakeholders. It is not necessary to revise the vision statement annually — after all, the statement should be solid enough to weather short-term changes in the environment. When it is clear that new trends have substantially changed the operating circumstances of the organization, it is time to re-evaluate the statement and fine-tune the goals.

A retreat setting is constructive for visioning exercises. Participants could be asked to imagine the sections of the annual report in 30 years. What has the organization accomplished in year 20XX? Small groups brainstorm separately and write down all ideas and suggestions the teams come up with. No suggestions are out of bounds. There are no limits to acceptable innovation. Afterwards, a facilitator works with the entire group and helps transform the ideas into workable statements. A good writer drafts the final product.

SAMPLES

Think of a realistic but inspirational statement.

- *I have a dream.* (Martin Luther King, Jr.)
- *By the end of the decade, we will put a man on the moon.* (John F. Kennedy)
- *There is a greater community respect for the elderly in general, and particularly for the frail and chronically ill. The elderly in our community lead higher quality lives characterized by more independence, greater freedom of choice, and stronger sense of self-worth.*