

# Mission statements

Staff members need the ownership mindset

## Question:

**My company published a new mission statement late last year. It's listed on our Web site. It's printed on the back of our business cards. It's even been framed and hung in offices and meeting rooms in the building. I guess we're supposed to feel like we're all on the same team now or something. To me, just because we now have a defined mission, I don't think that makes us a team. We still have a lot of problems communicating and working together. Publishing a mission statement hasn't helped these problems go away. What do you think about this?**

## Answer:

At the outset, let me observe that I am a firm believer in mission statements. I

believe they are an important part of defining the purpose of the organization. Unfortunately, too often it seems that these statements fail to take hold. Employees don't resonate with them. They fail to become part of the organizational fabric. That's a shame, because a mission statement, well-positioned and properly executed, can serve as a rallying point. Let me explain.

In previous articles, you've seen me make reference to the "Three Ps" of the internal business environment (i.e., Purpose, Partnership, and Process). Mission statements are an important part of Purpose, the first P. Answering questions of purpose has to do with specifying the reason the organization exists and its daily commitment to its constituents. In that sense, you might say that the mission or purpose statement is foundational.

Let me elaborate on this last point by talking about some other important foundational elements. Organizations are built from the foundation up. The strength of this foundation for any organization starts with its values as a guide and its vision as the direction. From my perspective, in addition to the mission, these elements are absolutely essential. They can be used to unleash the full potential of the individuals who populate the organization.

Identifying the values espoused by the organization helps to set the tone for the behavior that is expected from all employees. This can help in framing criteria to be used in a variety of human resources-related decision making, including employment selection, performance appraisal, and promotion/succession planning. Remember, at the individual level, values define character; at the organizational level, they define culture. So, a powerful activity can be clarifying the values the organization

believes in. Just ask the folks who used to work for Enron or Arthur Anderson.

The vision is a foundational element because it outlines what the organization strives to become at some future point in time. While the mission statement is typically directed toward "today," the vision statement describes the organization as it might be, should it fully maximize the resources at its disposal. Thus, there is normally a gap between where the organization is today and the desired end state as captured in the vision statement. But, closing that gap can become a very compelling focus of individual and collective activity.

Now, in order for this to happen, employees must practice behavior that is consistent with the values, mission, and vision that the organization has articulated. Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? But, here's the rub—too often these elements are crafted by top managers without any input from the people who will be charged with making it happen. Rarely, in my experience, have I seen this top-down approach work very well.

What you describe in your question appears to be consistent with a top-down model. Your organization seems to be working at the surface of things in its approach to defining and implementing a mission statement. You (and I'm guessing many of your colleagues) were not included in the process. You see how the soaring rhetoric that has been crafted has not affected the "brutal reality" of things at your level (e.g., the communications problems you reference).

So, the prescription here is certainly for organizations to specify values, mission and vision statements. But, more specifically, the prescription is to do so collaboratively within a systematic process that extends to the grass roots level of the organization.

One way to do this is through a large-scale model of engagement called appreciative inquiry (AI). Developed by Dr. David Cooperrider at Case Western Reserve University, AI is a process for engaging all employees of an organization. Further, a central tenet of the approach is that it is a positive model. That is, it helps people to focus on what is working, rather than trying to fix what isn't working.

By engaging people at all levels of the organization, values, mission and vision statements can be fleshed out so that appropriate detail is offered to answer basic questions like, How does this apply to me? What am I supposed to do? And so on.

By involving the organization's members in the process, work area and team charters can be crafted that extend the

values, mission and vision statements further into the depths of the organization. At the individual level, employees' roles and responsibilities can be refined.

As you can see, what I am outlining is a much more thorough approach than what your company probably used. But, at the end of the day, what are the results? If the idea is to set the tone for the organization so that the collective behavior of the organization is modified, then a comprehensive approach is not just a nice thing to think about trying. No, it is a necessary strategy to ensure active participation, promote full understanding and encourage an ownership mindset.

So, to move further forward, see what you can do to extend your top-down approach to one that is more inclusive and participative.

In doing so, my sense is that you will be pleased by the results. You might even find that some of the negatives of the workplace begin to recede as people turn more and more of their attention and energy to the positive, future oriented pursuits that have been specified.



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