

Statement of purpose

“If you don’t know where you are going, you might not get there.” (Yoda - Star Wars)

Essentially, your statement of purpose communicates *why* your event or organisation exists, and *who* it serves. Having a clear statement that is a summary of your organisation’s purpose will not only help your organisation communicate what it does and why, but will also help it to be consistent in what it does and how it does it. This will be immediately useful to members, potential members, funders, beneficiaries and policy makers.

For example, the Voluntary Arts Network exists to increase participation in the arts and crafts. This is their ‘mission statement’, or their statement of purpose. Having this clear, concise statement of purpose informs everything they do and it gives them their strategic direction. Are you able to summarise your organisation’s or event’s purpose in this way?

What is a mission statement?

Mission statements may be called many things, including:

- Vision
- Mission
- Organisational objectives
- Key (or core) message

The term that currently appears to be gaining ground is ‘statement of purpose’. This is clear and direct and does not carry the possible religious overtones carried by the words ‘mission statement’ and ‘vision’. For the sake of clarity ‘statement of purpose’ will be used throughout this document. However, the term you adopt is up to you.

Your statement of purpose will bring together the major principles of your activities as stated in your constitution or memorandum of association, the rules and values that guide your organisation and the agreed purpose in use in the day to day management and operation of your organisation.

Statement of purpose is an essential step in strategic planning

Having a statement of purpose, is an essential step in the process of developing a strategic plan for your organisation. It states your reason for existing and informs all of your organisation’s activities. It is the highest level in the process of strategic planning. This can be summarised as follows:

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE / MISSION / VISION

= *the BIG picture: why you exist*

STRATEGY

= your priorities, your goals, your direction

ACTIVITIES

= how you are going to do it

Strategic planning is essential

You really do need to think about your strategy! Having a strategic plan isn’t a luxury; it’s a *necessity* to keep you on course in our changing – and competitive - world of limited resources. If you haven’t got a strategic overview of where you are going and where you want to be you may suffer from some of these difficulties within your organisation:

- Chasing one source of funding after another until you don’t even remember what you should be doing

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- Disagreement and confusion within your organisation about priorities and resources
- Operating in a perpetual state of crisis
- Getting stuck in doing what you've always done
- Reactivity – responding to funding calls when it doesn't fit your remit

Do you need to revise or create a mission statement?

Organisations often set themselves up and get to work without realising the need for a statement of purpose. Generating this statement is then undertaken when there is a sense an organisation has lost its way, or isn't clear anymore about what it should be doing and why. Obviously it would be better to create your statement of purpose from the start as this will make it easier to review your organisation at a later stage.

If you already have a statement of purpose then a review may be due in order to ensure that you have a working statement everyone can sign up to, not a fossilised statement that has lost meaning. Doing a review will be part of the strategic planning process, so it might be a good idea to build this into your organisation's planning cycle. It is a good idea to undergo a review every three years or so.

How to tell if you need to review your statement of purpose:

- Does your existing statement no longer represent the work you actually do?
- Does your committee or management board disagree with what your priorities are?
- Has the environment in which you work changed so much your existing statement is no longer appropriate?

- Do you not know what your statement is?
- Is the morale of staff or members at a low ebb?
- Is your organisation struggling to exist rather than flourishing?

Yes to any of these questions may suggest that reviewing, revising or creating a statement of purpose would be a good idea.

To do, or to be?

When you begin to think about your statement of purpose, try to move your focus from what you do, to what you want to achieve. All too often organisations get blinkered by what they are busy doing, and lose sight of the big picture. When this happens, statements of purpose are often written as a sort of to do list:

- *For example:* 'To put on concerts and give young people in Our Town opportunities to participate in choral music.'

This is okay, but doesn't focus on what the organisation wants to achieve. Instead it puts the emphasis on doing *something*. A better and more useful way of writing a statement of purpose is to write it in a way that sets out what the intended outcome of any activity will be.

- *For example:* 'Our festival works to create greater opportunities for young people to participate in choral music in Our Town.'

The first example tells us what the festival does, and the kind of service it provides. The second tells us what it wants to achieve, but not how it is going to do it.

This shift of emphasis from an organisation's work, to the outcome it intends to achieve, puts the overall goal rather than activities in the

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driving seat. Organisations focused on activities can easily become lost, moving from one project to another with no sense of direction. On the other hand, organisations focused on their overall goals and objectives can choose the activities that bring them closer to these goals.

An example

At the moment many horticultural societies are suffering because of changes in gardening as a leisure activity. Many societies have constitutions written years ago that commit them to running horticultural shows, where keen gardeners can show their prize exhibits. But today, many gardeners are more interested in creating 'low maintenance' gardens for pleasure than growing vegetables for the table, or breeding the perfect sweet pea! As a result, fewer gardeners are interested in showing specimens and competing in shows. The annual show, instead of being a celebration of gardening is instead becoming a financial nightmare for the committee who appear to have no choice but to go ahead even though each year it makes a bigger loss.

The problem for horticultural societies is whether to broaden their appeal and change their constitutions to meet the needs of today's gardeners, or to remain focused on exhibiting and risk losing members and failing to attract new ones. This is causing heated debate on committees, as there appears to be no middle ground.

This example shows how making an activity (in this case the show) the statement of purpose can cause problems. If the statement of purpose focuses on goals, not activities, changing direction to respond to the needs of members will be easier without compromising the goals of the organisation.

What's involved in writing a statement of purpose?

This is not something one person can do alone; it will involve at least the committee and probably the wider membership of your organisation, or participants in your activities. There are clear steps you can take to write a statement of purpose:

- Review your constitution
- Invite reaction
- Appraise new statements
- Agree statement of purpose

This takes time, and the willingness of your committee and members to take part in what can be a difficult process. The activities outlined here need to involve a core group of people who have the clear intention of creating the statement. They may have different ideas, but the aim of the following exercises is to find the statement that brings everyone together.

Reviewing your constitution

What does your constitution say you do? It should tell you what your organisation was set up to achieve, its aims and objectives. You can use what your constitution says you should be doing as a starting point for discussing your mission statement.

Your constitution's aims and objectives aren't the same as a statement of purpose, because your statement will be written to summarise in an easily understood way, what your organisation does. Use the constitution as a springboard for discussion.

- Is what it says accurate?
- What is inaccurate? Why?
- What is the most important part of your aims and objectives? Why?
- Are there any other things you are doing now that aren't included in your constitution?

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- Are you working with different groups of people, or the same groups of people as identified in your constitution?
- Is the language of your constitution useful and relevant or not? Which words or phrases are better?

It is possible that your constitution isn't an accurate reflection of the current work your organisation is doing. In this case you may need to go back to basics and take a good look at your constitution and update it. (See Constitutions and Legal Status for more guidance.)

Writing your statement of purpose

After taking a look at your constitution the next step is to find a way of expressing your aims and objectives clearly and precisely. The aim of writing a statement of purpose is to create a statement that can be easily communicated. To help you do this, think how you'd explain what you do to a stranger. You may want to work on this individually, then bring the results of your work back to the group for discussion.

When discussing different views on your aims and objectives, remember to look for areas where everyone is in agreement and build on these. There will be areas where you'll disagree and this will be where the hard work comes in! You will need to find ways of turning the areas of disagreement into areas of agreement which you may find challenging. Remember - your statement is like a flag; it is not a bill of rights, so keeping it simple is important.

Some useful questions:

- Why would we have to be invented if we didn't already exist?
- What would happen if we ceased to exist tomorrow?

- What are we good at?
- How do we do things? (What are our values?)

Why bother?

Writing a statement of purpose is a joint activity, which will involve many people, often with different points of view. It can be a difficult and exhausting experience if there is a lot of disagreement. However, agreeing a statement of purpose is a powerful exercise and can breathe fresh enthusiasm and energy into an organisation. This is why it is often an excellent way of rebuilding morale when your organisation has been through a difficult time.

Make it easy for yourselves

- Writing a statement of purpose is a demanding exercise, don't make it any harder than you need to
- Work in a pleasant space
- Make sure you have enough time - it isn't something you can do in your lunch break!
- Keep interruptions to a minimum: put the answer machine on, shut the office door
- Take plenty of breaks if it does get hard
- You don't have to do everything together, you can work in small groups, or in pairs, or alone, so long as you come together again to discuss and agree the work
- Have a reward - a good lunch, a cake, an early finish

Dealing with difficulties

- Make sure you have a good facilitator to guide the discussions and keep everyone on track
- Look for agreement within discussions and summarise these as you go

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- Keep good notes that everyone can see. This will give you a sense of achievement
- Deal with conflict directly: if two people don't see eye to eye, perhaps have a break and let them talk about it together, or set up another time for people to discuss the issue if it is not relevant to the statement of purpose
- Persevere: the process may seem difficult or soul destroying and the attention to detail may be frustrating, but if you can stick with it and keep going, you will have something everyone can feel ownership of at the end.

The Statement

When you have arrived at a statement everyone is happy with, make sure you've got a final copy somewhere safe, then go home and sleep on it! Perhaps arrange to meet again in a week to make sure it is still right. In the meantime you can test it by running it past as many people as you can. They will quickly tell you if it does actually communicate your purpose well.

Your new statement of purpose can then be the guiding principle that helps you translate your overall purpose into goals, aims and objectives that direct your everyday work and activities.

Best of luck!

Further Information

For exercises on writing statements of purpose see:

Planning Together: the art of effective teamwork. George Gawlinski and Lois Graessle. Planning Together Associates, 1988. ISBN 0 9528577 1 5

For more information on strategic planning and statements of purpose see:

Managing without profit: the art of managing third-sector organizations. Mike Hudson. Penguin, Second Edition. 1999. ISBN 0 14 026953 3

Other Related Information Sheets

Constitutions and Legal Status
Incorporation
Long Term Strategic Planning

Developed with thanks to
Voluntary Arts Network www.voluntaryarts.org



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