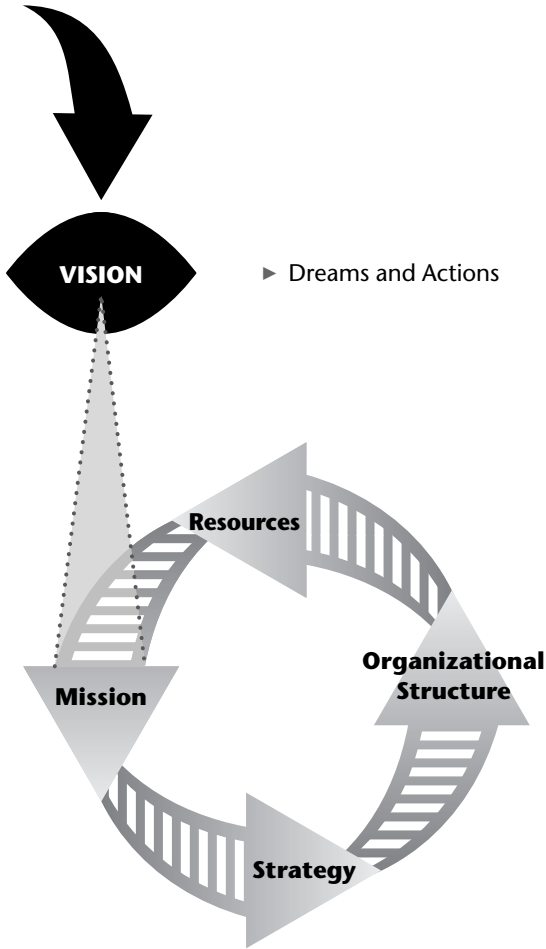


PART ONE

Vision





Dreams and Actions

Ever heard of an agency that is said to have lost its vision? Probably not often. But have you ever heard of an agency that is said to have lost its sense of mission? We hear that one just about every day. An unfocused sense of mission causes everything from financial troubles to organizational inertia. So why do we hear more about mission than vision? The answer has to do with the difference between vision and mission. We find that the two are often confused. Yet there is a great deal of difference between them.

Quoting dictionary definitions is ordinarily a sign of weak writing, but we'll bend that rule a bit and review some of the words and phrases that our reference sources used to describe these two concepts.

Vision	Mission
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imagination• Dreams• Forecasting• Mental picture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A body of persons• Office• Organization• Series of services

Look at these two lists of words. The words describing vision are words that also describe characteristics of individuals. The words describing mission, however, are words that also describe characteristics of organizations. Here is another way to say it: People have visions, organizations have missions.

THE ELEMENTS OF A VISION

True vision is a uniquely personal commodity. It is the dream that provides the impetus for all operations of an organization. Often, vision exists in the mind and heart of an organization's founder, and can be such a grandiose goal that it seems close to preposterous. The original vision of Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, was a variation on the theme of economic equality, and other executives hold equally lofty visions. Their strength comes from the fact that if you stretch far enough, you're bound to accomplish many good things even if you fall short of your goal. As a colleague from Sri Lanka puts it, "to hit the top of the mango tree, shoot for the moon."

A leader's vision is outwardly focused. Few vision-holders think in terms of departments, governance structures, policies, and other details of administration. Rather, their starting point is the outside world and the organization's place in it. Operational details come later, usually from some other source. A vision is also firmly oriented toward the future with such a long-range quality to it that it can be hard to calculate in years the amount of time required to implement it.

Vision is important not for the details it provides but for the passion and urgency it supplies the visionary. Without the grandiose notions embodied in most visions, few would be inspired to take action. One implication of this is that a nonprofit can actually survive without a particularly strong vision. Usually it turns out to have been present sometime in the past—such as in the mind of the founder—and successors have simply remained faithful to its general outlines. Finally, vision is most important at the beginning of an organization's development, and at key junctures thereafter. Often when an organization hesitates to act at a critical juncture it's because no one provides the vision necessary to make sense of an otherwise seemingly risky path.

OTHER VISIONS COMPLEMENT

We've talked so far about a sole individual's vision, probably the executive director, as though no one else in the organization is eligible to act from a strong personal commitment. Since managers get caught up in day-to-day realities it can be hard for them to develop

a coherent vision to carry them through all the ambiguities, which is one of the reasons for creating a widely accepted mission statement.

Still, people at all levels of the nonprofit can develop their own personal vision. The reason that these typically won't clash with the CEO/executive director's vision is that they are inevitably rooted in a particular position or function. In practice, such a manager's vision should act to support the overall vision. For example, the financial manager who operates from a personal vision of the future—as opposed to just putting out daily fires—ideally will complement the overall vision, even if it is never explicitly stated.

MISSION IS THE SOURCE OF MOTIVATION

As such a personal commodity, vision may or may not be present at any given time in an organization. Rather, the concepts embodied in the vision are captured in the mission which is an ever-present, clear articulation of organizational goals and purpose. In a for-profit company, employees understand that the primary mission is to be profitable. Shrewd managers take this a step further and develop other goals that are a bit more uplifting, but profitability has to be number one.

Because nonprofits do not have the same primary, and well-understood, goal of making a profit, they don't have this common driver around which to focus organizational energy. The structural motive to encourage cooperation and teamwork is lacking. Consequently, nonprofit leaders have to work especially hard to replace this natural unifier and motivator. A clear and engaging mission, drawn from a vision, helps to provide this unification and motivation. This is because a mission statement—and the strategy that grows out of it—helps the people of a nonprofit align their own goals and actions with the organization's strategic direction. In the nonprofit framework, the meaningful profit goes to the community.

