

# Your Mission Is Your Most Valuable Asset—Part One

by Peter C. Brinckerhoff

When I'm with nonprofit board or senior staff, I sometime will ask them what their organizational strengths are, and then I'll often ask about what their assets are. Not surprisingly, managers and board members can usually list their organization's assets, sometimes in great detail. If asked, they can discuss their building, their staff, their equipment, their endowment, even their receivables.

All these assets are great, and important in delivering mission, but my opinion is that your mission is your most valuable asset. More valuable than your building, than your financial reserves, than your volunteers and, yes more valuable than your staff. Really? Yes. Because the mission is why the board and staff show up. The mission is why the building got built, why the reserves are in place, why you have a good reputation in the community. Your mission is the *why* of your organization.

And, in addition to being the most important asset, the mission can and should become a set of bookends for your nonprofit. Decisions, discussions, strategies should start—and end—with mission. I'm sure that at your nonprofit when considering your options for a new program or new location, you've asked each other, "Does this support our mission?" Good. That's starting with mission. What about ending with mission, though? Well, every one of your staff and board decisions should result in one or more of the four following outcomes:

- More mission
- Better mission
- More effective mission
- More efficient mission

That's it. While not every outcome is short-term (for example, sending staff to continuing education should result in better and/or more effective mission, but probably not for a while), you should be able to talk about how every action, every decision, every strategy moves you toward your nonprofit being more mission-capable.

## Get the most from your mission

Let's drill down a bit more into why your mission is so important, and then think through how you can get more out of this, your most valuable asset. Your mission, if properly utilized can be all these things:

- A strategic and tactical touchstone,
- A staff and volunteer recruiter,
- A staff and volunteer motivator,
- A fundraising competitive advantage, and, oh yes,
- A compelling reason for the people who you serve to show up.

The question you should ask is: How do I get my mission to do all this? How do I turn that piece of paper on the wall into an organizational dynamo, not just something our board adopted five (ten, fifteen, twenty) years ago? How

### At a glance

Your mission is your most valuable asset. Decisions, discussions, and strategies should start and end with a consideration of their impact on and expression of your mission. In this first of a two-part column, Peter Brinckerhoff explains that your mission statement must be:

- **Accurate:** The mission statement describes what you truly do, where you do your work, and who you help.
- **Concise:** It must appeal to people's short attention spans.
- **Inspiring:** The mission must make people want to know more about your work.

do I best use my most valuable asset? First, you need to get the mission you want. Then, you need to use that mission constantly.

## Get the mission you want

You should start by making sure the mission you have is the mission you want. Is the mission accurate, concise, and inspiring? Let's look each of these in turn.

**Accurate:** This means that the mission statement describes what you truly do, particularly *where* you do your work and *who* you help. While this sounds like a technical detail, it's important, particularly for nonprofits in the United States. If your mission statement does not correctly define the kinds of people and places you do mission, the Internal Revenue Service can and will find that your organization has Unrelated Business Income, and ding you if you are not filing your form 990-T.

**Concise:** This means short and sweet. We live in a culture with very, very short attention spans. I liken this to the use of a television remote control; if I'm in the least bored or uninterested with what's on a channel, *click, click*, watch for a minute, nope, not interested, *click*... Sound familiar? The basics are the same with your mission statement if it is long, drones on, or isn't quickly inspiring.

Let's say that you come up to me and I ask you what your organization does. You start to recite your mission statement. "*We help children (I'm interested!) and their families (good!) maximize their reintegration and unification skills (huh?) through a network of collaborating organizations...(click)*". Even if I'm still standing in front of you, smiling, nodding and looking you in the eye, mentally, I'm gone.

Concise is essential, but concise is hard. You have to boil down all the things you do to a concise description. And, in doing so, you'll almost certainly leave something someone on your board and staff cares deeply about unsaid, or at least not highlighted. Every phrase, noun, adjective, adverb, and, most importantly, verb you remove is painful. But it has to be done or you'll hear far too many *clicks*.

**Inspiring:** As I've said, your mission is your key asset, so make it work for you. Turn it into your five story elevator message so that people who hear the mission will want to know more rather than *click* on you. Brevity is key, and the most difficult part of making something inspiring. We're all so proud and excited about our organizations that we're sure if we just keep talking (or writing) longer, people will get how cool our mission is. The trouble is that once that *click* occurs, you're done.

Once you have the mission you want, you need to use it constantly, consistently and in new and innovative ways. In my next article, I'll show you how to do just that, and then you'll be getting the most out of your most valuable asset.



**Peter Brinckerhoff** is an internationally acclaimed author, lecturer and consultant on nonprofit management and governance. Parts of this article are taken from Peter's most recent book: *Smart Stewardship for Nonprofits: Making the Right Decision in Good Times and Bad*, published by John Wiley & Sons. You can learn more about Peter at his website: [www.missionbased.com](http://www.missionbased.com).

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1 South Wacker Drive Suite 2380  
Chicago, IL 60606  
800.526.4352  
Fax: 312.930.0375

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