



Is Your Mission Clear?

It's what you're all about, so get it right

By Stephen Peithman

It may be the single most important thing your theatre company can have—in the beginning and as the years go by.

This asset, which costs nothing and yet worth so much, is a well-defined and clearly worded mission statement.

Here's why:

- It crystallizes just why you formed your group in the first place.
- It tells company members, your audience and your community what and who you are, and what you stand for.
- It serves to keep your company on track, so you don't spread yourself too thin or go off in directions for which you're not equipped.
- It helps donors, sponsors, and governing agencies understand why they should support your work.

Often the mission of a company remains the same for many years, even though the way it does business has probably evolved. But sometimes even five or ten years can change the landscape so markedly that the original mission must be revised in order to address those new realities.

How recently has your mission statement been reviewed by your board or staff members? If it's been more than five years, now may be a good time to revisit, and if necessary, fine-tune or revise your statement to make sure it's relevant to your current environment and speaks to all your stakeholders.

You can begin the process of writing or revising your statement by creating a worksheet based on these three questions.

1. What needs or opportunities do we exist to address?
2. What are we doing to address these needs?

3. What principles or beliefs guide our work?

Ask staff, volunteers and constituents to list any words, phrases or ideas that come to mind with respect to your company and these three points. Give everyone a chance to be heard, and allow the ideas to flow, without editing.

Next, look for language and concepts that enjoy broad consensus, and from these build or fine-tune your mission statement, so that it:

- Expresses your company's purpose in a way that inspires support and ongoing commitment
- Motivates those who are connected to your company
- Speaks in a way that is both convincing and easy to understand
- Remains free of jargon, buzz words, and vague generalities
- Clearly defines the actions that make your company unique, using active verbs to describe what you do. [For a list of active verbs, visit <http://www.guidetograntsplus.com/blog/?p=208>]
- Is short enough so that anyone connected to the organization can readily repeat it.

Keep It focused

Beautifully worded perhaps, but none of the following statements really helps us understand what the company actually does:

- "Bringing people together to share ennobling artistic experiences."
- "We cultivate artistic exploration by providing a vibrant home for performance, fostering a multiplicity of voices, and catalyzing among artists and audience."
- "Raising consciousness and nurturing compassion through groundbreaking performances and life-changing educational programs."
- "We explore the truth of the human experience and the human spirit through the examination and presentation of dramatic work."

It's better to jettison the hyperbole and spell it out what you do for everyone to see:

- "To introduce and involve young people in live theatre, with a focus on performance and creative expression through singing, dancing, and acting."
- "A repertory/ensemble theatre company dedicated to producing the "classics" of world dramatic literature."
- "Producing plays of the recent past that deserve another chance, including plays that were ahead of their time, not accessible to a wide audience, poorly publicized or obscured by inferior productions."
- "To present quality live theatre to the community at affordable prices, and provide opportunities for performance and stagecraft for community members over the age of 16."

Try to keep your statement short and precise. The points made in the two statements below are clear and valid, but their length dilutes the impact (and memorability):

- “We seek to engage, inspire, entertain and challenge audiences with theatrical productions that range from the classics to new works; we train and support the next generation of theatre artists; we provide arts education programs that promote life-long learning to a diverse community; and we celebrate the essential power of the theatre to illuminate our common humanity.”
- “Providing a nurturing environment to develop new plays and outstanding artists dedicated to enriching the lives of young people by offering opportunities in the performing arts that engender self-confidence, inspire both individual expression and ensemble teamwork, and provide positive role modeling, thereby encouraging community outreach through quality theatrical productions for children, teens and families.”

If you feel the need to explain yourself in such depth, try dividing your statement into three parts: *Vision* [what you strive to be], *Mission* [what you actually do], and *Values* [the core beliefs that drive your work].

For example:

- *Our Vision:* The Poorhouse Players will inspire, nurture, challenge, amaze, and educate artists and audiences, in order to ensure a more vibrant community.
- *Our Mission:* The Poorhouse Players produces eight or more theatrical productions of high artistic quality each year, and provides education in theater arts to adults and children.
- *Our Values:* We believe in exploring new ideas and generating discussions through producing and casting plays that reflect a diversity of ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds.

The guidelines above are broadly-based. Ultimately, there’s no one-size-fits all approach to creating a mission statement---except that it should be tailored to and reflect your company’s very reason for being.

A well-defined and compelling mission statement can and should motivate board, staff, volunteers, and donors, and serve as a tool to make decisions and achieve goals. It also helps attract people and resources to your company and its work. Just as important, they will be the *right* people and resources.

It’s well worth taking the time to get it right.

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