

Writing a Contemporary Mission Statement by Del Suggs

Every organization needs a Mission Statement. As a matter of fact, every department and every office should have a Mission Statement. While it sounds like a pretty simple matter to create a mission, it's more difficult and requires more thought than you might initially consider.

The modern mission statement is far different than its predecessor. How can that be? Isn't a mission statement just the purpose for an organization? Shouldn't it be simple to capture your purpose in a few words?

Here's the difference in the modern Mission Statement:
It explains *why*.

Old school mission statements defined **what** an organization did. Contemporary mission statements define **why** an organization does what it does.

See, it's really the **why** we do things that matters.

Let me give you an example. I worked with a history and natural science museum to create a new mission statement. Their old mission was typical. It explained what the museum did: maintained a collection of native plants, animals, and historic buildings and presented programs to the public.

I started out the rewrite by asking everyone why the museum was important. I talked with staff, volunteers, board members, visitors, any one who had an opinion. Why was all the stuff the museum did important?

I discovered that the museum had a higher mission than just collecting artifacts. All of the collections were simple tools serving a bigger goal.

In the end, this became the new Mission Statement:

"The Museum promotes knowledge and understanding of the area's cultural history and natural environment, inspiring people to enrich their lives and build a better community."

The real mission of the organization was to inspire people to enrich their lives, and to thereby create a better community. That was why volunteers gave their time. That was why staff members worked long hours without complaint. That was why donors provided funding. Collecting artifacts and presenting exhibits just assisted in reaching that end goal.

Think about applying that lesson to your organization and office. Take a look at your mission statement. Does it define **what** you do?

Redevelop it so that it explains **why** you do what you do. What is your ultimate purpose?

Using "The Five Whys"

"The Five Whys" is a method of distilling the true cause/effect of an issue. Simply put, it involves asking the question "why?," and then asking "why?" of the answer. The pretense is that if asked five times, that simple question will take you to the heart of the matter.

When I first heard of the Five Whys, I was told it was an ancient Chinese technique. Later I learned it was neither ancient nor Chinese-- it had been developed by Sakichi Toyoda at his automobile company to aid problem solving. Whatever the source, it's a useful tool.

A quick example: My car won't start.

Why? Because the battery is dead.

Why? Because the alternator isn't working.

Why? Because the belt broke.

Why? Because it was worn out.

Why? Because I didn't follow the auto maintenance schedule.

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So the root cause of my car failing to start is my own neglect of the required maintenance.

The concept is to peel back the layers of an issue, and get down to the true problem or concern. But it also works in helping to determine a purpose. I like to use it to analyze a situation, condition, proposal, or issue.

I find it especially useful in developing a purpose or mission statement. While assisting an College Student Government Association in Texas to create a mission statement, I began by asking them why the SGA existed.

"To be the voice of the students" they replied.

Why? "So the administration will know the students' opinion on important school issues."

Why? "So the school can better meet the students' needs."

Why? "So more students can get an education."

Why? "So they can become successful productive citizens."

So the SGA's real purpose is to help students become successful graduates. That's a totally different idea-- and more powerful purpose-- that

just being the "voice of the students."

While it may seem a little hokey, and the number five is pretty arbitrary (could be three, could be six), it does seem to work. Maybe looking at the path we've come will make the path ahead seem more clear.

The next time you're faced with a decision, issue, or question try the Five Whys. It just might help you get down to the Heart of the Matter.

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