

## **Be Careful What You Ask For: Getting the Mission Wrong**

Is your Mission statement leading you to greater accomplishments or down the road to perdition?

This is not a rhetorical question. Although most people are aware they need a mission, having one doesn't mean you will be successful. In fact, many mission statements have been wordsmithed by marketing and vetted by legal to a point where they say nothing.

The mission should be a clear statement of what the organization is all about. Then employees can make decisions and take actions by asking one simple strategic question:

Will this decision or action move me closer to or further from accomplishing my mission?

No firefighting. No knee-jerk reactions. No crisis management.

The first step is to have a mission statement that is short and to the point.

Some years ago the city of Portsmouth, Virginia was down on its luck...but not completely out of luck. The city brought in a new city manager, George Hanbury, who set a new -- simple -- mission for the city: "Clean City, Economic Development, and Customer Service." He spread that mission to every official and employee.

The city turned around under Hanbury's leadership. Eighteen years later they invited him back for a special 'George Hanbury Day.' At the reception a man came up to him. "I'm sure you don't remember me but I drove a garbage truck when you became city manager. I still remember that mission you gave us, 'Clean City, Economic Development, and Customer Service.' It changed everything."

That's the power of a good mission. It's transformational.

But there is a nasty little problem hiding under the surface. And when you get it wrong, you can destroy yourself.

A major utility company created this mission: "During the next decade, we want to become the best managed electric utility in the United States and an excellent company overall, and be recognized as such."

On the surface it looks fine. But the problem comes in the final words, "be recognized as such."

The CEO and his team decided the 'recognition' would be winning the prestigious Japanese quality award named for Dr. W. Edwards Deming, who had been pivotal in helping Japanese industry recover after World War II.

The prize required great rigor, dedication, and leadership to be achieved. It would certainly be an important recognition of excellence.

However, without even noticing it, the company's mission shifted to over-emphasize "recognized as such." The company did get some excellent improvement results but aiming for the prize built a huge quality bureaucracy. As a former employee quipped, "you couldn't plan lunch without doing a 7 step storyboard!"

The great day came and the company achieved its mission measurement -- the Deming Prize. It was a Pyrrhic victory.

They were attacked in the local paper and then the Public Service Commission got into the act. Who was going to pay for all of this? The rate-payers didn't want to foot the bill! Then came a freak storm and service was interrupted significantly. The howling media jumped all over the notion that the company was 'excellent' or 'well-managed.'

It wasn't long before the CEO was out of work and a memo was 'leaked' announcing the dismantling of the quality improvement program.

That decision to add "be recognized as such" led to choosing to win a prize and then to a distortion of the company's focus. No one meant it to happen. These were bright, experienced, well intentioned people. Chasing the prize (which Dr. Deming himself always criticized) did the damage long before the papers got into the act.

The point here is not to 'put down' the company but to be very careful in constructing your mission. If you use it right, you will accomplish it, unintended consequences and all.

So how do you avoid this sort of costly mission meltdown?

1. Make sure the mission is clear enough that people can make decisions or take actions based on moving closer to that statement of intent. For example, the Portsmouth garbage man might ask himself, "Am I maintaining a 'clean city' by putting the cans back neatly on the curb and picking up any stray garbage that didn't make it into the truck?"
2. If people can't remember the mission or express it in their own words, they can't implement it. Keep it simple and to the point. Mission statements

don't have to be poetic or novels. Both the Portsmouth and utility company missions are short and to the point and people kept them in mind easily.

3. Sit down with individual employees and make sure they understand how their jobs help fulfill the mission. These discussions can happen one-on-one or in the team. The key is to make sure that people can express in their own words how their job supports the mission.
4. Track your progress toward the mission. Are all parts of the mission being accomplished? Setting goals and objectives that are linked directly to fulfilling the mission and measuring progress are the keys to making the mission a reality.
5. The mission requires regular scrutiny. Examine it annually to make sure it is still leading you in the right direction. As you work on your annual plan or update to your long-range plan, make sure the mission is still the expression of who you are. But avoid the urge to just tinker with the words. Changing the mission means you have decided to change direction.
6. Examine your situation periodically and ask, "Have we slipped off the path without noticing it?" Look at all your actions and results critically. Stand back and take a hard, objective look. Have you created more bureaucracy or made decision-making too complex?
7. Make sure the mission has staying power and can guide you over many years. If you're constantly changing the mission you may only have a high level goal. Look at your long-term vision. Is it clear enough to set a number of missions to achieve? Or is it a little fuzzy so the missions are fuzzy and fragile?

One final thought on developing a powerful mission statement – check out the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution. It's a perfect mission and states what will be done, for whom, and why. Copy from the best and achieve more.

About the Author:

Rebecca Staton-Reinstein, Ph.D., President of Advantage Leadership, Inc., works with leaders who want to grow their companies strategically, transform results, and engage employees. She is the author of "Conventional Wisdom: How Today's Leaders Plan, Perform and Progress Like the Founding Fathers," and "Success Planning: A 'How-To' Guide for Strategic Planning." Learn more at [www.AdvantageLeadership.com](http://www.AdvantageLeadership.com).