



# Mission Statements: Do They Make a Difference?

*How to maximize the impact value of your mission statement.*

Mission statements come in all forms and sizes. Some are lengthy and thoughtful, others are short and sometimes catchy, and still others are visual and graphic. Whatever form your hospital or health system's mission statement takes, does it really make a difference to how people in the organization perceive and perform their roles and responsibilities daily?

Consider the following questions regarding your organization's mission statement:

- Does it capture “why we exist”?
- Does it inspire commitment and loyalty (and even passion) in board members, senior leadership, clinicians, associates, patients and other stakeholders?
- Is it clearly and commonly understood across all levels of the organization?

- Does it make a difference to the people responsible for carrying out the mission every day?

### **Length, Relevance and Visibility**

The standard length of a mission statement is that it is long enough to be descriptive and meaningful, and succinct enough to be memorable. Many organizations print their mission statements on the back of employee identification cards. It is not unheard of for regulators, primarily from The Joint Commission, conducting on-site surveys to approach staff and ask if they know what the organization's mission statement is, what it means to them, and how it guides their actions and decisions. A relevant mission statement will be memorable, understandable and pertinent to how associates make and carry out decisions on behalf of patients and others in their daily work.

Consider how visible the mission statement is in the physical spaces of

your organization. Visual accessibility is one way to reinforce relevance so associates intentionally adhere to the mission statement in practical ways.

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CEOs and board chairs can work together to identify individuals who have had exemplary experiences with patients, co-workers or others where applying the mission has significantly shaped the outcome of a decision or action in positive ways. Many boards allow time in meetings to invite employees to share “mission-in-action” experiences to reinforce and recognize that their decisions are appreciated.

### **The Bottom Line**

Mission statements should:

- Capture “why we exist.”
- Inspire commitment, loyalty and passion in all stakeholders.
- Be clearly and commonly understood across all levels of the organization.
- Make a difference to people responsible for carrying out the mission every day.

### **Mission and Fiduciary Duties of Directors**

The importance of the mission for tax-exempt organizations is rooted in the fiduciary duties of board members, i.e., the duties of care, loyalty and obedience. The Governance Institute recommends that boards conduct an

annual self-assessment that asks several questions regarding their mission and its application to governance functions related to board members fulfilling their fiduciary duties.

Under the duty of care, a key question to consider is how effective is the board in consistently evaluating proposed new initiatives regarding mission, financial feasibility, market potential, patient safety and impact on quality?

Regarding the duty of obedience, consider the following questions:

- Does the board review the hospital or health system's mission annually to ensure its ongoing appropriateness?
- How effective is the board at ensuring the organization is fulfilling its mission?
- Does the board consistently consider whether a major decision will affect the mission before approving it?

All board members should know that their most important responsibilities are to fulfill their fiduciary duties and ensure that the organization is achieving its mission, vision and strategic direction. To the extent that board members can consistently answer the questions above in the affirmative, the board will be in a better position to demonstrate that it is fulfilling its fiduciary duties.

### Annual Mission Review

Mission statements are generally written with a 15- to 20-year horizon, and should declare the organization's driving purpose with a view to the

future, rooted in present realities of who we are, what we do and why we do it.

The Governance Institute recommends that the mission be reviewed annually, but this does not mean that a total analysis or rewrite is required. An assessment of the mission should center on questions such as:

- Is the mission statement relevant to current conditions, market changes, patient needs, stakeholder expectations, technological advances and evidence of success?
- Is the mission statement understood, embraced and manifested in decisions, dilemmas and behaviors across the organization?
- Does it capture and illuminate the organization's fundamental purpose and why we exist?
- Is the mission discussed thoroughly at new employee orientations, town hall meetings and in other settings to reinforce it as a differentiator in how we perform and hold each other accountable?

If the mission needs a refresh, there are many methods to use. An accelerated approach involves getting input from all levels and stakeholder groups of the organization. A multidisciplinary task force charged with developing a draft mission statement will collect this information and report its findings to senior management and/or the board or one of its committees.

Input is solicited through brief surveys, multiple focus groups and

selected interviews. The method is flexible and should be tailored, for example, to the needs and culture of each hospital within a health system. Often, the process directly precedes or is part of a strategic planning process or board retreat.

The board's role is then to turn the mission into policies that guide decision making and performance in six oversight areas: quality, finance, strategic planning, management oversight, board development, and community benefit and advocacy. To fulfill its roles and responsibilities, the board should establish specific criteria for each policy oversight area to demonstrate how and when the mission is being fulfilled. These criteria should inform goals and metrics for the organization's strategic plan.

### Creating a Mission-Driven Culture

Organizations that are mission-driven and mission-accountable are far more likely to create a unified culture of consistent behaviors, decisions and engagement across all levels, from the boardroom to front-line associates. People who understand and buy into the "why" of your existence are more likely to derive satisfaction in knowing their role and performance have meaning and make a difference in the lives of people they individually and collectively serve. ▲



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