

Writing a Mission and Vision Statement

By Judy Rushfeldt

Last year, I attended a seminar where the attendees were asked to define their personal mission or purpose in one sentence. Out of about a group of about three hundred people, fewer than a dozen were able to articulate a mission statement.

It's not that living with purpose is a low priority for most of us. Research by Richard J. Leider and David Shapiro, authors of *Repacking Your Bags*, found that the number one deadly fear of most people is "having lived a meaningless life."

Why, then, does writing a mission statement seem like such a daunting task?

I believe the main reason lies in the lack of practical resources. Though you can avail yourself of prolific advice about writing mission statements from management experts and from books, the Internet, and so forth—most of this information is complex and confusing. Also, most of these resources target corporations and organizations, providing little practical advice for an individual who wants to craft a personal mission statement.

When you were a child you probably learned how to start a fire by focusing sunlight through a magnifying glass. Sunlight alone could not start the fire; it had to be focused through the magnifying glass. This reflects a basic principle of solar energy—though a large amount of sunlight falls on the earth, the light is diffused. For the sun to be utilized for heating, solar energy units must be designed to collect and concentrate the light.

The same principle applies to purpose. It must be focused to produce results. With no focus, there is no mechanism for establishing direction or goals. As Diana Scharf Hunt said, "Goals are dreams with deadlines."

Committing yourself to defining your purpose is the perhaps the most important task you could ever engage in. "Discovering your purpose will put your life into crystal-clear perspective," says Mark Victor Hansen in an Internet article "Conceptualize your Purpose." "You will see another world, one in which you are a necessary and intricate spoke in the wheel."

Your Personal Mission Statement

What is a mission statement? Since the focus of this article is on personal life purpose, as opposed to a corporate or organizational purpose, I'm going to simplify the process with the aim of making it easy for individuals who desire to articulate their purpose. Let's use the following definitions:

Mission Statement: Concise statement of your life purpose. Vision Statement: Concise statement of the unique and distinctive ways that you will accomplish your purpose.

The first place to start is your mission statement. I will use the terms "mission" and "purpose" interchangeably. Choose the term you like best.

Think of your mission statement as a general statement encompassing your reason for existence—in other words, a broad statement of what you hope to accomplish. It does not include the distinctive ways that you intend to accomplish your purpose; that will be articulated in your vision statement.

Your mission statement will help you stay on course. In *First Things First*, Stephen Covey emphasizes the motivation and energy that result from an effective mission statement. "What we're talking about here is not simply writing a statement of belief. We're talking about accessing and creating an open connection with the deep energy that comes from a well-defined, thoroughly integrated sense of purpose and meaning in life."

Before you develop your mission statement, it is important to understand what a mission statement is not. It is not a to-do list. Nor is it a statement of strategies or methods. It is not a job description. Jobs and roles change through life's different seasons; purpose embodies a broad vision that encompasses all your roles.

You may not see a clear picture right now, and that's fine. Relax. Don't sweat it. Enjoy the process.

In other words, your mission statement is not written in stone. You can and should revisit it periodically. Most likely you will revise and fine-tune it time and again. Don't be concerned about whether it is precisely accurate. Pray and ask God to lead you in this endeavor.

Take time out from your busy schedule to prayerfully reflect on your personal mission, as you understand it at this point on your journey. Look at the big picture, and ask yourself questions like, Who am I? Why am I here? What are my desires and dreams? What is my mission, or purpose?

Defining your purpose should be a stimulating and motivating exercise. It should stir enthusiasm and excitement.

Many people feel that purpose must relate to a vision of achieving something of great magnitude or something that affects a nation or even the entire world. But purpose does not necessarily involve grandiose ideas.

I like what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Everyone has the power for greatness—not for fame but greatness, because greatness is determined by service.”

Defining your passions within a larger context will help you articulate your purpose.

Successful people not only have a clear vision of what they want to do, but why. The why is as important as the what, for it is the why that fuels vision and keeps you motivated when you face setbacks.

Understanding why you want to do something will help you define your purpose. For example, perhaps you believe you are called to leadership in the business arena. Ask yourself, Why do I want to do this?

Think about how you can use your gifts to seek others. Always seek to understand the big picture – the purpose for your passions and talents.

Now get out some paper or your Palm Pilate or laptop or whatever communications gadget you like best, and begin drafting your mission statement. I’ll say it again—do not obsess about getting it perfect. I wrote and rewrote my mission statement many times. And who knows, I may refine it again in the future.

Keep revising it until you can define it in one clear, concise sentence.

Here is my mission statement: “To inspire and equip women to reach their divine potential.”

Notice that this statement does not include the specifics of how I will accomplish my mission. It says nothing about the unique and distinctive strategies I will employ for achieving my purpose.

Your Vision Statement

Now that you have defined your mission statement in one sentence, you are ready to take the next step and craft your vision statement. The vision

statement adds the all-important how. It defines the distinctive and specific ways that you will accomplish your mission.

As George Barna says in *The Power of Vision*, “While the mission statement is philosophic in nature, the vision statement is strategic in nature.” While mission relates to general approaches, “vision relates to specific actions.”

Your vision statement propels your mission to specific strategies. Specifying the primary activities you will pursue to accomplish your purpose, it reflects your unique passions, talents, and skills.

You should be able to define your vision statement in one concise paragraph. The first sentence of this paragraph is your mission statement. The next one or two sentences specify how you will accomplish your mission.

Your vision statement will evolve over time, reflecting your character development and the acquisition of more skills and experience.

At one time, my vision statement read as follows: “To inspire and equip women to reach their divine potential. This will be accomplished by writing articles and books and by speaking at conferences and seminars.”

As time went on, I revised my vision statement to the following: “To inspire and equip women to reach their divine potential. This will be accomplished by writing articles, columns, books, and e-books; by publishing an online women’s magazine; and by speaking at conferences and seminars.”

Notice that the first sentence (my mission statement) did not change. The next sentence, which encompasses how I will achieve my mission, continues evolving.

Thousands of other women may have the same mission statement as mine but have different vision statements reflecting their unique gifts and callings.

For example, one woman might reach the same mission as mine through counseling. Her vision statement might read something like this: “To inspire and equip women to reach their divine potential. This will be accomplished through personal counseling.”

Another woman might have a vision statement like this: “To inspire and equip women to reach their divine potential. This will be accomplished by coaching women in leadership and business management skills.”

Can you see how the vision statement encompasses uniqueness and specificity? It is the vision statement—not the mission statement—that reflects your unique gifts and strategies.

Your vision statement serves as a compass to keep things going in the right direction. It helps you measure your progress, set goals, establish priorities, and know when to use one of the most important words in your vocabulary: No.

One of my favorite movies is Apollo 13. I never fail to be inspired by the courage and resourcefulness of the astronauts amid unimaginable pressure and seemingly impossible odds. On top of a litany of other crippling technical problems, the astronauts were faced with the reality that their oxygen could run out, they could be poisoned by carbon dioxide accumulations, or they could freeze to death. Even if they managed to return to the earth's atmosphere, they had to enter at precisely the right angle.

If you've seen the movie, you'll recall there were many decisions and actions that contributed to their successful landing. One of those actions was ensuring they kept the earth in sight at all times, for they had lost their navigational equipment.

In the same way, your vision statement will keep you moving in the right direction. It will help you stay focused on the big picture, even when facing emotional upheaval, discouragement, obstacles, and all the other distractions that life throws at you.

Mission and vision statements provide focus to your purpose. As Henry David Thoreau said, "In the long run men only hit what they aim for."