

Practice Brief #1

Mission, mission on the wall...

What role do missions play in successful schools?

Despite the widespread assumption in both business and education that organizations need to have a clearly defined mission in order to be successful, a review of literature reveals a wide variety of opinions about what constitutes an effective mission and how to build one. Proponents of different approaches to mission-building can point to examples of companies or schools that have succeeded using “their approach,” but the conflicting claims that result leave leaders of schools and other organizations with no definitive guidance on how to address the issue themselves.

How can so many conflicting claims co-exist? Reading a sampling of the literature on missions and mission-building in schools and other organizations and looking at the examples of six schools that have demonstrated the ability to make some improvements over significant periods of time suggests that effective missions may differ on a number of dimensions (content, depth & breadth, and timing) but may all serve a key function within organizations.

Function: What is a mission for?

The function of a mission is to create a shared understanding and sense of purpose for the members of an organization. With a shared understanding and sense of purpose members of an organization can coordinate their activities more easily because they have a common basis for making decisions; they know what they are supposed to do and why. Furthermore, leaders can delegate and distribute responsibilities more effectively because members of the organization can take initiative and act in ways that are consistent with the aims and best interests of the organization.

Content: What should a shared understanding involve?

Part of the reason that successful schools and organizations reflect a wide range of approaches to missions and mission-building is that there are many different ways to create a shared understanding and sense of purpose. There is no one right answer. Some organizations can create a shared understanding by clearly articulating goals and standards and some can do it by engaging in a

Books and articles suggest an effective mission “should” provide :

- *a key purpose for the organization* OR
- *clear goals* OR
- *an inspiring vision* OR
- *a description of the values and culture of an organization* OR
- *some combination of any of those...*

When discussing how to develop a mission some urge leaders to:

- *articulate it and build “buy-in” for it* OR
- *build it collaboratively through a formal process with a representative group of stakeholders* OR
- *build it collaboratively and formally with all stakeholders* OR
- *build it informally through regular conversations* OR
- *derive it from the analysis of performance data and identification of strengths and weaknesses* OR
- *some or all of the above*

collaborative process to create a mission statement. In some organizations, however, the explicit statements of goals or mission may be far less important than fostering a common identity – as an organization that is particularly well-known for producing a particular product, achieving particular levels of performance, providing certain kinds of services, or operating in certain ways. For example, a school might be well-known for having a child-centered instructional philosophy or a “back-to-basics” approach, for concentrating on reading or the arts or for having teachers who work together in the classroom. In short, it’s not necessarily the content of the mission that matters; it’s how mission statements, mission-building strategies, goals, visions, plans and other ways of describing the work and purposes of an organization are used.

A mission is not an end in itself; a mission is a means to achieve a shared understanding and sense of purpose.

Development: How should a shared understanding be built?

Just as there is no single element common to the missions of all successful organizations, there is not one way to develop a shared understanding and sense of purpose and get everyone “on the same page.” Possibilities include:

- *Technical approaches* that specify and align goals, strategies and outcomes and closely monitor them.
- *Collaborative approaches* that undertake collective examinations of the organization’s history, operations, values, and/or performance.
- *Leadership-based approaches* that depend on popular, charismatic, and/or powerful leaders to articulate an organization’s vision, values mission, goals and/or purpose and to get other members to understand or at least “buy in” to their view.

It is worth noting that any of these approaches can be carried out in a “top-down” or “bottom-up” manner. The goals and monitoring strategies of technical approaches can be developed and carried out in close collaboration with the members of an organization (and other stakeholders) or imposed by leaders; goals developed collectively can also be implemented collaboratively or imposed; powerful leaders can develop shared understandings by “walking around” and engaging organization members in dialogue and discussion or by “fiat.” The “right” approach for an organization depends on the history and values of the organization, the working styles and expectations of members, and the demands and circumstances the organization faces.

Critical issues to consider in building a shared understanding:

- What’s the history of the organization? What are its “core values” and ways of working?

Avoid fatal errors:

Specifying the goals of an organization does not always help to build shared understanding and sense of purpose: even people who know what the goals of an organization are may not understand what they stand for or why they are important. .

Making representatives of a particular group a part of the mission-building process does not necessarily mean that all members of that group will “buy-in” to the end result.

Relying on strong leaders to develop and maintain shared understandings inevitably creates transition challenges and continuity problems.

Strategies that foster collective understanding in one “unit” of an organization (like a department or a school) may not work when trying to build shared understanding across units...

Embrace the contradictions of collective understanding:

Consider the value of direction and flexibility, control and autonomy, clarity and ambiguity...

- Who are its members? What are they accustomed to? What kinds of expertise do they have? What are their expectations?
- What kinds of leaders are available? What kinds of expertise do they have? What can they do best?
- What are the current demands? How quickly does a shared understanding need to be built?

Depth & Breadth: How specific does a shared understanding need to be?

While some authors champion the value of having clearly defined and specific goals, many others argue that a more general, and sometimes ambiguous, understanding may be sufficient. Each has its benefits, but there may be a tension between them that is related to the size of the organization and the number of “stakeholders” an organization seeks to engage. In small organizations where members have frequent contact and conversations with one another, general understandings may suffice, and it may be possible to tell how widely shared understandings are just by “walking around.” At the same time, specifying a mission, goals, or vision too narrowly may make it hard to find people who share exactly the “right” mindset. Large organizations may benefit from the fact that broad general, understandings enable many people to feel that the organization reflects their views and values; but if members do not have a clear and specific enough sense of the organization’s purposes, procedures, or goals, they may not have enough guidance to coordinate their activities and to work effectively together.

What matters most: A shared understanding and sense of purpose has to be widely-held enough and specific enough to guide decision-making among the members of an organization.

How many people in an organization have to be on the “same page” may depend not only on the size of the organization but also how closely connected their responsibilities are. “Tight” organizations where each member depends on others to get their job done may require more specificity and more widely held understanding; “Loose” organizations that can operate effectively even without much coordination may be able to get by with a more general understanding held by fewer people.

Timing: When should an organization focus on building shared understandings?

Paying too much attention to the mission of an organization may be worse than paying no attention at all. Repeated efforts to articulate or revise a mission may demonstrate to organization members that they lack a shared understanding and suggest that attempts to produce one are futile. As a result, if members of an organization are in conflict or lack any common beliefs or values, it might make more sense to focus on other aspects of the organization

When mission-building comes later...

City, a K-8 school in the San Francisco Bay Area with an “academic focus”, had attempted and failed to come to consensus around a new mission several times: a veteran faculty simply did not believe that they needed to adjust their teaching and their beliefs about teaching and learning in order to meet the needs of their changing population of students. Therefore, the principal turned her attention to hiring new teachers who had experience working with diverse students and supported a wide range of professional development initiatives to help staff learn new skills – including instructional strategies for students whose primary language was not English. Once the principal had successfully made some changes in the composition and skills of the staff, she was able to successfully launch an effort to revisit and revise the school’s mission and provide a public demonstration of the school’s new approach.

first either by hiring new personnel that share some values and assumptions or offering professional development opportunities that may help members gain and share new skills and knowledge.

Organizations that seem to be functioning well may not need to devote significant time and attention to mission-building activities but might want to stay attuned to what organization members know and believe about an organization's goals, purposes, and values and, periodically, revisit them. Simply the passage of time, which brings new staff members, new technologies, and new demands on the organization, can lead to the erosion of shared understanding or sense of purpose.

Questions to keep in mind:

How are you monitoring the individual and collective understanding of the organization's purposes, goals, rationale, and values?

When does a mission need to be examined or re-established?

Who is the mission for? How widely does it need to be shared?

How will the mission and the mission-building process be used to advance shared understanding?

Who should take on the responsibility for monitoring and maintaining shared understanding? If leaders do, what will happen when they leave?

How do you know if the members of an organization have a shared understanding of their work and purpose?

- Can the members of an organization (or a department or "subunit") agree (in general) on what kind of person "fits" (and who doesn't)?
- Do many members identify some of the same key values, goals, or practices?
- Do members know what kinds of behaviors or practices are inappropriate in this organization (but might be acceptable in others)?
- Can members explain why they do what they do in the organization and how it relates to the work of others?

Selected references and resources

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