

Mission, vision, and goals—how they differ and why all three are important



“Maybe it’s time to update our mission statement.”

Every organization needs a mission, vision, and goals. There’s often confusion about these three terms—how they differ and what they mean. Here is a brief description of each.

- **Mission** defines why the organization exists. It seldom changes and is usually never completed. It answers the question, “Why do we exist?”
- **Vision** gives the organization direction and defines its uniqueness (how it differs from other organizations with the same mission). It answers the question, “How will we fulfill our mission?” Vision is malleable and doable.
- **Goals** describe action, are measurable, and have a short timeframe (one to five years)

For instance:

The *mission* of every hospital is the same—provide healthcare for patients.

But the *vision* of each hospital may be unique.

- Serve as a general, regional hospital.
- Specialize in cancer research.
- Focus on the needs of children.

Goals for a hospital might include:

- Become a certified level 3 trauma center in four years.
- Outsource our ER department in the next 12 months.
- Remodel the common areas next year.

The *mission* of every church is usually a blend of the great commission and the great commandment—and this mission hasn't changed in 2,000 years.

- Love God; love others.
- Exalt God, edify the church, evangelize the lost.
- Share the gospel of Christ in our city and around the world.
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But the *vision* for each church may be unique.

- Appeal to a young audience.
- Establish a strong local church and then create satellite churches.
- Emphasize local and international missions.
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Goals for a church might include:

- Debt free in three years.
- Start a Sr. Adult ministry this year.
- Sponsor a new church every three years.
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Mission gives your organization general direction by defining what business you're in. Vision provides specific direction and even distinguishes your organization from other, similar organizations. Mission is abstract; vision is concrete. Mission is usually never accomplished; vision is. Goals are "near-sighted"—they describe action that will occur in 3-5 years; they are clear and easy to understand—not ambiguous or imprecise; they are measurable—success or failure will be obvious.

Here is a fictitious example of how these three planning elements might be expressed in an organization.

Organization—Hope for Americans

- Mission—Assist individuals and families in America whose basic needs are not being met.
- Vision—Bring relief to homeless families. (This would be one of several vision statements.)
- Goal — In the next four years, build 100 affordable, green, storm-resistant homes for families living in the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans. (This would be one of several goals.)

Notice how the progression from mission to goals becomes increasingly more concrete, doable, and engaging.

Having a clear mission is necessary but not sufficient. You must also have viable vision. A clear vision statement is necessary but not sufficient. You must have doable goals.

Sometimes, organizations get bogged down in the vision-crafting stage. When this happens, skip vision-crafting and move *directly to goal setting*. Goals will get the organization active and engaged. Goal-setting helps identify current opportunities and immediate needs. Ask "what can we do *right now* to accomplish our mission?" and the goals you craft will immediately activate resources and give momentum to the organization. Eventually, these goals will help clarify vision.

Often, when constituents cry out in frustration, “What is the vision of this organization?” they are actually longing for goals; they are wanting to know what the organization is going to *do*.

Here’s a summary of how these elements relate to each other and fit into the life of an organization. To succeed, every organization needs to have a clear answer to these questions.

- *Why* do we exist? – Mission
- *How* are we going to fulfill our mission? — Vision
- *Who* are we? – Culture
- *What* are we going to do to accomplish our vision? – Goals
- *How* are we going to accomplish each goal? – Plans
- Relative to each goal: *When* are we going to do it (dates needed here), *who* is going to do it (names needed here), and *how will we know* when we are successful (metrics that reveal failure or success). – Every goal should include these elements.