

Knowledge Worker

That Other Mission Statement

(October 2015)

Because knowledge workers exercise a great deal of discretion in their work it has become exceedingly important to management for knowledge workers to be energized and committed to the organization and to the work they do for it. In a word, they should be “engaged.” One of the factors thought to affect engagement is the organization’s mission statement. The more compelling the mission statement can be made the better for all concerned.

In my experience there are two mission statements of interest; one is the formal, public mission statement and the other is an informal, often unstated mission statement. That distinction is the focus of this month’s column. That distinction is loaded with implications.

Let’s begin with the obvious: mission statements are pretty much a fact of life in most organizations. They have become *de rigueur*. Management feels obligated to have one. Some are good, some are not so good. As might be expected, there are different opinions as to what a mission statement ought to state and how it should be stated. This is further complicated by the fact that mission statements are usually available to the public. This requires that careful attention be paid to its appropriateness and its suitability for public consumption. In turn, this calls for a lot of wordsmithing. All of this can detract from the basic purpose of a mission statement; namely, to state simply, clearly and unequivocally why the organization or unit exists, what it is there to do, or, as the French say, its *raison d’etre*.

Because formal mission statements are so tinted and tainted with so many considerations, it is rare for them to energize and motivate employees. Consequently, I find it useful to pay attention to a second, informal and often unstated mission statement. This second one reflects the larger purpose people believe they are there to serve. In organizations marked by people who are dedicated and committed to their work and their organization, this informal, unstated mission statement is sure to exist, even if it takes some digging to uncover it.

To illustrate: When I first acquired Educational Testing Service (ETS) as a client back in the early 1980s, it had a very nice, very proper and very formal mission statement having to do with testing and higher education and psychometric research and the like. Like most formal mission statements, it was quite public and doubtless reflected a great deal of time and energy expended in getting it right. However, I don’t believe most employees paid a lot of attention to it. If you did what I was doing, which was “going out on the floor” so to speak, and talking with the people who did the work of ETS’ various programs, you got a very different picture.

At the time, I was working in and on ETS’ Financial Aid Form (FAF) processing operation. In a roughly three-month period at the beginning of the calendar year, ETS processed millions of student/parent applications for financial aid. If you were fixated on a formal mission statement you would have been focused on matters related to processing those FAFs in an accurate, productive and efficient manner. But if you talked with the people who did that work, that’s not how they accounted for their presence, especially for their commitment. In fact, they were nearly unanimous in their view of why they were

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there: “We’re here to help the kids.” “What kids?” you might ask. The ones trying to get into colleges and universities, whether via an admissions test, a placement test or seeking grants or other forms of financial aid. There it was – *their* mission, what *they* were there to do – in three little words “Help the kids.” That was the informal, unstated mission and it was the driving force for many people in the organization.

Another illustration: Several years later, when I was Senior VP for Systems and Operations at a financial services firm, the Chairman and CEO of the parent company launched a campaign whereby employees could submit suggestions for a motto pertaining to organizational performance. Mindful of what I had observed at ETS I shared it with my team and asked them about their views. “What kind of a motto or mission would turn you on, get you excited about working here and the work you do?” There was considerable discussion and ready agreement: “Kick a-- in the marketplace!” was far and away their favorite. They could get excited about that one. It wouldn’t do for public consumption, of course, and although I submitted it we all knew it wouldn’t win. Nevertheless, it reinforces my point.

I would be remiss if I did not note that in the subsidiary where I worked there was an informal mission statement that captured quite nicely what most people saw as the heart of their work; namely, “Get the money, keep the money.” As some might say, that is the “name of the game” in financial services firms where revenues are derived from charges levied against the funds under management.

It helps to keep in mind that formal mission statements are rational explanations that serve primarily to account for or justify the existence of a unit or organization – to the public. They are unlikely to arouse any emotional responses on the part of employees. Yet, an emotional response – namely, fervent commitment and dedication – is precisely what many claim that a mission statement should trigger.

So, when you find yourself futzing about with formal mission statements, remember that, at its heart, a formal mission statement articulates, often in a rather antiseptic way, the reason the organization or unit exists. It is one part rationale and one part justification. Neither is likely to get employees very excited. Chances are a formal mission statement will sound quite different from the informal mission statement that accounts for the commitment of people to their work and the organization in which they do it.

In the end you can think of it this way:

- The formal mission statement is for external consumption; it explains to people *outside* the organization or unit what it is there to do.
- The informal mission statement expresses what the people *inside* the organization see as the driving force behind their work; it accounts for their commitment to doing it and doing it well.

If all you’ve got is a carefully crafted formal mission statement, beware! It’s not likely to do much in the way of getting your people excited about the work they do or the organization for which they do it. For

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that, you need something else, you need that other mission statement. To come up with it you have to find out why people think they're there and the larger purpose they see. If they don't see one you've got bigger problems than coming up with a formal mission statement. And if what management wants in the way of a formal mission statement is at odds with any informal mission you uncover, there's a lot of work to do reconciling the two.

So what is the "Take Away" from this month's column? Well, whether you're a CEO or a middle manager or a consultant or an HR staffer or an external performance improvement specialist, you'd better be aware of the difference between these two kinds of mission statements and, in any given organization, you'd better know what both of them are and it's especially important to know if you're missing the more important of the two.

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Worker's Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available [here](#).