

September 24, 2014

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A Primer on Discerning and Articulating Vision and Mission

Where there is no vision, the people perish....

—Proverbs 29:18

The “Why” and “How” of Crafting Mission Statements

This short essay sets forth a prescriptive, nuts and bolts discussion of the “why” and “how” of mission statements: **why** clear statements of mission are an indispensable element of professionalism and organizational vitality, and then **how** to craft mission statements that transform.

A. The “Why” of Crafting a Mission Statement

Let me begin with two professors at the Stanford University Graduate School of Business, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras. In March of 1994, Collins and Porras completed a six-year study of outstanding corporations. They were not only interested in accounting for an organization’s exemplary success. More importantly, they wanted to learn what characteristics correlated with enduring excellence in changing circumstances. Their book,

Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies, was a phenomenally successful best seller on which the two scholars would build a cottage industry promoting the importance of vision and mission. In a rapidly changing world, they found that discerning and articulating core values and mission were critical to enduring excellence.

Contrary to popular wisdom, the proper first response to a changing world is not to ask, “How should we change?” but rather to ask, “What do we stand for and why do we exist?” This should never change. And *then* feel free to change everything else. Put another way, visionary companies distinguish their timeless core values and enduring purpose (which should never change) from their operating practices and business strategies (which should be changing constantly in response to a changing world).ⁱ

Put into youth ministry or program terms, the first question is never “What should we do this week, this month, this year?” or even, “What kind of ministry do we want to be?” or even, “How should we change our ministry?” The first question should always begin with the vocational “whys.” Why did I go into youth ministry? Why do we come into work each morning? Why do we want kids to come into our ministry? Why do we even have a youth ministry?” The “why” questions will surface your true passions, your true core values and purpose, which will in turn provide a pole star to govern all of your decisions and actions.

Collins and Porras went on to write a seminal 1996 Harvard Business School article, “Building Your Company’s Vision,” a fine primer on the nature and importance of mission statements.ⁱⁱ That same year, Collins published “Aligning Action and Values,”ⁱⁱⁱ in which he sought to clarify the confusion swirling around the concept of vision:

Yet vision is one of the least understood – and most overused terms in the language. Vision is simply a combination of three basic elements: 1) an organization’s fundamental reason for existence beyond just making money (often called its mission or purpose), 2) its timeless unchanging core values, and 3) huge and audacious – but ultimately achievable – aspirations for its own future (I like to call these BHAGs, or Big Hairy Audacious Goals.) Of these, the most important to great, enduring organizations are its core values.^{iv}

Collins would re-present the same basic concept in his book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. There, Collins described the idea as “The Hedgehog Concept” after a fragment from the Greek poet Archilocus, “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”^v

As I read Collins’ “Hedgehog Concept,” I could not help but think that, actually, our advantage as ministers to youth is that we already follow the most famous Hedgehog of all time. Jesus’ fundamental reason for existence was crystal clear: “...so that everyone who believes in him may not perish

but may have eternal life” (John 3:16); he “...came that [we] may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). His core value is still known and recited by 2.5 billion followers 2,000 years after he pronounced it:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

Finally, Jesus called us to the most audacious goal of all time, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Reflecting deeply on these touchstones, considering how the resources of our Scripture and tradition reveal God’s means for guiding your youth toward faithful, flourishing lives, and prayerfully asking where the Holy Spirit is calling your ministry will provide a deep and sturdy foundation for discerning your mission statement. And a mission statement that reflects your fundamental purpose, core values, and audacious aspirations will:

- Provide a solid foundation for setting goals and objectives.

- Provide a priorities template for making decisions about where to invest time, energy, and resources.
- Establish a filter for deciding which programs to launch and which programs not to launch.
- Attract and motivate colleagues who share the articulated passion. (And dissuade and deflect would-be colleagues who do not.)
- Articulate the value and values cultivated by the ministry so parents and youth can understand its importance to faith and flourishing.
- Lift an inspiring, challenging vision for your youth that calls them to a heroic adventure, to giving themselves over to something larger than themselves.
- Help lay leaders understand the intrinsic value of the youth ministry and the importance of allocating funds, staff and space.
- Inspire your team with the courage to stay the course when headwinds are strong.

- Provide a consistent foundation for creating enduring traditions, rituals and culture.
- Lay a foundation that will sustain the ministry's vitality through the inevitable personnel transitions and guide successor leaders as to the core values and purposes of the community.

B. The “How” of Crafting a Mission Statement

Drill down on even the most secular accounts of “how” to craft a mission statement and you will soon see the telltale signs of a spiritual question. The “how” of crafting a mission statement is essentially an exercise in spiritual discernment. Listen to Collins and Porras in “Building Your Company’s Vision”:

You do not create or set core ideology. You *discover* core ideology. You do not deduce it by looking at the external environment. You understand it by looking inside. Ideology has to be authentic. You cannot fake it. Discovering core ideology is not an intellectual exercise. Do not ask, What core values should we hold? Ask instead, What core values do we truly and passionately hold? You should not confuse values that you think the organization ought to have – but does not – with authentic core values. To do so would create cynicism throughout the organization.^{vi}

In that same Harvard Business Review article, Collins and Porras counsel gathering a group of deeply invested stakeholders who deeply understand the culture and ethos of your ministry and then asking the stakeholders to test potential core values by asking questions such as:

What core values do you personally bring to work? (These should be so fundamental that you would hold them regardless of whether or not they were rewarded.) What would you tell your children are the core values that you hold at work and that you hope *they* will hold when they become working adults? If you awoke tomorrow morning with enough money to retire for the rest of your life, would you continue to live those core values? Can you imagine them being as valid for you 100 years from now as they are today? Would you want to hold those core values, even if at some point one or more of them became a competitive *disadvantage*?^{vii}

If the core of this process is a form of collective spiritual discernment, as I contend it is, then it goes without saying that you cannot impose a mission statement on a new ministry just because it worked in your last ministry. You will have to live, love, listen and learn with and from your new community before you will have the requisite relationships and insight to discern and pursue the vision God is holding out for your new community.

Even then, you cannot just go into your office at the end of a long day and scratch out a mission statement by yourself so you can get it to the

senior pastor or deacons or Christian Education Committee just before their next meeting. You cannot even pick an exemplary mission statement out of a book. Again, *you do not create your mission statement, you discern it.*

There are several fine resources for guiding your visioning process when you are ready to get started. If you are drawn to Collins' and Porras' prescriptions for business organizations, then I commend to you Jim Collins' *Vision Framework* document.^{viii}

ⁱ Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), xiv.

ⁱⁱ Available at: <http://hbr.org/1996/09/building-your-companys-vision/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Jim Collins, "Aligning Action and Values," *Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management Leader to Leader Journal* (Summer, 1996).

^{iv} Jim Collins, "Aligning Action and Values," *The Forum*, posted June 2000, http://www.jimcollins.com/article_topics/articles/aligning-action.html

^v Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 90.

^{vi} James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, "Building Your Company's Vision," *Harvard Business Review*, (September 1996), <http://hbr.org/1996/09/building-your-companys-vision/> (accessed January 4, 2013).

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} <http://www.jimcollins.com/tools/vision-framework.pdf>.