Why I HATE Mission Statements

By: Michele Yurecko

I have a confession to make. I hate Mission Statements. There. I said it, and it's too late to take it back. Given that I am an assessment professional, my aversion to Mission Statements may surprise you, particularly those members of the administration and evaluation crowd. In the workplace, most of us to define our institutional identity and determine success, but are they really up to the job?

A Mission Statement is a guiding statement of purpose. It is the big idea that characterizes the essential nature, values and work of an organization. Although the Mission Statement serves the come with limitations - limitations that, unfortunately, are rarely discussed. The Mission Statement is viewed as the heart and soul of an organization. We praise “mission driver companies,” and “mission focused leadership.” However, the Mission Statement is merely one component in the complex process

A mission statement is defined as “a long awkward sentence that demonstrates management’s inability to think clearly.” All good companies have one.

- Scott Adams, creator of Dilbert

accept assessment models that place the Mission Statement at the core of institutional or program evaluation. Mission Statements are supposed important function of declaring an organization’s purpose and core values, it is important to recognize that Mission Statements of assessment, and too much focus on that one component can narrow our vision and draw our attention from other salient factors that have
enormous impact on organizational success.

The first problem I have with Missions Statements is that they are too darn aspirational. They describe what an organization intends to be, without necessarily taking into account what the organization actually is. If you want to know what an organization wants to be when it grows up, read the Mission Statement. If you want to know what an organization actually is, you're going to have to dig a bit deeper than that. The "boots on the ground" realities which deeply impact the day-to-day conduct of an organization, can have tremendous influence on the identity of an organization and the success of its efforts. However, the lofty Mission Statement frequently glosses over, or even ignores, these powerful factors.

In their aspirational smugness, Mission Statements are also overwhelmingly affirmational. They are like tiny little cheerleaders, root-root-root your organization to success with positive statements. Mission statements describe what an organization intends to achieve, what legacy it will leave, how it is going to shine. Mission Statements rarely discuss challenges, limitations, or anything that might cast the organization in a bad light. In effect, Mission Statements eliminate an organization's challenges and limitations from the declaration of its identity. Yet, in reality, those limitations and challenges are key features that reveal hard won successes and heroic efforts.

With its positive and perky language, the Mission Statement can be reduced from a means of institutional renewal, to a tool for self-promotion. Rather than foster genuine reflection, evaluation, and change, the Mission Statement can become a means to promote and market an organization with hand-picked evidence and assessment results. While this practice may enhance public perception, it denies an opportunity for real renewal. As pointed out by Robert Stake and his colleagues, "It is difficult to fix weaknesses in an atmosphere of self-promotion."

Ethical and effective assessment practice must occupy the real estate between what an institution intends to be, and what it actually is; between what the Mission states, and the story told by the "boots on the ground." Assessment cannot be limited by the language of the Mission Statement, but must look beyond the aspiration and affirmation, to construct a fuller picture of organizational identity. Effective assessment must take into account an organization's mundane challenges and limitations, as well as its lofty Mission. In constructing this more comprehensive approach, the assessment professional can better serve the honorable goal of organizational improvement and renewal, and avoid the temptation of self-promotion.

Would we all be better off ditching these aspirational, affirmational, self-promoting Mission Statements? Should we just abandon the window dressing, and get back to work? Maybe. In spite of the fact that Mission Statements drive me crazy, I'm still not ready to vote them off the island entirely, but they must be placed in "timeout." When attempting to evaluate organizational effectiveness, it's always good to practice skepticism and deconstructionism, particularly with regard to the Mission Statement. I'll let you in on a little secret. When I started my most recent position as Assistant Dean of Academic Assessment, I didn't write a mission statement for my office. This wasn't an oversight or an act of rebellion, but more of an experiment. I shelved the Mission Statement, and instead composed a statement of Assessment Philosophy, one that I hope is powerful and flexible enough to support changing goals and an expanding role on campus. Do I feel a little rudderless without a Mission? No. I feel free and excited about where the "boots on the ground" will take me.

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