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Mission or Values: Which Comes First?

To chart a course, it helps to have a compass. For private and family foundations, that’s one of the things a mission can provide. But as time passes and the organization evolves, foundation leaders may find their mission statement no longer aligns with their intentions or community needs. While some leaders will choose to develop new mission statements, others rely on a list of core values to guide decision-making and strategic priorities.

A nonprofit mission statement is a short and precise declaration of the organization’s purpose in society. And its values are the principles that guide how the organization thinks and acts. While a mission statement explains the organization’s reason for existing, values describe its culture and beliefs.

Although some foundations are established to mobilize funds around a single, specific, and unchanging mission, many others must retroactively develop or reorganize their mission and values as the organization evolves. Private and family foundations—which often have asset pools before they develop mission statements—are particularly vulnerable to misalignment without a clear and sustainable direction for their philanthropic endeavors.

“Especially as leadership shifts from one generation to another, it’s important for foundations to have a steady vision of what they want to achieve and to define that vision through their mission and values,” says CAPTRUST Director of Endowments and Foundations [Heather Shanahan](#). “Otherwise, different leaders may have very different opinions on how to spend, which can create gridlock or dilute impact over time.” Without clarity of purpose, foundations may also experience a multitude of causes vying for their attention, leading to confusion and uncertainty.

A well-designed mission and values can do the opposite. Namely, they help foundation leaders and staff move together in a shared direction.

Mission Driven

“While mission and values are intertwined, they each serve a distinct purpose,” says CAPTRUST Financial Advisor [Luis Zervigon](#). Zervigon advises endowments and foundations, works on multiple community boards, and serves as a trustee of both the Keller Family Foundation and the RosaMary Foundation in New Orleans, Louisiana. He says one of the biggest benefits of having a mission statement is that “it helps the foundation think proactively.”

A mission-driven approach emphasizes long-term vision and desired impact. It defines the causes and issues the foundation aims to address by identifying its goals and target beneficiaries. “The mission lays the groundwork for subsequent decision-making,” says Shanahan.

Creating a mission statement allows founders to engage in strategic planning and align their short- and long-term philanthropic goals. It also helps outline the foundation’s focus, creating the potential for deeper impact.

Nonprofits that are drafting—or revising—mission statements can begin with two key steps. First, reflect on the foundation’s purpose. For foundation leaders, this means evaluating long-term aspirations, understanding the legacy of the group, and assessing the external needs and opportunities that align with their resources and expertise.

Next, board members may choose to perform a SWOT analysis with key stakeholders, assessing the organization’s internal *strengths* and *weaknesses*, plus external *opportunities* and *threats*. A SWOT-based stakeholder analysis can help identify areas of focus and potential alignment between the foundation’s resources and its community’s needs.

Throughout this process, it can be helpful to remember that developing a mission is iterative. Leaders should draft initial statements, seek feedback from stakeholders, then refine accordingly. “The ideal mission statement allows flexibility over time while creating healthy limits,” says Shanahan. “It demonstrates what the foundation does and does not do, and it gives leaders a reference point when evaluating opportunities.”

Zervigon says he’s seen many foundations move from generalist giving to special-interest-based missions. For instance, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—now known for its fight to end malaria—was founded in 2000 with four initial priorities: global health, education, libraries, and the Pacific Northwest. In 2006, it reorganized, creating three separate divisions. One addresses global development; another addresses global health; and the third addresses social inequities in the U.S. The U.S. program also identifies emerging societal needs that currently fall outside the program’s scope but could become areas of focus in the future.

Another example is the Surdna Foundation, founded as a family foundation in 1917 to address a broad range of philanthropic purposes. But by the 1990s, Surdna’s focus had narrowed considerably, addressing mainly environmental and community revitalization needs. In 2008, the foundation adopted an all-new mission statement focused solely on social justice. According to its website, this decision was intended to “create a sense of common purpose and help build consensus around difficult choices.”

Value Development

Zervigon says core values can provide a similar sense of purpose and consensus. And sometimes, they can offer additional specificity. “While the mission is a useful tool for creating guardrails, values can

provide a framework within the mission to help leaders put priorities in order," he says. Naming core values can help leaders discern which projects and efforts to support, in which order.

For instance, the mission of the RosaMary Foundation is to support grant seekers in Greater New Orleans who share the foundation's vision to build a successful and vibrant city. Under that mission, it gives highest priority to grants in five categories, ranging from education and human service organizations to governmental oversight activities. These classifications help foundation leaders prioritize grant applications.

A value-driven approach can also be helpful for foundations that have outdated mission statements or trust documents. "Often, these groups simply follow an organic process of letting the trustees decide what is the greatest need in their community," says Zervigon. And that's OK too. But for foundations that want a list of values, looking at past decisions can reveal patterns of giving. For instance, if the organization finds itself consistently giving to community development and to the arts, then those may be its values.

Nonprofits typically have three to seven core values. What's important is not the specific number but making sure that all leaders agree on what should be included. Also, value statements should not be aspirational. They should be grounded in the real experience of the foundation or the culture of its board. Once the foundation knows its own values, it's easier to identify like-minded grant seekers.

Natural Evolution

Once mission and values have been established, implementation and evolution become critical, ensuring that the foundation's efforts remain aligned with its purpose and adaptable to change. Foundation leaders must actively steer the organization toward the foundation's intended impact while embracing the evolving philanthropic landscape.

"Ideally, mission and values will work together, guiding the foundation's grantmaking strategies and decisions," says Shanahan. "Aligning funding opportunities with these two elements can help ensure the efficient allocation of resources and maximize the foundation's impact."

Zervigon agrees. "Mission and values provide a framework, but it is through strategic grantmaking that foundations truly manifest their impact," he says. "By allocating resources in alignment with their mission and values, foundations can more effectively address societal needs and drive positive change." Strategic grantmaking allows foundations to leverage their unique perspectives and expertise to target pressing issues. It empowers them to be change agents in their communities and beyond.

However, as time progresses, both the external landscape and a foundation's priorities are likely to evolve. This is one of the reasons why foundation leaders should periodically assess the effectiveness and relevance of their mission and values. "The evaluation process allows for adjustments and refinements to ensure continued alignment between the outside world and the foundation's goals," says Shanahan.

Each foundation's journey is an ongoing process of growth. "Regular evaluation helps us stay true to our core principles while embracing new possibilities," says Zervigon. "It enables foundations to be proactive and nimble in their approaches to philanthropy."

Especially for family foundations, the generational transfer of leadership can be a natural time for evaluation. Some families choose to involve younger family members very early in the process, educating them about the mission and values so they're ready to take the reins when the time comes.

Engaging next-generation leaders before they become board members can help ensure a smooth transition.

It also creates continuity of purpose and helps the organization stay relevant in a changing world. This can help strengthen the group's long-term impact. Whether those next-generation leaders are family members or professional staff, each successive generation will contribute to the foundation's growth and continued relevance, but only if they understand and feel connected to its mission and values.

For leaders of private and family foundations grappling with the question of which comes first—mission or values—the answer lies in recognizing their interdependence. By engaging stakeholders, reflecting on purpose, conducting analyses, and embracing an iterative process, leaders can create mission and value statements that are fit to guide a multigenerational philanthropic journey. Implementing and regularly evaluating these statements will ensure ongoing alignment and adaptability, helping the foundation to achieve its intended impact and fulfill its purpose.

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