

■ Meaningful Missions and Visions

by Tom Terez

Q. What exactly is the difference between a mission statement and a vision statement, and how can ours be world class?

A. There is a critically important difference between these two key ingredients of an effective organization. A recent study, conducted by the International Association of People Who Don't Mind and In Fact Happen to Advocate Long-Windedness in All Their Communications, found that the typical *mission* statement includes two semicolons, two dashes, and at least two business buzzwords—while the *vision* statement contains only one dash but makes up for it with at least one run-on sentence.

To be at all credible, a company's mission and vision statements combined must include at least five of the following terms and phrases:

- high performance
- world class
- diversity
- empowerment
- employees are our most important asset
- exceeds
- delight(s)
- right the first time

- everyone's job
- puts people first
- puts the customer first
- puts employee bonuses first

Of course, examples are the best way to convey these important guidelines. Here is what the little-known Anon Company* came up with af-

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ter spending eight hours in a hotel meeting room, during which the organization's 35 employees consumed 102 donuts, 90 cups of coffee, 68 soft drinks (including 24 cans of Jolt Cola), 35 boxed lunches, and countless peppermint candies.

Our mission is to develop a high-performance mission statement—one that puts the customer first, puts employees first, and does it right the first time—in a way that delights anyone who had concerns that this mission statement would actually mean something; in order to show that employees can exceed expectations for

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■ Meaningful Missions and Visions *continued*

how much unhealthy food they can consume during a single work day; and so we can get out of this damn hotel room with its thermostat that we can't control and end this madness an hour early.

This mission statement clearly conveys that the employees of Anon are bold risk-takers, as demonstrated by their brazen abuse of their high-performance gastrointestinal systems. The employees also show a command of key business terms, particularly those words and phrases that have had the meaning squeezed out of them years ago. And let's not ignore the powerful empowerment reference at the end of the statement.

The team from Anon also developed a vision statement:

Our vision is to be a world-class organization—one that becomes a benchmark for other organizations, so they can copy what we do and get it right in about five years, by which time we will be light years ahead of them; one that impresses its customers the first time and every time with its plastic-laminated mission and vision statements; and one that fully empowers its employees so they aren't forced to spend an entire day in a freezing-cold hotel meeting room churning out run-on sentences while the real work backs up.

These statements are guaranteed to strike a deep chord in employees, customers, and printers of plastic-laminated cards. Imagine the Anon employee who needs a quick dose of direction

or inspiration. All they'll need to do is reach into their wallet or purse and—oh gee, I must have thrown it out.

Seriously, when done right, mission and vision statements can give an organization an incredibly powerful sense of purpose and direction. Here are several things to keep in mind:

- Five different people are likely to have five different definitions of “mission statement” and “vision statement.” Begin any dialogue by reaching consensus on one definition for each. Otherwise, well-intended people will go off in wildly different directions.

- Steer clear of phrasing debates, in which the mission- and vision-development process becomes an exercise in fine writing. That doesn't mean you should give in to bad grammar and lousy punctuation. Rather, have two or three group members massage the wording after the main discussions. They can bring one or two clean versions to the next all-group session.

- Remember that the process of developing mission and vision statements is as important as—some would even say more important than—the output. When people take time to craft the concepts, they learn more about each other, their work, their customers, and their overall system—not to mention their past, present, and future as an organization.

- When developing mission and vision statements, involve people from all areas and levels of the organization. They're the ones who will

■ Meaningful Missions and Visions *continued*

be making it happen—so doesn't it make sense to have their hands on the clay? Yes, it's tough to orchestrate widespread co-creation. Consider tapping the services of an outside facilitator who can bring neutrality and the needed know-how to pull it off.

PLEASE NOTE:

* Anon Company is not a real company. The name has been entirely made up for the purpose of this article. Anon = Anonymous, get it? But it's a big country, and for all I know, there may be a real Anon Company, the CEO of which is reading this right now. Well, any name similarity would be purely coincidental, accidental,

transcendental, and so forth. If there is a real Anon Company out there, I'm certain it's an excellent organization with world-class mission and vision statements, and I urge you to buy its products and/or services in great quantities.

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