Meaningful missions, valid visions and virtuous values: an exploration.

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Abstract

The paper explores the place of vision, mission and values in facilitating the planning and development of services at a strategic level. Definitions of institutional mission, vision and values are offered. The reflective thinking associated with defining mission, vision and values enables an assessment of the current position of an institution and its service to be made and a clear and coherent direction for its future to be determined. The process involves a thorough review of institutional aims and objectives as well as its underlying ethos.

At times, management features such as mission statement s have had a 'bad press' as too many were developed with insufficient thought for their function and content. Some underlying principles are a central to their development and fulfillment and these are discussed. Above all they must have – Meaning, Credibility, Acceptability, and 'Testability'. Success in achieving and, importantly, maintaining mission, vision and values needs to be measurable, or assessable through performance evidence. In addition, a range of stakeholders needs to have a voice in their determination. Some examples of published statements are examined and evaluated.

The mechanics of development are discussed with particular reference to recent experience at LISU where, having redefined the institution's role and sphere of activity, the statements of mission, vision and values were completely revised through an iterative and consultative process lasting some weeks.

The paper concludes by emphasising the need for a periodic review of mission, vision and values to ensure their continued relevance.

Introduction

This paper explores the place of organisational vision, mission and values in facilitating the planning and development of services at a strategic level. Definitions of institutional mission, vision and values are offered and some underlying principles which are considered central to their development and fulfillment are discussed. There follows a section in which selected examples of published statements are briefly examined. Then the practicalities and mechanics of development are discussed with particular reference to recent experience at LISU where, having redefined the institution's role and sphere of activity, the statements of mission, aims and values were completely revised. The paper end with some reflections on the sustainability of these kinds of statements.

Context

Before embarking fully on the exploration of vision mission and values in this paper it is perhaps salutary to reflect on the contextual theme chosen for this Session by the Management and Marketing Section. It is inspiringly entitled - "Strategic Planning Tools for the Tomorrow People – Library and Information Professionals of the 21st Century." and, as such, is a laudable banner behind which to assemble. However, it may be argued that many of the tools for tomorrow people including mission vision and values are not necessarily new, but have to be regarded and used in a new ways if information agencies and their managers are to achieve what is needed. The imperative to determine, and review regularly, strategic purpose and direction has always been evident. What perhaps is novel for the 21st Century is that the penalties for failing to do so are more severe in terms of diminished service quality and lost opportunities. As never before therefore, managers must equip themselves, and those around them, with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to apply modern management techniques. The jury may still be out on whether enough of them can rise to the challenge.

At this point it is also pertinent to recognise that mission, vision and value statements have not always been regarded enthusiastically or positively by those seeking to manage well. In short, they have sometimes had a 'bad press'. This may be attributable to several factors. Firstly, they may have been poorly drafted with too much emphasis on rhetoric than substance. (For invented examples of almost meaningless but 'wordy' mission statements one need look no further than the excellent pages within the Dilbert website [1] .) Secondly, there may be a lack of resonance between the sentiment of the statements and the reality of the organisation's mode of operation and culture. Thirdly, they may be so obscure that stakeholders fail to identify with the statements. It would be naïve to ignore these factors and to some extent this paper is a manifesto, or polemic for the development of better statements.

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[1] Dilbert Mission Statement Generator:
http://www.unitedmedia.com/comics/dilbert/games/career/bin/ms.cgi
http://www.unitedmedia.com/comics/dilbert/games/career/bin/ms.cgi

Some definitions

It is important to define terms in this exploration. Below are offered some simple definitions.

MISSION
A statement of purpose and functions – why the service exists, what it does, who it serves

VISION
A statement of the desired future state – where the service wants to be

VALUES
A statement of shared organisational principles and beliefs

STAKEHOLDER
This is another important term that will recur in the discussion. For the purpose of this paper, it is meant to describe and encompass all who have an interest in the service including: funders, policymakers, managers, staff at every grade/level, vendors and the user community, including potential users.

Strategic Planning Issues

The parts played by mission, vision and values in supporting strategic planning are many and varied. Their initial development acts as a catalyst to determining the character of the organisation. The reflective thinking associated with defining mission, vision and values enables an assessment of the current position of an institution and its service to be made and a clear and coherent direction for its future to be determined. The process involves a thorough review of institutional aims and objectives as well as its underlying ethos.

Thus, the activity stimulates important questions regarding the organization, such as:-

What kind of organisation is this?
What kind of organization should it be – now and later?
What kind of organization do we want it to be – now and later?

There are similarly pertinent questions to be asked regarding the service and the overall direction in which a strategy is being taken.

Turock and Pedolsky rehearse similar questions in relation to mission statements in their manual on financial planning. The include - Who are we? Why are we here? and What is our business? To these three, in view of the earlier discussion in this paper, is worth adding – Where are we going? (Turock 1992)

The values of an organisation can draw on a deeper and broader professional ethos and it is pertinent here to note the *Statement of Core Values of Librarianship* and associated policy statements from the American Library Association[2], as well as the

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[2] ALA Core Values of Librarianship webpage

Ethical Principles and Code of Professional Practice for Library and Information Professionals from CILIP[3] in the UK.

Once determined, mission, vision and values serve as a focus around which future strategy and operational priorities can be evolved in a coherent and rational manner. Plans, initiatives, decisions and action flow freely and naturally from an overall series of guiding principles that leave stakeholders to concentrate, day to day, more fully on excellence of execution rather than direction of travel. For an extensive, if not exhaustive discussion of the relationship between strategy and mission, vision and values, one can do no better than consult the chapter on Strategic Focus in Corrall's excellent book on strategic management. (Corrall 2000)

The development of Mission, Vision and Values Statements

If mission, vision and values statements are to be credible as foundations for service delivery, effective in supporting its strategic direction and sufficiently robust to accommodate the ebbs and flows of organisational fortunes, they need to be developed with a great deal of thought and care. This is particularly important if the poor regard in which these statements were sometimes held in the past is to be overcome. They need to be viewed positively as a clear and unambiguous expression of the purpose and aspirations of the service.

Some underlying principles are a central to their successful development and fulfillment. These may be summarised in a series of questions related to the following:
- Meaning
- Credibility
- Acceptability
- Testability

The first question to ask is – do the statements mean anything? It is all too easy to adopt language that is obscure, vague and jargon ridden in drafting. This is particularly so if the intention of drafting, however inadvertently, is to impress, rather than create a sound blueprint for service delivery. All stakeholders should be able to understand what is meant in these statements. In the UK, the Plain English Campaign[4] has done much to make the formal pronouncements of organisations more accessible. Allied to clarity of meaning is brevity. These statements should not be too long; indeed some authorities recommend that they should be brief enough to commit to memory. Other than in very special circumstances, there is little virtue in transforming such statements into miniature essays.

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http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/corevaluesstatement/corevalues.htm

[3] CILIP Ethical Principles and Code of Professional Practice for Library and Information Professionals webpage http://www.cilip.org.uk/professionalguidance/ethics/default.htm

[4] Plain English Campaign Website:-
http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/

The second question to ask is – Do you, and, importantly, do other stakeholders believe in the statements? As far as mission and vision are concerned, are the goals and aspirations embodied within them capable of being achieved? They must therefore be realistic in the scope and depth of the ambitions that they describe. Where values are concerned, their credibility relies, to a large extent, upon the trust that the organisation has been, and is able to engender. This will relate to its past history of relationships with stakeholders as well as its candour in describing itself.

The third question to address relates to acceptability. In short; will all stakeholders 'buy in' to these statements? Will, for example, the funders add their unequivocal support to the sentiments in the statements? Without their tangible support in terms of disbursing resources to an organisation, the achievement of what is described will be difficult, if not impossible! In this context, it is clear that whatever is claimed for the library and information service should be congruent with that of the parent organisation whether it be a public community authority, a university or college, or a commercial undertaking. Moreover, what of the user community? As a key component of the stakeholder population it needs, in general terms, to be able to find acceptable what is being planned and delivered in its name. Finally, a particularly crucial section of stakeholders is represented by the staff within an organisation. A critical factor is the extent to which they will identify with, and work to fulfil the motives and aspirations expressed in the statements. With regard to acceptability, the message that emerges is the importance of consultation. It is frequently the case that staff, for example, are unaware of the existence of a mission statement, let alone familiar with its content. It is inadvisable to adopt a top-down approach to developing mission, vision and values if they are to have any real meaning and utility in management and acceptance by all those who matter.

The fourth question relates to the testability of what is being specified in statements. and is possibly, the most demanding of all. Put succinctly, the question is: How would you demonstrate that you are achieving what has been specified as your mission, vision and values? Success in achieving and, importantly, maintaining mission, vision and values needs to be measurable, or assessable through performance evidence. This factor is closely allied to the test of meaning described earlier. For the more amorphous the statement, the less possible is it to assess what constitutes success as well as when and if it is reached. Sawhill and Williamson explore issues regarding the real success of a non profit making organization in achieving it mission in a journal published by Mckinsey, the international management consultants. They describe nonprofit missions as "notoriously lofty and vague." and go on to stress the importance of performance metrics.

> Every organisation, no matter what its mission or scope needs three kinds of performance metrics - to measure its success in mobilizing its resources, its staff's effectiveness on the job, and its progress in fulfilling its mission. (Sawhill 2001)

This array of questions serves well to enable a sense of reality and perspective to be retained during the creation of mission, vision and values statements.

<u>Selected Examples</u>

It is appropriate to select some statements to illustrate that brevity can be achieved without losing meaning. Perhaps the most concise statement of mission for an entire institution is that of the **University of Strathclyde in Glasgow UK**.

The place of useful learning [2000]

which represents a revision of its earlier statement from the Eighteenth Century as -

A place of useful learning [1726]

The examples below all describe library services mission.

To achieve excellence in the provision and promotion of information services to meet the research, teaching and learning needs of the University.
Australian National University Library

The Library's mission is to make its resources available and useful to the Congress and the American people and to sustain and preserve a universal collection of knowledge and creativity for future generations.
The Library of Congress

To support teaching, learning and research across all subject areas in the College, and to provide for the information needs, whether print based, electronic or audiovisual for all staff, students and researchers.
Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh Library

The St. Louis Public Library will provide learning resources and information services that support and improve individual, family, and community life.
St. Louis Public Library Mission

In accordance with London Business School's Key Strategies, the Library's mission is to build, maintain and provide resources, technology, staff and services in support of present and future education and research needs of London Business School's community.
London Business School Library

Somewhat less brief insofar as they also describe a little more how mission is to be achieved are those below.

The role of the Library and Information Services is to support the information needs of the community at Dublin City University, thereby serving the wider community both regionally and nationally.
To this end it shall seek to provide the best environment and facilities conducive to the study and learning process.
It shall contribute to the open exchange of information, through co-operative endeavour and the provision of access to information sources world-wide.
It shall strive constantly for the further improvement of a quality service
Dublin City University Library

The Library's mission is to maintain and develop collections and services in support of the present and future teaching and research needs of the University of Oxford, and of the national and international scholarly community. In order to carry out this mission, the Library will always aim to:
(a) develop and maintain an understanding of the needs of its users and potential users and respond to them;
(b) build the necessary collections and services and provide access to them;
(c) preserve the collections for future users;
(d) develop appropriate skills and motivation of staff at all levels;
(e) ensure its financial viability;
(f) foster good relationships with other University bodies, including the Colleges;
(g) cooperate with other libraries within Oxford and in the world at large;
(h) exploit in all areas the potential of technology in order to achieve these aims.
Bodleian Library Oxford University

A search through the internet using Google, for example, will reveal others that are good and some that are less satisfactory with regard to the principles discussed above.

The LISU Experience

The LISU experience in developing a revised statement of mission, strategic aims and values is worth relating as a case study. It had became clear, over time, that the scope of LISU's activities had broadened as new work in new areas was added to its basic core activity. Neither the name - Library and Information Statistics Unit - nor its mission and aims were entirely descriptive of its current endeavour and its future aspirations. As well as remaining heavily concerned with statistics and libraries, it had also become involved with in applying a range of qualitative indicators of performance. Moreover, its ambit of interest extended beyond libraries to museum services, archives and other cultural services agencies as well as publishing and scholarly communication issues in general. However, LISU's identity was very well recognised and it was important to retain LISU's name in some form. In the event, it was decided to identify the Unit with the initials LISU, with an associated 'strap line'- *Research and Consultancy for Performance Management: Information, Cultural and Academic Services.*

Having redefined the institution's role and sphere of activity and updated the LISU identity, the statements of mission, vision and values were completely revised through an iterative and consultative process lasting some weeks. All the LISU staff met several time to discuss and debate the development of new statements in an atmosphere where all ideas were equally valid and worthy of consideration. It was felt important to devote adequate time to considering these matter as the outcome would establish the character and direction of LISU's activity for some time. An initial 'brainstorming' took place with everyone contributing ideas. One technique involved a 'post-it' exercise where everyone was invited to write 'keywords' on pieces of paper and post them up on a wall in the conference room. These were then grouped in broad thematic areas to stimulate further discussion. Drafts of the statements were then produced and further discussion and revision took place. Consultation took place within the University at Loughborough and especially with the Professor who has line-management responsibility for LISU within the institution. Thereafter, refined

drafts were submitted for discussion to the LISU Advisory Group, which is a body of external specialists that meets twice a year to advise on strategy and priorities and which identifies opportunities for LISU. They received minor amendment at this stage. The text of the statements was finally agreed in the Autumn of 2005 and are now featured on LISU publications and on its website.[5] The text is appended to this paper.

Not the End – Not even the beginning of the End!

This paper has outlined the role and discussed some aspects of the development of mission, vision and vales for library and information services. It needs to be appreciated that just as the information environment, management imperatives, service priorities, and user demands change with time, so will mission, vision and values alter although perhaps, not so radically. Therefore, they need to be periodically reviewed to ensure that they are remain relevant and meaningful. Mission, vision and value should never be far away from practice – they should permeate professional thought and action. Thus developing a coherent and universally agreed series of statements is not the end – it is not even the beginning of the end!

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX

Text of LISU Mission – Strategic Aims - Vision

Mission statement

LISU is a national research and consultancy centre which promotes good management practice in information, cultural and academic services, through providing independent advice and support for advocacy and for performance evaluation and enhancement.

Strategic purposes

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[5] LISU mission, strategic aims and values web page
http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/dils/lisu/pages/mission.html

1. To provide library and information services managers and policy makers with the range of tools they need to develop services to their full potential, including authoritative data on the operation of services

2. To raise awareness of the value of performance evidence in managing and to increase understanding and the application of such evidence

3. To conduct advanced research that contributes both to the evolution of investigative methods and to the understanding of information, cultural and academic services and the wider knowledge economy

4. To maintain and enhance LISU's reputation for quality in data collection and analysis; reliability and authority in data dissemination; and independence and integrity in reporting results

5. To continue the development of LISU's field of operations, particularly in cultural services, including museums, galleries and archives, and academic support services

Values

1. LISU rigorously protects and promotes its reputation for integrity and unbiased reporting of the results of any investigation which it undertakes

2. LISU consistently develops its collective skills, knowledge and experience and applies enthusiastic commitment to achieving quality in its output

3. LISU actively contributes to sharing knowledge and extending professional discussion through participation in conferences, scholarly publishing and similar avenues of dissemination