

VISION, MISSION AND STRATEGY

David Rabkin, March 2023

I wrote the original version of this paper is paper to help a group of colleagues in the midst of a strategic planning process. They were struggling, in part because they didn't recognize that a few key pieces of their thinking were missing. While they had good picture of what I would term "mission" — the organization's role in society relative to other actors – they hadn't articulated the organization's reason for being stated in terms of the future to which its efforts would contribute (a "vision").

My initial effort to clarify what was missing from our thinking turned into this paper, an effort to outline the key ingredients that must be in place to guide strategy and assess success. It also helps untangle the meaning of words such as vision and mission, which are too often used with ambiguous meaning. Clarity on the meaning of these concepts can be enormously helpful in planning (as well as implementation and operations); they help keep ones "eyes on the prize," on what's most important.

Often, organizations' planning processes may fail to create components needed to complete their strategic planning puzzle. Their plans may read well, and yet they feel... unsettled, somehow. Perhaps, it shows up when they try to answer questions about it, or to make tactical decisions based on it. They may find themselves reopening decisions that were made in the past; why don't those decisions feel right?

My experience is that organizations often do a good job of declaring a mission yet fail to articulate key aspects of vision (which I'll define further, below), which is the bedrock that underpins mission. Without both a vision and mission that are clear and compelling, it's tough to know if you've created effective strategy, to attract audience, funders or partners, or sustain the organization and its efforts.

This document outlines – *as a system for critical strategic thinking* – detailed articulations of the concepts of vision and mission with some exploration of strategy. The framework can help one identify where more definition or consensus-building is needed and where the dots need to be better connected. The focus is on creating a coherent vision and mission the one can use as basis for creating and assessing strategy and, later, operations.

What ARE Vision, Mission and Strategy? A System for Strategic Thinking

In the introduction to the book *Engine of Impact*, a book referred to us as a source of insight, the authors state that "...everything starts with mission." They have just explained the "engine of impact" concept, highlighting the role of "strategic thinking" ("which encompasses mission, strategy, impact evaluation, and insight and courage") and "strategic management" ("which encompasses funding, talent and organization, and board governance").

While mission *is* important, and clarity of mission is essential, I take issue with their statement. Mission is NOT where “everything starts;” as a result they fail to emphasize two critical factors that enable organizational effectiveness: 1) what actually motivates people and 2) the necessary precursors to mission needed to effectively guide an organization. A compelling mission can help, but it’s often not what directly motivates people. Further, mission on its own is insufficient as a guide for the creation of strategy or assessment of effectiveness; where mission comes from is critical. So let’s explore it.

Where does “everything” actually start?

It starts with a vision for the world of the future or at least a vision for select aspects of that world. Why do we (in our organization) do what we do? Because we’re helping to create a world that’s somehow different from today’s or helping preserve something about today’s world that we value. Either way, we need to be driven by a vision of the future that’s grounded in our core values – the results about which we truly care.

Visions can take many forms. It may be helpful to start with the words like “we envision a future where...” or “we envision a world that...” and take it from there. For example:

- We envision a world that... is cancer-free.
- We envision a future where... the epidemic of species extinctions occurring because of humanity’s destruction of ecosystems has been halted.
- We envision a future where... people who grow up poor are given a truly fair chance at becoming financially successful.
- We envision a world where... lay people and business people alike are aware of, and habitually think about, the positive and negative impacts of technology and make personal and business decisions grounded in that thought, based on sound logic, and consistent with their ethical values.
- We envision a world where... people value social equity and act to promote it in their personal and professional lives.

Often people use the term “vision” to describe the future state of their organization. But an *organizational* “vision” only says something about how we’ll get the job done, not what the job is or why we’re doing it in the first place. Vision should be in service to something more fundamental and not bounded by the walls of the organization: one’s vision for the world’s future.

Although these visions differ in fundamental ways, each answers the question “*Why* are we doing this?” And each does so in a way that may be sufficiently compelling to satisfy stakeholders (participants, funders, audience, etc.). When key people don’t say “I get it, but WHY is it important?” any more, then you’ve probably dug deep enough to tie into something fundamental¹, and have found your vision.

¹ There’s probably a level deeper here, values, which are the bedrock motivating the vision. I’m not going to explore that here. The people you’ll attract are those who already value your vision’s defining features.

Of course, a component of great leadership is choosing a compelling vision (or facilitating the process by which an organization does so) and articulating it well so others can understand and commit to it.

What comes next?

Knowing why is a good start, but it's insufficient. What comes next is "*mission.*" Given the future state that we hope will come about (our "vision"), what will be our role in making it happen? Mission and role are inextricably intertwined, and as the role gets operationalized through strategy and action, clarity of mission helps keep one on track.

In selecting one's mission, it's to ground oneself in an accurate set of assumptions about causality, what affects what in our world – a *theory of change* that links what you do to its impact. It's also important to recognize that we and our organization are part of a society with multiple actors contributing to the vision. We don't necessarily need to replicate what others already do; but we might determine that it makes sense to do so because the world needs "more of it" or because we can do it far more effectively. Our role will likely compete with and also depend on and complement others'. But our mission must be compelling, and we'd better be among the best, if not THE best, at it.

A mission grounded in vision might look like the following: A vision of a world where people from disadvantaged backgrounds can become financially successful might be pursued through a mission of giving members of underrepresented groups the skills and support needed to start and run their own businesses.

It's a huge vision, clearly needing further focus in order to be operationalized. Even so, it's still just one small piece among a million pieces that together can contribute to the vision of a socially equitable world. One can imagine other organizations with the same vision but different missions, some working on regulatory issues, others on encouraging investment in minority communities, and so on. And despite the fact that this mission is only a small piece, it makes sense, its logic is credible, and it's compelling.

Given that there are any number of potential missions through which one might pursue a vision, crafting one's role is an act of leadership. It may come from an individual who articulates both the vision AND mission. But in some cases, boards, leaders, and organizational teams may all play significant roles in crafting both the vision and mission. Either approach can work; what's critical is that in the end, everyone understands the vision (the "why") and the mission (the organization's role, the high-level "how" we will contribute to achieving the vision). Neither on its own is sufficient to serve as guide; both are required. And both must be compelling.

Where does strategy come in?

When you know what you're trying to achieve in the world (your vision) and you can articulate your role in contributing to it (your mission), you are ready to define the fundamental building blocks of *what you'll do to deliver on your mission and how you'll be successful*. That's strategy.

For instance, using the example above of the social entrepreneurs devoted to social equity: They're going to contribute to a future where people from disadvantaged backgrounds can become financially successful (the vision). Their role (the mission) will be to give members of underserved groups the skills and support needed to start and run their own businesses.

There are lots of organizations with a similar mission, however. Where might this organization contribute uniquely? Where might it have considerable impact? In this case, the founders do some research, think about their own skills and the needs of the community in which they live, consider the strong relationships that they have with leadership of several school systems, and weigh a variety of other factors. Then they decide that their *strategy* will be to offer an after-school program to teach business and leadership skills to teens who will imagine small businesses that they actually create and run while being coached by members of the local business community serving as mentors, role models and teachers (and who will also become donors to the program because they share the core values and a vision and see the results first-hand).

Strategy articulates what *in particular* you're going to do and what about your approach will make you successful in delivering on your mission. It's the how, and it reflects what's important to success. It identifies who your customers are and how you'll serve them. It explains what's different from other organizations. It likely describes how you'll market and perhaps how you'll set your pricing. It may define a unique approach to staffing. It will define those aspects of what you do that are essential to your success.

Determining strategy is far from easy. One good test for whether you're ready to tackle it is whether you've achieved clarity – and appropriate buy-in – on vision and mission. Those statements don't have to be *perfect*, but they have to be pretty good. When they are, then it's time to wade into strategy. As you do, as the world changes, and as you gain experience, you'll be in a better position to assess and refine all three.

A Starting Point: Vision and Mission

The original version of this paper was drafted at a moment when an organization I was helping with strategic planning found itself revisiting its strategy for the third time in a year. Why was it difficult for consensus to form around prior versions of the strategy? What did they feel unconvincing?

Although the organization had articulated a mission that felt on target, it had not articulated its vision beyond a tag line with highly ambiguous meaning. As a result, it lacked a clear and consistent basis for answering two critical questions about any aspect of strategy under consideration:

- Does it propel the world toward our vision? (Alternatively: Does it serve why we exist as an organization?)
- Does it fit within our role as expressed by the mission?"

If the answers to these questions aren't "yes," then it's not on target. Or... if we truly believe it's essential, we then need to revisit vision and mission to find what's missing. Strategy, and the actions that it drives, must always serve both.

Without a clear organization-wide articulation of vision, these questions were being answered by each individual. People's logic varied and often went unstated. Under these circumstances, it's no surprise that most people felt uncomfortable and unsatisfied with their plans.

In this case, it was tough to know if we were making good decisions and to build consensus for them when we lacked the means to assess them relative to a shared purpose.

Vision doesn't always come first. Some founders, for example, have a clear sense of what they want to do. Even in these cases, it's well worth back-tracking to a clear vision. First, it's almost always present in the founder's mind, but tacit. Second, it's necessary for planning and often for marketing, fund-raising, building organizational spirit, and more.

The Role of Vision, Mission and Strategy in Assessment

The framework of vision, mission and strategy – and the concept of theory of change that hold them together – provide a framework for asking key assessment questions whose answers help us plan, manage, raise fund and gain access to other needed resources, market ourselves, and more. A few key assessment questions include:

- Is the world moving closer to our vision? Let's identify ways to make objective comparisons over time, whether it's measures we can use, examples to cite, stories to tell.
- Are our efforts effective in helping it get there? What outcomes does our *theory of change* (the logic model for how we have impact) suggest we might measure to see if our strategy is effective and if we're implementing it well? In the early stages, when might not have impact yet, we might measure progress in preparing to do so.
- Are the mission and strategy still the best way for us to pursue the vision? This question is challenging, a big, multi-level agenda that includes sweeping questions about the continued relevance of the current mission as well as more focused questions about strategy, efficiency and sustainability. At any level, though, the

ability to assess achievement (via measures of impact and attainment of objectives) and use of resources (such as time, \$, human capacity, physical space, etc.) is helpful, if not critical, to managing and justifying the endeavor.

- Is our theory of change complete and [still] correct? A strategy works only if the theory of change is correct. Lack of effectiveness may relate to poor plans, poor execution, or incorrect plans based on a flawed theory of change. The world changes; so one needs to periodically assess validity of one's theory of change.

Next Steps

Once we're clear on vision and mission, we can further vet and detail our theory of change and our values, then make decisions about our brand, audience, intended impacts, offerings, make/buy, etc. that together define strategy. We can also begin developing the measures we'll use to measure impact, effectiveness, and the validity of our assumptions.

Are we close enough on vision and mission to start?

If not, work a bit more on them. But note that I used the words "close enough." I don't use them casually; sometimes one has to plow ahead from planning to action – to DO something – and thus to generate essential learning that's available only from experience. Use this framework, but not as a tool for procrastination.

www.dgrabkin.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/DGRabkin-Vision-Mission-Strategy-2-2.pdf