

Section 1: Mission - Your North Star (Not Another Boring Mission Statement)

Reality Check Box: "But We Already Have a Mission Statement"

I hear you. You spent \$50,000 on consultants who gave you a beautifully worded mission. It's probably etched in marble in your lobby.

Here's the test: Can three random employees recite it? Do they use it to make decisions? Does it actually influence anything?

If not, you have lobby art, not a mission.

You've got two choices:

1. **Evolution:** Find the kernel of truth in your existing mission and clarify it
2. **Revolution:** Admit it's broken and start fresh

Both are valid. Just don't keep pretending word salad is helping anyone.

OK, We Need a Mission

Go to any corporate website, click "About Us," and try to guess what the company actually does based on their mission statement. I'll wait.

Can't tell if they make software or breakfast cereal? Yeah, that's the problem.

Most mission statements read like they were written by a committee of lawyers who were scared of committing to anything specific. They're full of words like "leverage," "synergy," and "excellence" that mean absolutely nothing to actual humans doing actual work.

Your mission should be the answer to the most basic question in business: Why do we exist? If you can't answer that in a way that makes sense to your newest intern and your most cynical engineer, you don't have a mission. You have word salad.

1.1 The Mission Reality Check

Before we create something better, let's acknowledge how bad most mission statements are. Sometimes you need to see the disease to appreciate the cure.

Exercise: Mission Statement Autopsy (Analysis)

Time: 20 minutes

Type: Individual, then team discussion

Let's dissect some real mission statements and figure out why they're useless. Here are five actual examples (company names removed to protect the guilty):

Corpse #1: "To be the global leader in delivering innovative solutions that create value for our stakeholders while maintaining the highest standards of excellence and integrity."

What's wrong with it:

- Could literally be any company on Earth
- "Global leader" – according to who?
- "Innovative solutions" – as opposed to boring solutions?
- "Create value" – no kidding, that's what businesses do
- Zero indication of what they actually make or who they serve

Corpse #2: "We strive to be Earth's most customer-centric company, where customers can find and discover anything they might want to buy online."

Actually, this one's not terrible. You know it's about e-commerce and customer obsession. You can even guess whose mission it is. See the difference?

Your turn:

Find three mission statements from companies in your industry. For each one, answer:

1. What does this company actually do? (Can you tell from the mission?)
2. Who do they serve? (Is it specific or "everyone"?)
3. Why should anyone care? (What change are they making?)
4. Could this mission belong to their competitor? (The switcheroo test)

Common Patterns of Meaninglessness:

- **The Thesaurus Explosion:** Using fancy words when simple ones work better
- **The Everything Bagel:** Trying to include every possible stakeholder
- **The (not so) Humble Brag:** "Leading provider of..." (says who?)
- **The Jargon Jungle:** Industry buzzwords that mean nothing
- **The Safety Net:** So vague it could never be wrong

Team Discussion: Share your worst findings. What patterns do you see? Why do companies write such garbage?

1.2 Finding Your Real Purpose

Now let's dig for something real. You're going to write things that sound too simple, too obvious, maybe even naive. Good. That's where truth lives.

Exercise: The Five Whys of Existence (Reflection)

Time: 30 minutes solo, 45 minutes team

Type: Deep reflection and debate

This isn't about what you do. It's about why you bother getting out of bed to do it.

Solo Work:

Start with: "My company exists to..."

Write your answer. Now ask "Why does that matter?" Write that answer. Keep going for five rounds minimum.

Example progression:

1. My company exists to... make project management software
2. Why does that matter? Because teams struggle to coordinate work
3. Why does that matter? Because unclear communication wastes time and causes frustration
4. Why does that matter? Because people want to do meaningful work, not fight with tools
5. Why does that matter? Because when people can focus on what matters, they create better things
6. Why does that matter? Because better things make the world more interesting/efficient/joyful

See how we went from "project management software" to something about human potential? But maybe #6 went too far into the abstract. #5 is still specific enough to be about project management software yet a big enough tent big enough that the company can keep growing with new offerings and markets.

Your turn:

My company exists to: _____

1. Why does that matter? _____
2. Why does that matter? _____
3. Why does that matter? _____
4. Why does that matter? _____
5. Why does that matter? _____

Team Work:

Everyone shares their endpoint (not the whole chain, just where they landed). Notice patterns. Debate differences.

Questions to fight about:

- Whose version resonates most?
- What themes keep appearing?
- Where do we disagree fundamentally?
- What would our customers say?
- What would we be embarrassed to admit we care about?

Integration: Combine insights into 2-3 core themes. These are your mission ingredients.

1.3 Crafting a Mission That Doesn't Suck

Time to start wordcrafting. In design thinking we explore many different options to discover something good. Try any or all of these exercises. Trust the process.

Exercise: Mission Mad Libs (Creative)

Time: 45 minutes

Type: Creative generation and refinement

Part A: The Formula Approach

Fill in these blanks multiple ways:

We exist to **[verb]** **[target audience]** to/so they can **[achieve what outcome]** by/through **[our unique approach]**.

Examples:

- We exist to **empower small business owners** to **compete with giants** by **making enterprise tools affordable**
- We exist to **connect remote teams** so they can **work like they're in the same room** through **ridiculously simple video**

Try 10 different versions. Get weird. Use unexpected verbs. Be specific about your audience.

Part B: The Haiku Approach

Write your mission as a haiku (5-7-5 syllables). The constraint forces clarity.

Example: Teachers shape the world
We give them superpowers
Kids win, future wins

Part C: The "So What?" Test

Take your favorite versions and add "So what?" to the end. If you can't answer compellingly, try again.

Part D: The Frankenstein

Take the best parts from different versions. Smash them together. Edit ruthlessly.

Team Integration:

1. Everyone presents their top 3 versions
2. Vote on elements, not complete statements
3. Combine winning elements
4. Wordsmith until it sings

Remember: Your mission should:

- Be specific enough that competitors couldn't use it
- Be clear enough that a teenager gets it
- Be inspiring enough that people care
- Be stable enough to last 5+ years (you can edit it once you grow)
- Be short enough to remember

1.4 Stress-Testing Your Mission

A mission that only works in the conference room is worthless. Let's see if yours can survive in the wild.

Exercise: The Elevator Pitch Challenge (Validation)

Time: 30 minutes prep, 2 hours testing

Type: Real-world validation

Test #1: The Stranger Test

Find 5 people who don't work at your company. Tell them your mission. Ask:

1. What do you think we make/do?
2. Who do you think we serve?
3. Why might that matter?

If they get it wrong, your mission needs work.

Test #2: The New Employee Test

Find your newest employees (hired within last 3 months). Ask:

1. Does this match why you joined?
2. Does this help you make decisions?
3. Could you explain this to your mom?

Test #3: The Decision Filter

Take three recent big decisions your company made. Ask: Did our mission make the right choice obvious? If not, your mission might be too vague.

Test #4: The Time Machine Test

Imagine explaining your mission:

- To your founders 5 years ago (Would they recognize it?)
- To your team 5 years from now (Will it still matter?)

Scoring:

- Passed all tests? You're golden
- Failed 1-2? Needs tweaking
- Failed 3+? Back to the drawing board

Pro Tip: When to Evolve Beyond Your Mission

Your mission should be stable, but not forever. Consider evolution when:

- You've achieved your original mission (congrats!)
- The world changed and your mission became irrelevant
- You've learned your real impact is different than you thought
- Your mission is limiting growth in surprising ways

Example: Amazon started with "Earth's biggest bookstore." They now have "We strive to be Earth's most customer-centric company, where customers can find and discover anything they might want to buy online." (Did you guess it?)

But don't change your mission because:

- A new CEO wants to make their mark
- You're bored
- A competitor has a cooler sounding one
- You're having a rough quarter

Mission evolution should feel inevitable, not forced.

Example Gallery: Missions That Actually Work

Some of these examples have been held up as great missions and some have been criticized as bad missions (and some have been called both!)

- Are some of these stronger than others? How well are these companies living up to their mission? How would you change the ones you think are weak?
- Tesla, Inc.: "To accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy."
- Xerox: "To help people find better ways to do great work — by constantly leading in document technologies, products, and services that improve our customers' work processes and business results."
- Patagonia: "We're in business to save our home planet."
- Airbnb: "To create a world where anyone can belong anywhere."
- Albertsons: "Guided by relentless focus on our five imperatives, we will constantly strive to implement the critical initiatives required to achieve our vision. In doing this, we will deliver operational excellence in every corner of the Company and meet or exceed our commitments to the many constituencies we serve."
- LinkedIn: "To connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful."
- IKEA: "To create a better everyday life for the many people."
- Starbucks: "To inspire and nurture the human spirit — one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time."
- Amazon: "To be Earth's most customer-centric company, where customers can find and discover anything they might want to buy online, and endeavors to offer its customers the lowest possible prices."
- Ben & Jerry's: "Making the best ice cream in the nicest possible way"

Notice what these don't have:

- Jargon
 - Committee-speak
 - Everything-to-everyone promises
 - Humble brags
 - Weasel words
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Bridge to Vision

You've got your mission – your reason for existing. But existing isn't enough. You need to know where you're headed.

Your mission says why you're on this journey. Your vision says where the journey leads.

Ready to paint a picture of the future? Let's go build your vision.