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# Translating Vision to Action

## *Developing an effective mission statement*

Last November I wrote about the importance of the vision statement as the first step in strategic planning. The vision statement describes what the organization hopes to achieve over the mid- to long-term and serves to guide decision making about current and future courses of action.

There is a Japanese proverb that states, "Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare." In order to achieve your vision, it is essential to translate it to action, to operationalize it. The first step in this process is the formulation of a mission statement. Where the vision statement tells us *what* we are trying to achieve, the mission statement tells *how* we will achieve it. Another way of looking at this is that the vision statement focuses on tomorrow while the mission statement focuses on today.

### Whose Mission?

One of the problems I note frequently is a lack of clear definition as to whom the mission statement is intended. There is a big difference between writing a mission statement for the emergency management *program* versus one for the emergency management *office*.

For example, consider this mission statement for FEMA:

...to reduce the loss of life and property and protect our institutions from all hazards by leading and supporting the nation in a comprehensive, risk-based emergency management program of mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Note that the statement defines a specific outcome and says how that outcome will be achieved while still covering a broad range of tasks. This is a good example of a program mission statement.

Compare this with the specificity found in the following mission statement:

...to provide recommendations and technical assistance to the Office of Emergency Services (OES), to maintain the FIRESCOPE Decision Process, and to continue the operation, development, and maintenance of the FIRESCOPE Incident Command System (ICS) and the Multi-Agency Coordination System (MACS).

In this case, the mission statement limits the organization to very specific tasks.

## Why the mission statement matters

The examples in the last section highlight a critical point about the mission statement: it defines the specific role of the organization and its objectives.

Consider the current controversy over a proposal by the acting Administrator to redefine the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's mission statement to eliminate "climate" and replace one of its main directives with new language. The current mission statement reads:

To understand and predict changes in climate, weather, oceans, and coasts, to share that knowledge and information with others, and to conserve and manage coastal and marine ecosystems and resources.

The proposed change would read:

To understand and predict changes in weather, oceans, and coasts, to share that knowledge and information with others, and to protect lives and property, and support homeland and national security.

Note how adding and deleting words and objectives can have a major impact on an agency's responsibilities. The mission statement can be a powerful tool to either expand or limit the role of an organization.

## Developing the Mission Statement

Peter Drucker said that a manager's job is to convert the organization's vision statement into specifics and that mission statements must be operational or else they are nothing but good intentions. Effective mission statements are linked to the organization's vision and define

the specific role of the organization. In developing your mission statement, consider questions such as:

- What do we do?
- Who is our target audience? Whom do we serve?
- How do we serve our target audience?

Questions like these make you think about what you really do and help you to define your role and the value you add to the organization.

Most emergency management offices use a variation on "to protect lives, property, and the environment." But ask yourself if this is what you really do. You can make the case that this is possibly your goal or maybe even a vision. But is it what you *really* do?

The Principles of Emergency Management working group defined emergency management as "...the managerial function charged with creating the framework within which communities reduce vulnerability to hazards and cope with disasters." This definition suggests that our true role is creating the context within which emergency plans will operate and that our audience consists of the organizations with whom we work. This has significance for our mission statement.

The POEM working group also offered a generic mission statement (which I paraphrase here) which you may want to consider:

To protect our community by coordinating and integrating all activities necessary to build, sustain, and improve the capability to mitigate against, prepare for, respond to, and recover from threatened or actual natural disasters, acts of terrorism, or other man-made disasters. 