

Maximize your leadership potential: CREATE & COMMUNICATE VISION

Strategic Thinking

Identifying Your Organization's Strategic Purpose

For many leaders the idea of spending time clarifying the organization's strategic purpose (often referred to as mission) seems like a colossal waste of time. Many have spent too much time in too many retreats or meetings wordsmithing a mission statement to death. Even worse, once that mission statement gets finalized, it promptly gets framed and put on the wall or posted on the web site and everyone completely forgets about it! Who can blame leaders (and employees) for not wanting to spend time going through such a pointless exercise! Unfortunately, such a painful process and poor use of an organization's mission can cause leaders to miss the real and powerful opportunities that clarifying a compelling shared sense of purpose/mission can create for teams and departments.

Why Should I Bother?

Acknowledging the good reasons that many leaders have for not wanting to discuss or clarify strategic purpose, why should they still do it? A clear, shared sense of purpose for a team, department, or college is one of the best tools that leaders have to create **alignment, motivation**, and, more broadly, provide a solid **foundation for strategic thinking**.

For **alignment**: Every day, members of your department or team are making decisions about the work—what they do and how they do it. Often, faculty and employees make decisions about what's most important and what they should focus on based on their individual roles and priorities, which can lead them to work in ways that move in different directions. Having a clear strategic purpose, on the other hand, creates a shared framework for understanding and (more importantly) making decisions about what work to do and how to do it. When our decisions and actions start to align with our shared sense of why we are doing our work and why that's important we create powerful momentum as a team or department. As Sheila Campbell and Merianne Liteman note in *Retreats that Work*:

"No organization will be as effective as it might be until its people understand and support the organization's strategic purpose. A muddled sense of purpose leads to confusion and allows people to decide individually what's important, without any context to guide them. A clear and galvanizing purpose, on the other hand, focuses everyone's efforts and moves the organization forward in an unambiguous direction."

Why it matters?

A clear, shared sense of purpose is commonly identified as a key characteristic of great teams and organizations. Clarifying strategic purpose can be a powerful tool for creating alignment, motivation, and fostering strategic thinking. It creates alignment because all of the team members' daily decisions are informed by that shared sense of purpose. It creates motivation because every member of the team knows that her or his work matters—that they are part of a team working to make a difference. Finally, a shared sense of purpose drives the goals and vision of the organization.

A muddled sense of purpose not only allows people to decide individually what's important, it *forces* them to decide individually what's important!

For **engagement and motivation**: A university environment is especially rich with teams and organizations engaged in meaningful work about which they care passionately! Unfortunately, in the day-to-day rush of meetings, emails, and tasks, many people lose sight of the noble purpose that truly drives their team. Not only does that intention fall into the background, it gets almost completely forgotten. This is a shame, because most people are more engaged, motivated, and, ultimately, fulfilled, when they know that they are working together with others to make a difference in some significant or meaningful way. As Daniel Pink notes in the book *Drive*, “The most deeply motivated people—not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied—hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves.” It is the leader's role to remind people that the work that they do matters, that it makes a difference. A clear, shared sense of purpose does that; it reminds them that the small, day-to-day tasks help to serve an important purpose.

As a **foundation for strategic thinking**: Before you talk about what you want to accomplish as a department or team, it's helpful to know why you are doing what you are doing. In other words, your team's purpose should be the driving force behind your team's goals and—over the long run—vision. For this reason, Campbell and Liteman refer to strategic purpose as the “heart of blueprints for the future.”

What is Strategic Purpose?

In simplest terms, strategic purpose answers the question “Why do we exist?” in a way that also clearly highlights “Why is that important?” In the FranklinCovey *Great Leaders, Great Teams, Great Results* course, the idea of strategic purpose is closely connected with a clear understanding of the value that your team provides to those it serves as well as your team's core “job to be done.” This is an important concept, because it gets to a key distinction with regards to purpose (or mission). Often, when teams and leaders think of strategic purpose or mission they begin by listing *what* the organization does. This is a fine (even good) starting point, but it is largely unhelpful if the conversation stops there. Strategic purpose is not about what we do, it's about why we do what we do. When you list all of the things you do as a department or team, ask yourself “*Why* do we do all of these things?” *That* is your strategic purpose. The team or department does all of those things for a reason, in order to have a particular kind of impact or make a particular kind of difference, and *that* is strategic purpose. That is the value that you provide to the people you serve. That is the “job to be done.” As an example that highlights this difference, almost every academic department—when discussing purpose or mission—will want to say, “Our mission is to do teaching, research, and service, in the field of (fill in the blank).” As noted above, that's a great starting point for mission, but a very mediocre final product. There is a reason *why* this particular department engages in teaching, research, and service in this particular field. That *reason* is strategic purpose. It is the *why* for all of the *whats* that we do!

How Can Our Team or Department Begin to Clarify Strategic Purpose?

As noted above, what a team does is only the starting point for the discussion of strategic purpose. Leaders and teams can engage the idea of strategic purpose by answering some very simple questions:

- What does our team do?
- For whom do we do it?
- Why is it important?

These questions seem relatively easy to answer but can inspire deep thinking. As you review your answers to these questions, look for common themes or particularly compelling ideas. These often begin to get at why you are doing what you are doing for the people you serve. What common themes arise in your answers to those questions? What points seem particularly compelling and important? As you and your team reflect on the answers to the above questions, you can refine the answer to the question of why you exist.

We discourage leaders and teams from referring to this work as a “mission statement” for the simple reason that the idea of a mission statement seems to inspire lengthy sentences and fancy wordsmithing that no one remembers.

Strategic purpose needs to be actionable. We encourage leaders and teams to try to distill a clear sense of purpose down to one simple sentence. For example: “To facilitate research and improve health.” “To improve the performance of faculty and staff at UF.” “To improve the quality of educational and developmental outcomes.” “To promote and create a healthy campus community.” These are just a few of the examples of strategic purpose that leaders or teams have identified at UF. The extent to which they are helpful depends on how the leaders and teams use them.

Great teams have a shared sense of purpose that guides their everyday actions. As a leader, don’t settle for a fancy-sounding mission statement that sits on your web site and is forgotten by your team. Instead, create an ongoing conversation with your team about **why** all of you do what you do and **why** that makes a difference. That shared sense of purpose will help create greater alignment, motivation, and strategic thinking for and within your team.

References

- Campbell, Sheila, and Liteman, Merianne. 2003. *Retreats That Work*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.
- Pink, Daniel H. 2009. *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.