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MIND THE GAP
Mission Accomplishment Measures

THE CREATION OF MISSION ACCOMPLISHMENT MEASURES ALLOWS YOU TO IDENTIFY YOUR "MISSION GAP" AND TO THEN WORK AT CLOSING IT.

How does your board determine if your organization is successfully accomplishing its mission? I have asked this question of thousands of nonprofit executives and board members throughout the past 15 years in research studies, courses I teach, and during consulting projects. The responses vary, but here are some common answers:

"I look at the year-end financial report, and if we have at least broken even, I breathe a sigh of relief."

"It's all about the number of people we are able to serve. If those numbers are in a good range, then I feel like we are getting the job done."

"For me, I take my cues from our CEO. If she seems upbeat, then I figure things are going just fine."
Money, numbers served, and a positive attitude. I can understand why people value these things, but do they really tell you if you are accomplishing your mission?

My follow-up question usually gets to the heart of the matter: What metrics — specific measurable results, outcomes, evidence, and/or data — do you look at to tell you that you have actually made a difference — had a measurable impact — in accordance with your mission?

The response to that question is often silence. Various research studies over the years have demonstrated that many or most nonprofits do not have reliable impact measures or performance metrics that tell them how well they are accomplishing their mission. In many organizations that do have performance metrics, senior staff and board members often do not use the same metrics to judge performance. While more and more organizations are promoting the idea of measuring mission impact, and progress is being made, we still have a long way to go.

Your nonprofit can maximize its mission impact by ensuring that its mission statement contains impact language, by setting "mission accomplishment measures," by articulating your "mission gap," and, finally, by tying these actions into a strategy development process.

REVIEWING YOUR MISSION STATEMENT
The first step of making the mission accomplishment approach of practical use is to review your mission statement. The intent here is not to devote an inordinate amount to time to wordsmithing the statement, but to consider sharpening its stated impact and aim.

One way to think about a mission statement is that it is a stated intention to make a difference for a person, place, or thing. Your board, therefore, should determine if your mission statement
- specifies the difference you are committed to making
- specifies the persons, places, or things you aim to impact
- expresses your ultimate intrinsic desire or what you want most

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Specificity is important. If your mission statement is too vague and broad, you will have difficulty with the next two steps of establishing mission accomplishment measures and mission gap. But reviewing your mission statement is valuable exercise on its own as well. By specifying impact and aim, a mission statement can communicate more effectively to potential donors, supporters, volunteers, funders, and other potential collaborators.

SETTING YOUR MISSION ACCOMPLISHMENT MEASURES

Suppose you serve on a board of an organization that is committed to eliminating homelessness in your county, and your mission statement is: "To end homelessness in Merrill County." How would you know you are making progress? One metric you could look at is the number of homeless people documented by regular government reports. That could be your mission accomplishment measure.

Or let's take a real-life example. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) wants to end drunk driving. Obviously, one of its top metrics is the number of people who die every year as a result of car accidents caused by drunk drivers. MADD has helped lower that annual number but is committed to continuing its work until the number reaches zero and stays there. This number, this metric, drives the organization's activities and strategy.

Admittedly, some organizations have more difficulty than others in coming up with their metrics. But you need to start somewhere. I recommend you begin by asking your board and senior staff members the follow-up question I mentioned earlier:

"What results, outcomes, and specific evidence should we look at to tell us that we are actually making a difference – having a measurable impact – in accordance with our mission?"

Then review the list. Maybe you can come to agreement on some metrics that already exist in data that you are already collecting or that governmental organizations collect. In many cases, organizations find that they need to create instrumentation, such as surveys and questionnaires, for the measures.

Or maybe you are going to need to identify reliable measures that indicate a change in the condition of the persons, places, and/or things that the organization wants to impact. If so, the board may want to appoint a task force to focus on the identification process. Organizations that have a single area of focus and a few programs may be able to identify a mission-level indicator rather easily. In these cases, impact measures for programs may even serve as measures at the organizational level. Alternatively, organizations with multiple areas of focus will find this to be more complicated and may end up with a set of three to five mission accomplishment measures that capture the collective impact of a number of programs.

If you are just starting the process of identifying mission accomplishment measures, don't expect perfection right away. You don't need immediate, iron-clad, scientific proof that you can present to your harshest critic. Find some reliable measure that gives you a good start and then let your work evolve over time.

IDENTIFYING YOUR MISSION GAP

The creation of mission accomplishment measures allows an organization to identify its "mission gap" — a term I have used with organizations in my consulting and teaching. The first step in identifying a mission gap is to use mission accomplishment measures to articulate the current state of the persons, places, and/or things for whom/which

the organization wants to make a difference. Next, you should choose what their/its condition would be in an ideal world. The difference between the reality and the ideal is the organization's mission gap — the gap the organization is committed to closing.

Several years ago, the leaders of the North Texas Food Bank decided to collect a variety of statistics to determine the "meal gap" for the men, women, and children living in their service area who are under the poverty line. They identified all of the potential sources of food available to this target audience -- including SNAP (formerly food stamps), school lunches, WIC, and meals provided through food pantries, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, etc. They also calculated that people would use some of their own resources to provide for their meals. They then calculated the meals available for this group of people and compared it to the number of meals this group needed to have three healthy meals per day. The difference between the two was identified as their region's "meal gap" of 29 million meals per year.

North Texas Food Bank then started working toward the goal of closing that gap as quickly as possible. Establishing this "meal gap," in the words of the organization's President & CEO Jan Pruitt, "transformed" the organization. They used the "meal gap" (also referred to as a "hunger gap") to promote volunteerism, food donations, financial donations, and to raise public awareness about the problem of hunger in America — and are making significant progress toward their goal.

TYING INTO THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

As board members and staff, one of our most important stewardship responsibilities is assuring that we are utilizing the resources provided by benefactors for their most productive use. We cannot know that — reliably — unless we have established widely agreed-upon mission accomplishment measures for the organization. Without them, an organization will

- be unable to coordinate action toward producing its most important results. Different people will rely on their own opinions. Imagine a football team on which each player has his own opinion of the direction of the goal line — it makes coordinating action difficult.
- not have a reliable basis on which to judge expanding, cutting, or eliminating certain programs or activities
- find it difficult to learn from mistakes and successes
- be managing opinions, a time-consuming, no-win situation, rather than managing for results
- base resource allocation decisions on opinions rather than reliable data
- find it difficult to evaluate the performance of the chief executive, since his or her performance is often linked to the organization's performance
- find it increasingly difficult to secure funding, as donors want to see measurable results

In no place does identifying mission accomplishment measures and mission gap play a more important role than in strategic planning. Without a clear understanding of your performance measures and mission gap, you cannot set a clear and coherent strategy for maximizing performance and for closing the gap as effectively as possible. You don't want to be in that position. Get started now!

Resources:
Mission Impact: Breakthrough Strategies for Nonprofits
Driving Strategic Planning: A Nonprofit Executive's Guide