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# Mission, purpose, and ambition: redefining the mission statement

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to argue for the need to redefine a mission statement, to develop a clearer definition and show its advantages and limitations.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper shows the literature's lack of agreement on the definition of the mission statement and whether it should be defined as a stand-alone statement or as a broader model. It then demonstrates the discrepancy between these definitions and the actual mission statements of exemplary organizations. This is followed by proposing a new definition of a mission, demonstrating how it is rooted in good practice, and presenting its benefits and limitations.

**Findings** – There are found to be widely varied definitions and models of the mission statement. These are typically complex (composed of many parts) and are not reflected in the mission statements of many exemplary organizations. The need is clear for a more focused definition.

**Research limitations/implications** – The basic argument is mainly built on conceptual discussions and unsystematic evidence. Therefore, there is a need for more empirical studies to substantiate that argument. The paper discusses the research implications of the proposed definition.

**Practical implications** – The proposed definition of the mission statement may prove helpful both conceptually and practically. This definition focuses the attention of practitioners on purpose and commitment independent from other related concepts. The paper shows the impact of the proposed definition on the process, participants, and outcome of developing a mission statement.

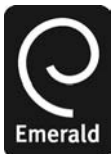
**Originality/value** – The paper offers a focused definition of mission statement and shows its relevance to both theory and practice.

**Keywords** Mission statements, Corporate strategy, Mission, Purpose, Values, Vision statement

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

The mission statement is a management concept that has created both interest and disagreement among researchers, consultants, and practitioners alike. A clear trend in the literature is the extension of the domain of the concept to the point of blurring its boundaries. The concept has been broadened to encompass not only the basic role of an organization in society or the reason(s) for its existence, but also its vision, values, scope of business, public image, and beyond. It is as if the mission statement (and alternatively, for some, the vision statement) is supposed to be an all-inclusive document and that an organization has to make one and only one such document. Probably there is a need for such a comprehensive guiding statement, or a system of guiding statements. A mission statement, however, is but one component among others in such a system, which may include a statement of vision, a statement of values, a definition of business and its scope, and/or a statement of strategy. Obviously these guiding statements have to be consistent and related to each other in a coherent and reinforcing way. And this need seems to partially explain the development of models incorporating a number of various but related guiding statements as well as the suggested list of compiled items to be included in the mission statement.

Whether the concept of mission is articulated as an independent statement or as a broader model, the need to redefine it in a clear and plausible way is still evident



(Khalifa, 2011). Both forms of articulation will be illustrated to show the inconsistency in defining and using the concept.

The paper initially shows the inconsistent use of the concept of mission in the expanded list approach. It then proceeds to show similar inconsistencies in three of the most respected models of guiding statements in the literature. These models are helpful indeed. Nevertheless, each model represents a particular approach of how to use a system of guiding statements, not just the mission statement, to help manage for lasting success. The paper does not question the configuration and logic of any of these models. Each, of course, has its share of strengths and weaknesses. The intention is rather to argue that a more focussed definition of the mission statement is indeed needed. Next, a simple and focussed definition of the concept of mission is developed along with a discussion of its advantages and drawbacks. The paper ends with practical implications, and limitations and directions for further research.

The following section briefly illustrates the vagueness and inconsistent definition of the concept of “mission” in checklist type of mission statement definitions. The checklists are not intended to form coherent and well-structured models unlike the ones which will be discussed later.

### **The checklist-type definitions of mission statements**

The literature presents a multiplicity of definitions of the mission statement (see Appendix). The evident inconsistency in these definitions leads to confusion both at the theoretical and practical levels. A recent work offers a more developed analysis and discussion of the sources and forms of this confusion (Khalifa, 2011).

The mission statement literature is dominated by the logic of compilation or what Campbell and Yeung (1991) call the checklist of items. This logic takes a widely varied collection of mission statements of actual organizations, analyzes and classifies their constituent items, and pools all these items to form a comprehensive list. This list is then used as the foundation of an “ideal” mission statement. This logic of compilation is inconsistent with the practice of most organizations in the sense that a single mission statement is rarely found having all or most of the items in the “ideal” list. Nevertheless, these compilations of items are used as benchmarks to evaluate and judge real mission statements, to suggest ways to improve them, and to give advice on how to develop new effective ones.

David and David (2003), based on Pearce and colleagues (Pearce, 1982; Pearce and David, 1987; Pearce and Roth, 1988), demonstrate a typical and influential representation of the compilation logic. They suggest the following comprehensive list of nine components that an effective mission statement should include (David and David, 2003, p. 13):

- (1) customers (the target market);
- (2) products/services (offerings and value provided to customers);
- (3) geographic markets (where the firm seeks customers);
- (4) technology (the technology used to produce and market products);
- (5) concern for survival/growth/profits (the firm’s concern for financial soundness);
- (6) philosophy (the firm’s values, ethics, beliefs);
- (7) public image (contributions the firm makes to communities);

- (8) employees (the importance of managers and employees); and
- (9) distinctive competence (how the firm is different or better than competitors).

David and David (2003) use this compiled list of items to judge the quality of the mission statements of some companies, and advise these companies to redraft their missions accordingly. In addition, the judgment of the quality of a mission statement is based solely on the existence or absence of these items. There is no conclusive evidence, however, to show that these items, as a set, are the best way to formulate a mission statement (see, e.g. Pearce and David, 1987). Nevertheless, any deviation from this list is arguably seen as a sign of deficiency, regardless of any contextual factors that may explain or justify that deviation. No wonder all sample companies of David and David (2003) fell far short of their ideal mission statement. In addition, the practice of scores of leading organizations does not seem consistent with such logic of compilation.

David and colleagues are not the only proponents of the compilation logic, though they are among the most influential. Leuthesser and Kohli (1997, p. 59), for example, show their belief in the compilation logic when they state: "Previous researchers have noted that mission statements – variously referred to as statements of purpose, values statement, goals and strategies, corporate creed, corporate philosophy, and so on – are structured in a variety of ways. Defined very broadly here, the phrase 'mission statement' should be taken as equivalent to numerous other descriptions that might be used to refer to the elements commonly found in a mission statement." The same inclination to that compilation logic is reflected in many other studies. Another example is provided by Strong (1997, p. 269) who asserts: "A mission statement is a clear definition of the mission and purpose of the organization, it may be referred to as the organization creed statement, statement of purpose, statement of general principles, statement of corporate intent or vision statement."

There are a number of researchers and practitioners who do not subscribe to this compilation logic. They offer instead a more focussed definition of the concept of mission, even though they may use different labels. Hamel and Prahalad (1989), for example, introduce the concept of "strategic intent" as a means to challenge and rethink the prevalent model of strategy. They describe strategic intent in terms of winning. They say: "strategic intent captures the essence of winning" (Hamel and Prahalad, 1989, p. 64). The central importance of the idea of winning is also shared by Welch and Welch (2005, p. 14), who state: "an effective mission statement basically answers one question: *How do we intend to win in this business?*" These voices, however, have yet to show their impact on the debate in the field of mission statement.

The following section shows the inconsistent use of the concept of mission in the formulation of structured models and frameworks.

### **Structured models of mission statement**

An alternative approach to the compilation logic exists in the literature: the structural logic. Unlike the compilation logic, which pools together diverse items scattered in many mission statements; the structural logic makes a strong case for the necessity and coherence of the items which constitute a model or a framework.

The first and arguably the most influential model to be discussed here is the "vision framework" developed by Collins and Porras (1991, 1995, 1996, and 1997). Collins and Porras (1991, 1997) use the label "vision framework" to be broadly defined as an over-arching concept under which a variety of other selected concepts are subsumed

and coherently related. This is a similar process to those followed to develop the other two models, which will be described later in this section.

For Collins and Porras (1991, 1997) a well-conceived vision consists of two major components: core ideology and envisioned future. Core ideology provides the glue that holds an organization together and defines the enduring character of an organization: what it stands for and why it exists. Core ideology of the organization consists of two distinct parts: core values, a system of guiding principles and essential and enduring tenets; and core purpose, the organization's most fundamental reason for existence, the idealistic motivations for doing the company's work which capture the soul of the organization. The envisioned future is what an organization aspires to become, to achieve, or to create. It consists of two parts: a clear and compelling mission (a long-term daring goal) and vivid descriptions, a specific and attractive image of what it will be like to achieve the mission (Collins and Porras, 1996).

Notice here that Collins and Porras (1991, 1997) differentiate between mission and core purpose. This is a position rarely found in the literature. While they follow the literature in defining purpose as the organization's reason for being, Collins and Porras (1991, 1997) choose to define mission as a daunting challenge with a clear finish line formulated as a long-term daring goal. This is similar to the concept of strategic intent of Hamel and Prahalad (1989). Practice, however, does not show that the distinction they make is common or even real. Collins and Porras (1997, p. 78) admit: "We want to be clear: We did not find an explicit and formal statement of purpose in all of our visionary companies. We sometimes found purpose to be more implicitly or informally stated."

The second model to be briefly examined next is the "Ashridge Mission Model." Campbell and Yeung (1991) recognize two schools of thought in defining mission statement. They describe these schools of thought as the "strategy school" and the "culture school." The former talks to the minds of employees and emphasizes business definition while the latter appeals to the hearts of employees and focusses on business philosophy, values, and standards of behavior.

Campbell (1992) and Campbell and Yeung (1991), in their "Ashridge Model," offer to synthesize the two schools of thought into "a comprehensive single description of mission" (Campbell and Yeung, 1991, p. 11). The model includes in addition to purpose, strategy, values, and standards of behavior. They reason that the company's purpose should be translated into standards of behavior through strategy and values. Hence, all of these are considered parts of a coherent mission statement.

The central issue of purpose, according to Campbell (1992), is to define for whose benefits the firm is in business, i.e. the firm's business philosophy or reason for existence; strategy is about the commercial logic defining what business(es) the company should be in and how it will gain competitive advantage; values represent the emotional and moral logic of purpose that will make employees and managers feel proud and committed to its achievement; standards of behavior convert ideas of strategy into policy guidelines. The strategy and culture (values and standards of behavior) components are added to purpose to ensure that purpose can be lived as it is translated into corporate reality.

Notice the centrality of purpose and the logic of including strategy, values, and standards of behavior in the model. It is the purpose that is the core, while other components are to ensure that the purpose is authentic, internalized, and reflected in the reality of the organization. The point, however, is not whether strategy and culture are necessary for the purpose to be lived and achieved, which is clearly

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the case, but whether they can be considered as parts of the definition of a mission statement.

The third model to be discussed is Lipton's (1996, 2003) model of organizational vision. The model includes three components, which Lipton (1996, 2003) describes as messages or principal themes: mission, strategy, and culture.

The mission is about the fundamental and unique purpose of business, in addition to business definition and scope, defining target customers and the value to offer them, and related issues. Strategy is about the basic approach to achieve the mission and to obtain a competitive advantage given the organization's capabilities and resources. Organizational culture is about values, standards of behavior, leadership style, how people relate to each other, etc.

Notice again here that the mission (defined as purpose) is at the core of the model augmented by strategy and embraced by culture that seems necessary to reinforce the mission and support the strategy.

Readers, of course, can readily notice the similarity and differences between this model and the "Ashridge Mission Model." One model is labeled "mission" and the other is called "vision." The "Ashridge" model emphasizes the importance of a "sense of mission" and Lipton talks about a "sense of vision." In both models we see purpose, strategy, values, and standards of behaviors. The contents of those elements, however, are not always the same. Without getting into the finer details of similarity and differences one can see that the business definition and scope, for example, is part of strategy in one model, and of mission in another.

This similarity between the two models is acknowledged by Lipton (2003, p. 6), who states: "The vision framework model has some overlap with other conceptions of organizational vision, [...]. Its closest cousin, I believe, is a vision model developed by the Ashridge Strategic Management Center in the United Kingdom." It is quite clear that Lipton (2003), in this short quote, uses mission and vision interchangeably. He uses the expression "a vision model" to describe the "Ashridge Mission Model." This is one source of the confusion I am arguing against.

The formulation of the three models discussed above departed from the logic of compilation by insisting on synthesis and coherence, which we have not seen in the checklist-type definitions of the mission. However, the authors of the three models admit, or fail to show, that their formulations are not found explicitly and formally written in practice in the forms they advocate. Collins and Porras (1997, p. 78) say: "We did not find an explicit and formal statement of purpose in all of our visionary companies." Campbell and Yeung (1991) describe how they constructed their model through in-depth interviews. They never claimed that their model is found explicitly in a formal statement of any of the organizations they used to illustrate its logic and power. The same applies to Lipton's (1996, 2003) "vision framework," which is based on an analysis and categorization of actual statements of what he considered successful companies. Lipton (1996, p. 88) admits: "Organizational culture is typically missing from the standard 'mission statement,' which is why the statement alone is ineffectual." He continues to explain: "The ultimate value of the vision as a management tool is undermined if the vision is nothing more than a statement of purpose and a strategy for getting there. Purpose and strategy do not have the power to enhance performance unless they can be converted into action, policy, and job-related behavioral guidelines" (Lipton, 1996, p. 88).

These three models, of course, make good business sense. They are internally consistent, and their elements are coherent and mutually reinforcing. The point of

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debate, however, is the suitability of using a broad model as a definition of one of its parts.

The question of whether it is useful to think about, articulate, and write down all these components and parts, which are compiled in different ways by different researchers, remains valid. The answer is likely to be yes but this does not mean that all these various components and parts should be included in the definition of the mission or vision statement. An organization can have more than one statement and the mission or the vision statement is not necessarily an all-inclusive. Organizations should have strategies but strategies are not missions. They should have values and standards of behavior but these are not missions. They should have policies and systems but policies and systems are not missions. They should have operating procedures and routines and these are not missions. Having these concepts out of the definition of the mission statement does not mean that they are not important. Nor does this mean that the definition itself is faulty by excluding them.

To summarize, the centrality of purpose (or reasons for being) and the inconsistent use of the concept of “mission” are both noticeable in the three models discussed above, as well as in many other definitions reported in the literature. It is true that culture and strategy are needed to translate purpose into a lived reality. But this does not necessitate the inclusion of culture and strategy in the definition of mission. It is time to stop using one term to describe many related but different concepts. It is time for researchers (and practitioners) to speak the same language using specific terms to mean specific things. A mission statement is better used to communicate mission, a vision statement to articulate vision, and a values statement to describe core organizational values.

The final point to make before moving to offer the proposed definition of mission is to claim that the logic of both compiled lists and synthesized models fails to explain how extremely successful organizations manage for so long with “deficient” mission statements, i.e. mission statements that are inconsistent with that logic. The mission statements of exemplary organizations (see Khalifa, 2011), including top business schools, leading consulting firms, and top performing companies reported in any major study of long-lasting performance, such as Collins and Porras (1997), Joyce *et al.* (2004), and Collins and Hansen (2011) are all having “deficient” mission statements. Examining the annual reports of FTSE 100 companies and TOPIX 100 companies (data collected in 2008) shows that their mission statements do not match the logic of compilation and/or synthesis. Is it likely that these supposedly “deficient” mission statements may have helped these organizations to perform at exceptional level for such a long time?

### **Proposed definitions of a mission and a mission statement**

A thorough review of the literature as well as the discussion above show that purpose (the ultimate reason for an organization’s existence) is central to almost all proposed definitions of the mission statement (see Appendix). It is time to make a clear distinction between the concepts of mission, vision, values, business definition, and the like. The intention here, however, is to focus on the definition of a mission. Defining other concepts, as important as it is, requires more research to develop well-supported arguments, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Before moving into suggesting a new definition it may be appropriate to acknowledge the descriptive basis of the two types of logic that were described above. Researchers do make sense of what they observe in practice and translate that into

models, frameworks, or theories. These can then be used for making prescriptions. Researchers, however, take different paths in moving from description to prescription. The point is that when there is considerable diversity in practice, as Bart and Baetz (1998) already observed, researchers will have different ways as how they deal with such diversity. The paper presents the two dominant schools of thought in tackling this diversity and argues for an alternative way of thinking about the way forward.

As can be seen so far the early definition of a mission (see, e.g. Drucker, 1986, 2007) as the fundamental purpose of business that explains its reason for existence, is expanded in two ways: in checklists of compiled items and in well-structured and coherent models of synthesized elements. This paper argues for going back to basics and offers definitions of the mission and the mission statement in that spirit.

A simple and focussed definition of the concept of mission is suggested to serve two objectives: to add theoretical clarity and rigor in defining mission and mission statements, and to help practitioners make good use of the concept. The first objective may help find a common ground for the various definitions of the concept in the literature and ease the divergence in views. The second objective may free practitioners from the dictates of “checklist” mission statements, and give them confidence in their judgment of what is really salient in developing effective mission statements for their organizations.

Arguably, a mission is a genuine and energizing purpose of business – a purpose that is both affective and effective to create a sense of meaning and a sense of direction in the hearts and minds of the members of the organization. In other words, a mission is an authentic and ambitious purpose (see, Champy and Nohria, 2000; Ready and Truelove, 2011).

Authenticity of purpose specifically means originality rooted in reality. Ambitious purpose concretely means a significant value or outcome an organization intends to generate for a cause it strongly believes in (Champy and Nohria, 2000). As such, a mission is likely to be the product of a genuine feeling of responsibility to play a major role to produce results valued by the organization and its members.

There is truth in the argument made by the authors of the three models of the mission statement discussed above. It is proper to assume that a good mission has to be lived and committed to, that a sense of mission is essential, and that the mission should be reflected in culture and translated into strategy. These assumptions strongly imply that a choice has to be made in the articulation and formulation of the mission. No real choice can ever be made if there is no intention to carry it out. Without intention a choice has no meaning, i.e. it is no longer a choice. A weak intention is extremely unlikely to produce a sense of mission or develop a strong commitment. However, the conviction that the choice is the right one and the resolve to honor that choice can produce a sense of mission and develop a strong commitment (Champy and Nohria, 2000). Doubt and hesitation are unlikely to generate a genuine mission, and a fabricated mission is probably worse than no mission at all.

Consequently, a new definition of mission is proposed as a resolute commitment to create a significant value or outcome in service of a worthy cause – a cause that the members of the organization admire and be willing to exert their attention and energy in its pursuit. This definition has three pillars: an unyielding commitment to reflect authenticity of the mission (a hollow rhetoric is not a mission, just like a mask is not a real face); a significant value or outcome signaling a consequential challenge that is exciting and inspiring to stretch an organization’s capacity; and a worthy cause



to give meaning to the organization's members so that they invest themselves in creating the chosen value. It is up to each organization to decide the challenge it wants to engage in so as to create value, and the cause it elects to serve, as long as both choices are genuine and realistic. It is deliberately intended not to mention "customer value" specifically in this new definition, knowing that it is probably the most essential for successful missions (Drucker, 2006; Ellsworth, 2002; George, 2001, 2003; Khalifa, 2004). This is because some organizations may choose to focus on the wider value for society at large, while others may focus internally on organizational value. Given the context within which the mission is developed, these concerns for both societal and organizational value may form strong and credible missions as well.

This definition is expected to provide organizations with two types of benefits at both the individual and the organizational levels: soft human needs and hard organizational requirements. First, it helps set a clear focus that directs people's attention and energies to serve their need for meaning, sense of purpose, and sense of self-worth. Second, it helps in making strategic and resource allocation decisions to realize their chosen customer value, societal value, or organizational value. These benefits and advantages cannot be achieved unless the mission statement is an authentic expression of a real sense of purpose and unless top management behavior and organization's culture, systems, and processes are all consistent and reinforcing of that sense of purpose. Notice that the importance of culture, systems, and processes does not mean that they are part of the mission.

This proposed definition of mission is quite broad in terms of the variety of content, as the range of value and causes is limited only by lack of insight and imagination; but it is very specific in terms of what an organization decides to focus on, i.e. what value to create and what cause to serve. It implies that a choice among competing alternatives has to be made – a choice which is subject to refutation in favor of an alternative choice. This makes bland "motherhood statements" and "pious platitudes" seem like quite unauthentic missions (Ackoff, 1999). It also makes it more likely that an organization's mission is unique. To make a real choice is to come up with a deep insight into the realities of your business and its environment, and deep insights are not readily or widely available to everyone. Making a choice is difficult, painful, and risky (Drucker, 2001) and takes courage and creativity to craft (Matejka *et al.*, 1993).

The proposed definition is formulated in such a way as to be consistent with the definition of "strategic intent" by Hamel and Prahalad (1989), the definition of "purpose" by Champy and Nohria (2000), Ellsworth (2002), and Mourkogiannis (2006), and with other definitions of purpose in the literature.

The above definition of mission, however, does not imply that a mission has to be written to exist (Campbell, 1992; Lipton, 1996; Mourkogiannis, 2006). To be more effectively communicated, however, a written mission statement is valuable. A mission statement can now be defined as "a declaration of mission." That is: "a declaration of a resolute commitment to create a significant value in service of a worthy cause." It aims to make an organization's choices explicit so as to make the commitment public and to inform and influence the target addressees.

There is no standard format for writing the mission statement or ideal number of elements that it should include. Creation of value is probably the most visible part of the mission statement and is more likely to be explicitly expressed. The served cause may or may not appear in the statement. An organization, for example, may choose to write a mission statement focussing only on its role in society in the understanding that

the cause it intends to serve is strongly implied by that role. It may opt to focus instead, on the compelling cause to give deeper meaning to a direction or effort it is already engaging in, or on the assumption that what it does is implicitly known but lacks a greater purpose. The degrees of freedom are quite broad as to how the mission statement is expressed. However, an effective mission statement has to be concrete and reflective of a choice; otherwise there will be no focus and no guidance for a clear direction of the organization.

### **The strengths and drawbacks of the proposed definition**

The proposed definition of mission, however, neither exhausts all the varieties found in practice nor is it meant to do so. Three reasons explain this. First, the variety of organizations' mission statements is so wide that no single definition can possibly be exhaustive. Second, there are authentic and fabricated mission statements, and not all existing varieties are necessarily authentic. This definition, by design, excludes all those varieties of mission statements that are not authentic, i.e. that imply no particular choice. Third, the proposed definition reverses the logic of compilation and synthesis in favor of a more focussed approach. Evidently, a definition built on choice can never be exhaustive.

This proposed definition is consistent with the practice of some leading consulting companies, top business schools, exemplary companies, and nonprofits.

The following examples are chosen to fit the proposed definition for two reasons. First, since the definition is narrow, focussed, and not exhaustive, it is natural that some mission statements lie outside its boundaries. For example, a mission to deliver superior shareholder return clearly falls outside the boundaries of the proposed definition. It is neither effective nor affective for it gives no direction for action and fails to trigger the enthusiasm of organizational members. Second, the goal of showing these examples is to establish that the proposed definition is legitimate and rooted in the practice of a wide range of exemplary organizations. These examples, then, are neither meant to be exhaustive nor represent the only good form of mission statements (other good mission statements may exist which display clearly articulated and a significant value contribution and a worthy and compelling cause).

Drucker (1986, 1989, and 2007) is probably the first to introduce the concept of mission and to emphasize the power of purpose to the management literature. He shows how a sense of mission, even unwritten, had led Marks and Spencer in England and Sears, Roebuck, and Company in the USA to the top of their industry for decades. According to Drucker's (1994, p. 100) account, Marks and Spencer defined its mission back in the 1920s, "as being the change agent in British society by becoming the first classless retailer." Drucker also reports other similar missions such that of Sears, Roebuck, and Company, in the years during and following First World War, which he says: "defined its mission as being the informed buyer for the American family" (Drucker, 1994, pp. 99-100). Another example is brought by Hamel (2006, p. 83), who describes the mission of the Bangladesh's Grameen Bank as "to turn the poorest of the poor into entrepreneurs," and commends the great and sustained results it continues to produce.

Recently, Drucker (2006) illustrates how much effort and thought the best nonprofits devote to defining their organization's mission. He applauds their alertness to avoid sweeping statements full of good intentions and to focus, instead, on creating meaningful results for their society. Drucker (2006, p. 148) commends The Salvation Army's mission "to turn society's rejects—alcoholics, criminals, derelicts – into

citizens”; The Girl Scouts mission to “help youngsters become confident, capable young women who respect themselves and other people”; and The Nature Conservancy mission to “preserve the diversity of nature’s fauna and flora.”

George (2003, p. 66) describes the importance of Medtronic’s mission in its success and although the mission is written in six points he consistently uses a short version of it that reads: “to restore people to full life and health.” This clear purpose is really the essence of the mission that one can focus on and talk about.

The mission of Ken Blanchard Companies is “to unleash the potential and power in people and organizations for the greater good” (Blanchard, 2007, p. 331). There are other mission statements of leading consulting firms that are as short and focussed as the mission statements cited above and which are consistent with the definition of mission I offered earlier. Examples include those of Accenture: “To help companies and organizations improve their performance and competitiveness”; Arthur D. Little: “Be the top management consulting firm linking Strategy, Innovation and Technology to master our clients’ business complexity to deliver sustainable results”; Bain and Company: “To help our clients create such high levels of economic value that together we set new standards of excellence in our respective industries”; Booz Allen Hamilton: “Booz Allen Hamilton partners with clients to solve their most important and complex problems, making their mission our mission, and delivering results that endure”; and McKinsey & Company’s: “To help our clients make distinctive, substantial and lasting improvements in their performance and to build a great firm that is able to attract, develop, and retain exceptional people.”

Top business schools also have clearly focussed and purpose-driven mission statements. The following are just some of such statements. The mission of Haas School of Business, University of California Berkeley reads: “To develop leaders who redefine how we do business”; that of Harvard Business School declares: “We educate leaders who make a difference in the world”; and the MIT Sloan School of Management mission is: “to develop principled, innovative leaders who improve the world and to generate ideas that advance management practice.”

Examples of other exemplary organizations abound, but the ones cited above are enough to illustrate the value of the proposed definition of mission. I outline below some of the reasons why this definition is worthy of consideration:

- (1) It does not contradict any major model (Collins and Porras, 1997; Lipton, 1996; Campbell, 1992) or definition of mission statement. In this sense, it may help ease conflict in the literature as to what is and what is not a mission.
- (2) It is consistent with the mission statement of many exemplary organizations as well as with the early definitions of the concept (e.g. Drucker, 1994, 2007).
- (3) It is based only on purpose and choice. It does not include any descriptive parts, such as a business definition. It clearly describes the meaning of purpose as value creation in service of a worthy cause, and requires that this purpose should be ambitious and challenging.
- (4) It is parsimonious. It involves only three elements (firm commitment, significant value, and worthy cause) but does not imply that all should be present in the written statement of a mission.
- (5) It is broad and flexible. There is wide variety of value and causes limited only by a lack of insight and imagination. Once the value and the cause are defined, the mission helps in making strategic and resource allocation decisions.

- (6) It is meaningful and rich. Members of an organization can derive great meaning from the challenge of value creation and the merit of the cause. This in turn, may help trigger a sense of purpose and self-worth.
- (7) It produces its own criteria for what is a good mission statement. It implies that the commitment should be genuine, the value to be created should be significant, and the cause to be served should be worthwhile.

Having said that, it is possible to raise two basic issues threatening the validity of the proposed definition: one conceptual and one practical. The conceptual issue is related to the inclusion of authenticity and ambition in the definition of mission statement. The practical issue is related to how an observer or a researcher can distinguish between authentic and forged or between ambitious and unambitious mission statements.

At the conceptual level, the functions for which the mission statement is developed to serve (e.g. to give a sense of meaning, a sense of direction, etc.) cannot be served by fabricated missions. Fabricated mission statements reveal themselves in vagueness, lack of choice, feel-good formulations, etc. Managers, employees, and other stakeholders, who are having intimate acquaintance with the organization, cannot be deceived for long by a fabricated mission statement. The strategy, the culture, the decisions, and other practices and actions of the organization either substantiate or put into question the originality and authenticity of the mission statement. The only ones who may be misled by fabricated mission statements are distant observers or audiences who have no close relationship with the organization. An organization with a fabricated mission statement is like a person putting a mask on his/her face. If you are aware that what you see is the mask not the face then you can just acknowledge that you are unable to see the real face, unless, of course, you are interested to investigate the effect of putting masks on behavior or performance. Therefore, without including the attributes of authenticity a mask might be taken for the real face.

Practically, one needs to take a closer look or ask more penetrating questions to know the contextual conditions to determine whether a mission statement is authentic and ambitious. For example, researchers who mix authentic and fabricated statements in their quest to investigate the relationship between mission statements and performance will have contaminated data. Unlike authentic mission statements, fabricated missions may have a negative relationship with performance, for they are likely to produce cynicism and negative energy in organizations.

### **Practical implications**

There are at least four practical implications arising from this definition. First and foremost, is that if there is no sense of mission then it is better not to have a mission statement. Creating a sense of mission is a prerequisite for an authentic mission statement. This is an act of leadership. Second, the development process of the mission statement is of prime importance. A genuine mission statement is a product of both deep understanding of the organizational and environmental reality and deep insight. This is a soul searching and discovery process. Participation of leaders and opinion makers at various levels is the key in this process. Those are the people with influence and with direct and intimate connection with the reality inside and outside the organization and with its stakeholders. A mission statement cannot be imported, it cannot be taken off-shelve, and it cannot be delegated to a third party. Third, a mission statement is a matter of choice and choice is risky and hard. Developing a mission statement is a risky undertaking. It is not for the fainthearted.

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It needs courage and resolve. That is why confidence in the understanding and insight cultivated in the development process is essential to make an informed choice – a choice that carefully matches the organizational reality with the outside reality. Fourth, clarity of choice is reflected in the final wording of the mission statement. Both value and cause, the what and why of purpose, should be crystal clear in the mind of intended addressees. This does not necessarily mean that both should appear in the final statement. If the context clearly points to one of them the other should take the attention it deserves in the formal statement of mission. The important point, however, is not whether one or both elements of purpose (value and cause) appear in the formal statement but whether they reflect clarity of thinking and choice. This clarity is what makes purposeful action possible.

### Limitations and directions for further research

The process of developing a mission statement is not less important than its content. The two are intertwined, as can be seen in the practical implications above. The paper, however, focusses mainly on content and does not thoroughly address the process of developing a mission and how this process relates to and influences the mission's content. This is a fruitful research opportunity.

The proposed definition equates a mission to an authentic and ambitious purpose. Purpose has two dimensions: significant value and worthy cause. Simple analysis of this definition reveals two types of requirements for a statement of mission to qualify as a declaration of real mission: elements of purpose and their attributes. Value and cause, the two elements of purpose, should be significant and worthy, respectively. Authenticity of purpose, significance of value, and worthiness of cause are all difficult to establish and assess. There is an apparent dilemma here. On one hand, without these attributes real and fabricated mission statements cannot be distinguished from each other, which mean that the observed impact of a mission statement on organizational behavior and performance can be mixed at best. For that impact is not a matter of whether a mission statement exists but of whether a sense of mission exists. Without this distinction, then, it is unlikely to correctly reveal the actual impact of mission statements. This might partially explain the mixed results reported in the literature. On the other hand, pinning down the exact meaning of these attributes is tricky. The real challenge is to accurately operationalize these elements and their attributes and to find a means to measure them so as to clear the way for furthering the research agenda in this field.

In addition, the proposed definition implies that research carried out based on published data (including mission statements and performance measures) without closer investigation into the realities of the researched organizations is likely to produce erroneous conclusions. The proposed definition directs the attention of researchers to the importance of the contextual factors within and without the researched organizations. This means, for example, that what can be considered a significant value in one context might be insignificant in another. This requirement raises the bar for field research and makes it more demanding. Dealing with such challenges will probably trigger the zeal to advance research in this field.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf.)

Source	Definition
Ackoff (1999, p. 83)	"A mission statement states the organization's reason for being, its ultimate ends, its ideals."
Bart (1997, p. 9)	"A formal written document designed to capture and convey a firm's unique and enduring purpose. It should answer some fairly basic yet critical questions, such as What is our purpose? And, Why does our organization exist?"
Bart (2001, p. 322)	"Mission statements answer the question: why do we exist as an organization (or what is our purpose)."
Bartkus <i>et al.</i> (2000, p. 28)	"The best mission statements simply define the company's business and suggest a future goal."
Blanchard (2007, p. 19)	"A statement of purpose is not the same thing as a business definition BUT a mission can define the business and its role in it in the form of the unique value or contribution it wants to make."
Cardona and Rey (2006, p. 165)	"the mission of a company must be a contribution that characterizes the identity of the company."
Collis and Rukstad (2008, p. 85)	"The mission statement spells out the underlying motivation for being in business in the first place – the contribution to society that the firm aspires to make."
David and David (2003, p. 11)	Mission statements are "enduring statements of purpose that distinguish one organization from other similar enterprises". They assert that a mission statement answers the question "What business are we in?"
Davies and Glaister (1997, p. 594)	"There are numerous formal definitions of what a mission statement is, but most of them indicate that it should combine a statement of purpose for the organization with some form of aspirational vision for its future, all presented in as succinct a way as possible."
Drucker (1994)	A mission explicates the basic role of the enterprise in society
Ireland and Hitt (1992, p. 35)	"An effective mission statement describes the firm's fundamental, unique purpose. An important part of this description indicates how a firm is unique in its scope of operations and its product or service offerings."
Krattenmaker (2002, p. 3)	"A mission statement should describe the fundamental objectives of the business and should include what people variously refer to as guiding principles, credos, and corporate philosophies" (quoting Jeffrey Abrahams, author of <i>The Mission Statement Book: 301 Corporate Mission Statements from America's Top Companies</i> )
Leuthesser and Kohli (1997, p. 59)	"Previous researchers have noted that mission statements – variously referred to as statements of purpose, values statement, goals and strategies, corporate creed, corporate philosophy, and so on – are structured in a variety of ways. Defined very broadly here, the phrase 'mission statement' should be taken as equivalent to numerous other descriptions that might be used to refer to the elements commonly found in a mission statement."
Matejka <i>et al.</i> (1993, p. 34)	"A vision is an optimistic, inspiring picture that brings with it the responsibility to make it happen. A vision is a dream of greatness. [...] The mission melds the inspiration of the vision (what we want to become) with the realities of who we are and what we do for whom."

**Table AI.**  
Table of selected definitions of the mission statement

(continued)



Source	Definition
Pearce and David (1987, p. 109)	"It is an enduring statement of purpose that reveals an organization's product or service, markets, customers, and philosophy. When prepared as a formal organizational document, a mission statement may be presented under a maze of labels, including "creed statement," "statement of purpose," "statement of philosophy," or a statement "defining our business."
Rarick and Vitton (1995, p. 11)	"What a mission statement should say is still open to debate. To some of the companies surveyed, it is merely a venue to stress organizational values. To others, it is a straightforward outline of who-we-are, what-we-do, and where-we're-headed. To another group, it is a few words on vision."
Strong (1997, p. 269)	"A mission statement is a clear definition of the mission and purpose of the organization, it may be referred to as the organization creed statement, statement of purpose, statement of general principles, statement of corporate intent or vision statement."
Strong (1997, p. 269)	"Many definitions of the mission statement exist, there is an interactive use of these definitions but it appears that no two academics have agreed upon a single absolute definition."
Williams (2008, p. 96)	"A mission statement tells two things about a company: who it is and what it does" (Falsey, 1989, p. 3). "A number of others offer a similar definition [...] In addition to conveying a corporation's nature and reason for being, this statement may also outline where a firm is headed; how it plans to get there; what its priorities, values, and beliefs are; and how it is distinctive."

Table AI.

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