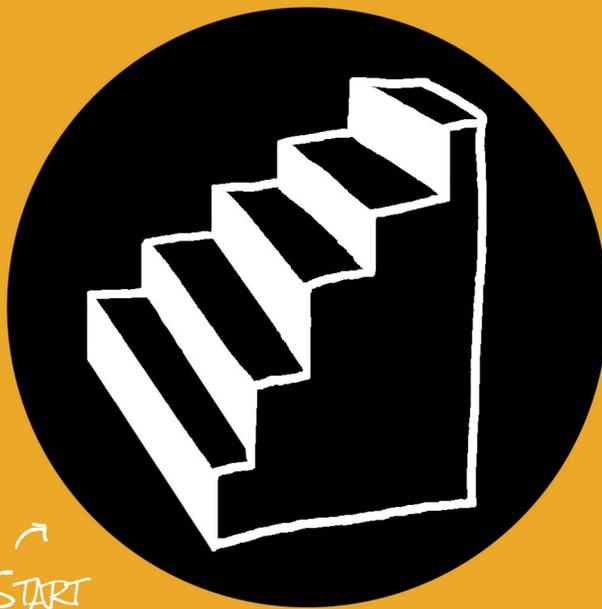


# A Step-by-Step Exercise for Creating a Mission Statement



↪  
START  
HERE

Working as a Group to Define a Mission that Matters  
60–120 minutes • 10–30 people



nonprofit **hub**

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## Your mission statement

By itself, your mission statement doesn't mean much. It's just words on a page.

But if it's supported by a group of people who care about making a difference in the world, that's something else.

Few things are as powerful as a shared mission.

This exercise will help your team come up with a mission that matters, and then make the jump.

It can take as little time as an hour.

Are you ready?

## Who needs to write a mission statement?

A nonprofit mission is never static.

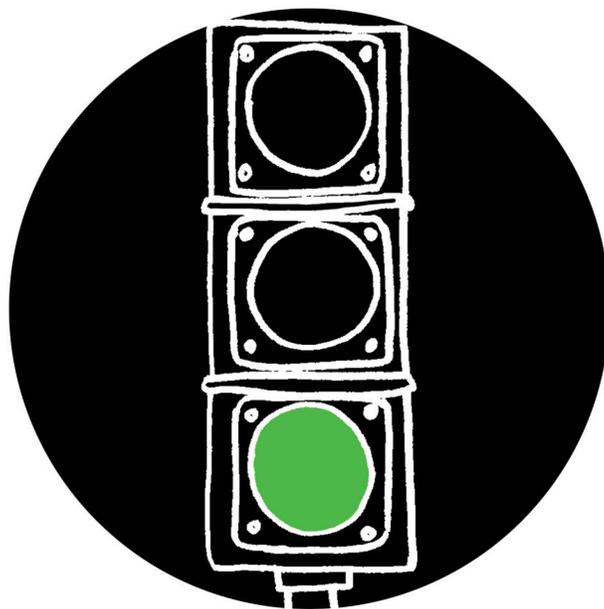
Especially in the first years, an organization's mission shifts and changes as the organization develops.

This tool is for teams who are either:

- Starting a nonprofit organization, or
- Rebooting their mission statement.

This tool is for those who want to skip the nitpicking, word choice arguments or needing to create the elusive “perfect mission statement.”

It's about deciding what you stand for, doing work that matters and bringing your team together.



## Get your group together

### What you'll need:

- Paper and pens for brainstorming. Index cards work great.
- A whiteboard or big sheets of paper for the group moderator.
- Coffee and bagels (optional).

### Who you'll need:

- *You*: an impartial moderator—preferably an outsider, not the executive director. You keep things moving and help supervise.
- 10 to 30 of the people who care most about your organization. This is a group project.

### How much time you'll need:

- One to two hours.



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## Step 1: Storytelling

Time: 10–20 minutes



One of the fastest ways to the heart of your mission is the stories your group already has.

1. Split your large group into several small groups of 3–5 people each. Make your groups as diverse as possible.
2. Each member of your mini-group gets a few minutes to share a story. This question can prompt some good ones:

*“What does it look like when we’re doing our best work?”*

3. Don’t have any story yet? **Make one up.**

*“What would it look like when we’re doing our best work?”*

4. Write details out on your notecards or paper. You’ll be sharing stories with the large group soon. Don’t forget them.

e.g.

**“In Rwanda, we got to help Bagina’s family easily get clean water which allowed the four children to focus on school work instead of spending days sick from bad water and nights walking hours to carry back water from the dirty river.”**

*(Modeled after charity: water)*

5. Look at the stories you've written down as a group. Identify every time you mention **a specific place or a person**. **Circle them** so you can identify them later.

e.g.

“In **Rwanda**, we got to help **Bagina's family** easily get clean water which allowed the four **children** to focus on school work instead of spending days sick from bad water and nights walking hours to carry back water from the dirty river.”

6. Now **draw a square** around any mention of your organization **making a difference and taking action**. *(It's ok to overlap your squares and circles.)*

e.g.

“In Rwanda, we got to **help Bagina's family easily get clean water** which allowed the four children to focus on school work instead of spending days sick from bad water and nights walking hours to carry back water from the dirty river.”

7. Finally, **underline** anytime something in the story **changes for better or results from your work**.

e.g.

“In Rwanda, we got to help Bagina's family easily get clean water which allowed the four children to focus on school work instead of spending days sick from bad water and nights walking hours to carry back water from the dirty river.”

8. Your stories should look like this by now:

“In **Rwanda**, we got to help **Bagina’s family** easily get clean water which allowed the four **children** to focus on school work instead of spending days sick from bad water and nights walking hours to carry back water from the dirty river.”

The point of this exercise: **being able to identify the important parts of your stories** so you can share with the large group.

If you identify the parts of your stories out loud, you can skip all the diagramming. But we think it’s helpful.

## Step 2: Sharing

Time: 20–25 minutes

Now it's time to share your stories and important elements.

1. All small groups merge back into one large group.
2. As moderator, create the following grid on a visible whiteboard, large piece of paper or whatever else you've got:

<b>Our Cause</b> Who? What? Where?	<b>Circled items go here</b>
<b>Our Actions</b> What we do	<b>Squared items go here</b>
<b>Our Impact</b> Changes for the better	<b><u>Underlined items go here</u></b>

3. Have each group share stories from their group.

As they share, have them identify the objects they identified and put them on your chart.

e.g. charity: water	
<p><b>Our Cause</b> Who? What? Where?</p>	<p>Bangladesh Rwanda Ngoma Liberia</p> <p>developing areas rural communities</p> <p>women families children Bagina</p> <p>farmers business owners fishermen</p>
<p><b>Our Actions</b> What we do</p>	<p>access to clean water wells safe routes to water</p> <p>water filter</p> <p>latrines sanitation handwashing education</p>
<p><b>Our Impact</b> Changes for the better</p>	<p>less sickness health less thirst decrease mortality more food</p> <p>less fear less crime</p> <p>reduce poverty improved economy solid communities</p> <p>kids can go to school can pursue other dreams save time and energy</p>

4. Patterns and similarities will develop naturally—group similar ideas more or less together, like we’ve grouped our examples above.

5. Name and identify common ideas from your stories and label their Big Idea.

e.g.	charity: water	
<p><b>Our Cause</b> Who? What? Where?</p>	<p><b>Developing Areas</b></p> <p>Bangladesh Rwanda Ngoma Liberia</p> <p>developing areas rural communities</p> <p><b>Families/Communities</b>      <b>Local Economies</b></p> <p>women families children Bagina</p> <p>farmers business owners fishermen</p>	
<p><b>Our Actions</b> What we do</p>	<p><b>Clean Water</b>      <b>Sanitation/Education</b></p> <p>access to clean water wells</p> <p>safe routes to water water filter</p> <p>latrines sanitation</p> <p>handwashing education</p>	
<p><b>Our Impact</b> Changes for the better</p>	<p><b>Health</b>      <b>Stronger Communities</b></p> <p>less sickness health less thirst decrease mortality more food</p> <p>reduce poverty improved economy solid communities</p> <p><b>Security</b>      <b>Opportunity</b></p> <p>less fear less crime</p> <p>kids can go to school can pursue other dreams save time and energy</p>	

## Step 3: Craft your statements

Time: 5–10 minutes

Time to get back into your original small groups and craft a mission statement.



1. Split back into your small groups.
2. As a group, you're going to write a mission statement for your organization that incorporates the Big Ideas you identified as a large group (*They should still be somewhere everyone can see them.*):

**Our Cause**  
Who? What? Where?

developing areas  
families/communities  
local economies

**Our Actions**  
What we do

provide clean water  
sanitation/education

**Our Impact**  
Changes for the better

health  
stronger communities  
security  
opportunity

All mission statements have these three elements: **Cause, Actions** and **Impact**. Here are some simple examples of mission statements that incorporate the Big Ideas above:

e.g.

“We help families in developing areas stay healthy by providing clean water and education.”

“Helping build safe, strong communities in the developing world through safe drinking water.”

“Through clean water, we promote security and opportunities in rural economies.”

### 3. Here are 5 things to remind your group:

- **Don't worry about word choice.** This is the easiest part to nit-pick and the least important for your final statement!
- **Keep it short.** Many of the best mission statements have fewer than 10 words.
- **Keep it simple.** Too many nonprofits have long, flowery mission statements that sound toiled over.
- **Say it out loud.** Does it sound awkward? Memorable? Catchy? Human?
- **The disagreement test:** If no one would disagree with your statement (*things like "make the world better" or "act with integrity"*) then your statement is too generic. Don't hide behind clichés!

e.g.

"charity: water is a non-profit organization bringing clean and safe drinking water to people in developing nations."

"The mission of The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts is to work with our community to reduce hunger and increase food security."

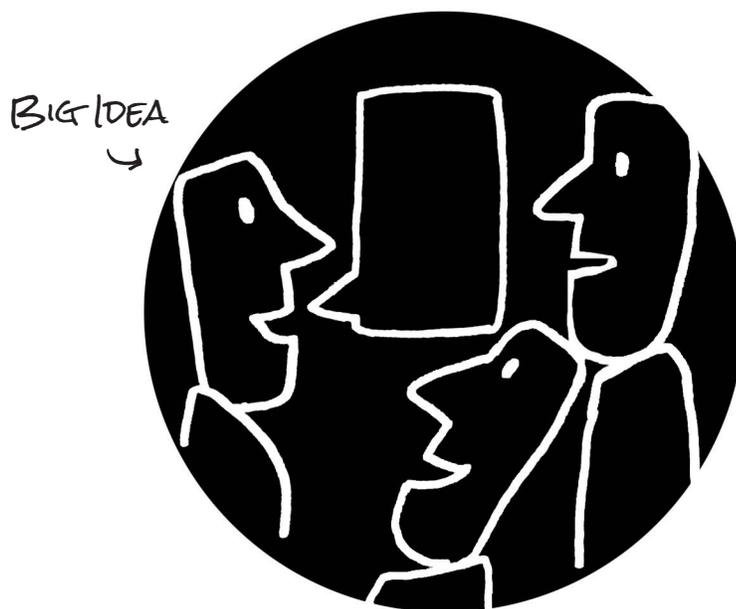
"TED is a nonprofit devoted to Ideas Worth Spreading."

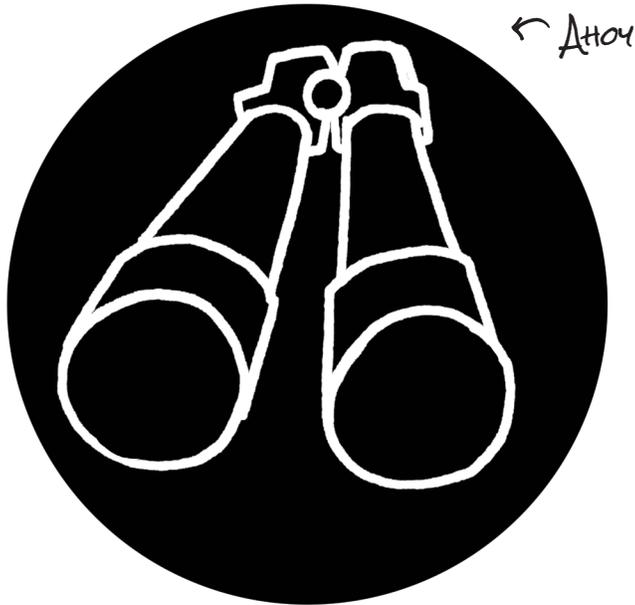
## Step 4: Sharing, take 2

Time: 5 minutes

Now it's time to share your potential statements as a large group.

1. All small groups merge back into one large group.
2. Have the moderator write each potential mission statement for everyone to see as each group shares it out loud.
3. If you like, you can identify each time a Big Idea identified earlier shows up. Remember: the Big Ideas can be implied—they don't have to be stated directly.





## Step 5: A dose of vision

Time: 5 minutes

Now you've got several strong, simple mission statement possibilities.

Each statement is built off the powerful stories your nonprofit has experienced or hopes to make true.

1. Moderator: Ask for volunteers to share why they know the mission you've defined is important.

Why does it matter?

And most of all, why do you know that you can achieve this mission together?

This is the final, most important test.

## Step 6: Jump

You don't have your final mission statement yet, but you're close.

1. Appoint a committee or final decision maker to take these mission statements and Big Ideas finalize the wording.
2. Have the final decision maker present the final mission statement to your organization at a later date.

A mission statement does two things:

1. Tells the world **why what you're doing matters**.
2. Leads your organization **to do what matters**.

By itself, a mission statement isn't enough.

You've got to make the jump.

Make your mission a reality. Do work that matters.



## Thanks for reading

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