

Mission Statements: Are They Worth the Time?

When business owners ask me if a company mission statement (aka value statement or corporate code) is worth the time and effort, I respond with a question, “What do you want the statement to do?”

Mission statements are not fairy dust. You can’t drop one into your employee manual and expect everyone in the company to commit it to memory and from that day forward act according to its principles. Since that expectation is a fantasy, what do you realistically expect your company’s mission statement to do?

When I decided to create a mission statement for my company, my goal was simple: Give everyone—from C-suite to loading dock—a single point of reference for how to act in situations not covered by our employee handbook. I’d guess that roughly 99 percent of the interactions involving customers, vendors, and employees are not covered in your handbook. I know that was true in my company.

Creating a Mission Statement

There are many consultants who can lead you through the mission-statement-creation process. I can’t tell you whether you need one of these consultants or not, but I can tell you that we’re very proud of the process we created on our own. Here are my top five suggestions.

1. Pick the Right Time.

If you initiate the process of creating a mission statement when there is a high level of conflict, employees and/or family members will likely see it as a not-very-well-disguised effort to cover up problems. If you think the exercise of creating a mission statement during conflict is necessary to help your culture, reevaluate the statement once the culture improves.

2. Pick the Participants.

Create a small group from among leadership team and family members. In our company with 70+ employees, the group consisted of eight people: three family members and five nonfamily employees—one from every division in the company.

3. Be there.

Since a family's or GM's core values should appear in a company's mission statement, the GM should facilitate the process. For example, I guided the group away from references to making more money, because I wanted everyone to focus on the success that would follow doing great work and treating people as we said we would in our mission statement.

4. Make it Yours.

Don't look at other companies' statements for hints because their statements describe what inspires them — not you. Ask yourself what inspires you to work as hard as you do, and then ask everyone in the group a few questions:

- How is the company perceived today, and how do you want it to be perceived in the future?
- Who are we now, and who do we want to be?
- What's important to us?
- What makes this company one we choose to work for?
- What makes us successful, and what would make us more successful?

5. Use It.

Once you create a mission statement, your work is not done. If the statement is filed in a drawer or buried in an employee handbook never to be mentioned again, you have wasted your time. A statement is irrelevant unless:

- The company's leadership team and the family truly believe what it says and act accordingly.
- Employees see it and hear it referred to regularly. We posted a professionally printed version of ours in the lobby and back entry of our building so everyone entering the building sees it.
- A family member reviews the statement with new employees during the onboarding process.
- GMs, leadership teams, and family members review it regularly.