

why have a mission statement?

by Susan Hay

Everyone seems to have a piece of early years practice. It is overwhelmed by regulation, guidance and opinion from regulatory bodies, from academics, from consumers, from the media, and in recent years has felt 'owned' by every stakeholder except the provider. The recent economic downturn has only served to increase our awareness of the forensic scrutiny early years services are under, measured in every way by others.



The focus of Susan's career has been the development of employer-sponsored work life and child care solutions in the UK. Having started a research and consultancy practice, and built

a network of nurseries in London in partnership with blue-chip employers, Susan successfully merged her own business with Bright Horizons Family Solutions. Susan has been centrally involved in influencing public policy and practice in child care, having acted as an advisor to successive Government, academic and campaigning working parties on the economics of child care provision, and the quality of services. Susan's increasing interest in family wellbeing, and the importance of embracing the UK Government's policy of Every Child Matters across health, as well as education, its impact on the life chances of children and centrality to reducing child poverty, has taken her into a new phase of working life largely in the voluntary and state sectors, holding a number of Trustee and Governorship roles, notably, as a Director of Bright Horizons Foundation for Children in Europe, and founding the charity, Adam's Hats. She maintains links with the work life sector as a freelance consultant.

The purpose of a mission statement

Having a vision, and sharing it through a carefully crafted mission statement can release us from the weight and confusion of daily life in child care and enable us to lift our heads above the parapet and take a longer view, because a mission statement is ours. It informs others of our values, those aspects of the organisation which are not subject to the benchmarks others impose, and which we do not seek to trade. Rosamund and Ben Zander, in their book *The Art of Possibility* (2002), aptly describe a mission statement as "helping to see things in terms of the realm of possibility, rather than as a downward spiral of constraints and limitations."

There are other reasons why having a mission statement is now more important than ever. Many surveys have shown that consumers believe that organisations have a duty to improve the social impacts of their activity; those same consumers are the families who seek child care providers they feel good about. Early years professionals were never attracted by salary alone, but even more so now are motivated by responsible business practices that produce a stable and meaningful career course. A

mission statement gives us the opportunity to describe the passion of the people driving the organisation and with it, the security of the careers they offer.

Early years services invariably set up with a purpose, and with a commitment to meeting the goals they have set out, within a culture concerned with regulation compliance, value for money, and a raised quality bar. We all must operate like this. Arguably one of the few ways we have of distinguishing ourselves from the crowd is to articulate how we offer our services, the spirit in which they are offered, and why families (as well as employees) and those who govern our practices can trust us.

Trust is harder to build than it used to be. As we communicate more and more by e-mail and conference call, how do we build trust with people we hardly ever see? The rules of trust are well-established, but they do not sit easily with the managerial tradition that believes efficiency and control are closely linked and that you can't have one without a lot of the other. As organisations dedicated to providing a service to families, child care providers do carry responsibilities beyond themselves, responsibilities that a virtual way of

working throws into sharp relief; and trust lies at the heart of the matter. This seems rather obvious, yet most organisations arrange themselves around the assumption that people cannot be trusted, and design oversight systems and processes to prevent anyone from doing the wrong thing. At the same time, unlimited trust is unrealistic. A mission statement can help to put a workable frame around this dilemma.

Trust also requires learning to be continuous, as times change and families' expectations and aspirations also change. A mission statement needs to embrace the agility and flexibility of the organisation whilst remaining true to its values. Trust needs bonding to happen between those responsible for delivering the service, as after all, they are only and jointly the trustees of the organisation's values. This means that the goals of smaller units, every child care centre within a group, must gel with the goals of the whole. A mission statement can help with the integration of such goals, and encourage trust right across a multisite operation, particularly if it is delivered with the passion of personal touch.

Saying what you want to say

'Personal infection' was the way in which Anita Roddick, the founder of Body Shop, described the way in which she poured her energy into the reinforcement of her beliefs and values into every medium she could find: visionary leadership combined with making values clear for others. Here is the Body Shop's mission statement:

Our Reason For Being: To dedicate our business to the pursuit of social and environmental change.

- *To creatively balance the financial and human needs of our stakeholders: employees, customers, franchisees, suppliers, and shareholders.*

- *To courageously ensure that our business is ecologically sustainable, meeting the needs of the present without compromising the future.*
- *To meaningfully contribute to local, national, and international communities in which we trade, by adopting a code of conduct which ensures care, honesty, fairness and respect. To passionately campaign for the protection of the environment and human and civil rights, and against animal testing within the cosmetics and toiletries industry.*
- *To tirelessly work to narrow the gap between principle and practice, while making fun, passion, and care part of our daily lives.*

This is a good example of a mission statement articulating possibility, full of passion, although it does not actually say what the business does. No one can reduce this statement to "What about me?" or to a set of specifics or constraints about the way they must do their work. But it does not stand alone.

A mission statement should be:

- Free-standing and special, both in and of itself, allowing infinite expression and development
- Capable of becoming real for the speaker or writer
- Inspirational for others and an invitation to create ideas that correlate with organisational objectives and goals.

If this can be achieved, then you have responsible, on-track participation in your vision. But framing possibility requires us to be counter-intuitive: to think in terms of contexts that govern and frame our work, rather than the evidence before us. To be widely accessible then, the mission statement needs to:

- Focus strategy by defining boundaries
- Define the dimensions along which an organisation is to be measured
- Suggest standards for individual ethical behaviour.

Relating the vision to your operational frame will finesse the trap of it all sounding like missionary zeal. Hopefully, your mission statement will be short enough to be repeated by everyone, and to be contained in an 'elevator speech,' to paraphrase our late great Jim Greenman, who led both Bright Horizons Family Solutions' Education and Training effort, and the company's charitable arm, Bright Horizons Foundation for Children.

Essentially, the mission statement should answer three key questions:

- What are the opportunities or needs we exist to address? (Purpose)
- What are we doing to address them? (Business)
- What principles and beliefs guide our work? (Values)

You could begin by creating a grid containing these questions, and ask staff and board members to list any words and phrases that come to mind in terms of your organisation. Look for the language and ideas that resonate with others, so that the completed grid leads to a statement that:

- Expresses your organisation's purpose in a way that inspires support and ongoing commitment
- Motivates those connected to the organisation at all levels
- Articulates the aspirations of the organisation in such a way that they are convincing and easy to grasp

- Uses proactive verbs to describe what you do
- Is free of jargon
- Is short enough so that anyone connected can readily repeat it.

Here is an example from the 1998 mission statement of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America:

The mission of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America is to make a positive difference in the lives of children and youth, primarily through a professionally-supported, one-to-one relationship with a caring adult, and to assist them in achieving their highest potential as they grow to become confident, competent, and caring individuals, by providing committed volunteers, national leadership and standards of excellence.

And if we break it down:

- *The purpose:* To make a positive difference in the lives of children and youth so that they will achieve their highest potential
- *The business:* Providing and supporting volunteers committed to having one-to-one relationships with children and youth
- *The values:* Individuals who are confident, competent, and caring.

Making it stick

A mission statement is a theme that can unite your organisation, providing it is both believable and sustainable. 'Believable' has already been covered, but 'sustainable' means that the actual work must be seen to reflect the mission, that there is no division between the mission thought, and the operational action. The ultimate test is probably whether the courage contained in the mission statement is capable of translation into per-

sistence and tenacity in the face of adversity, on the ground. Can you stand by it in the face of the sort of challenges those in early years practice face every day:

- Competition from other centres
- Short-term operational goals and needs
- Staff's fear of impending economic downturn, potential redundancy
- The howling wolf at the door. Can you distinguish between those who are 'on' and those who are 'off' mission, in your team, and can the mission statement be used to re-engage those who have become overwhelmed by short-term goals?

Responding to change

The mission statement often tells or references the story of why the organisation was first created, which was to meet an identified need, then. This essential purpose has probably not changed, but the way the organisation does business probably has, because the societal, economic, political, and regulatory landscape will have shifted. This changes the reality of pursuing your mission.

You should review your mission statement at least every five years, or after a big change in the external environment, to adapt it to contemporary circumstances in order for it to continue to inspire support, commitment, innovation and courage in a current and relevant way. Does it still motivate in a way that people can connect with it? The review should consider what new opportunities or needs should be addressed, and are there any new principles or beliefs that should guide the work. One of the main uses of the mission state-

ment will be as a publicity tool and for reporting purposes, and it will cease to be interesting to readers if it cannot be related to the present conditions in the field.

If we look now at how the Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America's mission statement has changed, we can see that today, it is more succinct:

(Our) mission is to help children reach their potential through professionally supported, one-to-one relationships with mentors that have a measurable impact on youth.

Specifically, 20 years on, it now reflects the current need for services to be evaluated for their impact. This is a good example of moving with the times, and of being both transparent and, therefore, trustworthy.

Finally, think of your mission statement as a compass for leadership decisions. When faced with a dilemma, return to it, and your action will reflect your values.

References

Zander, R. S., & Zander, B. (2002). *The art of possibility: Transforming professional and personal life*. New York: Penguin.