

Key Ingredients of a Strong Vision

By John Durel

The **key ingredients** of a strong vision are:

1. A clear statement of the organization's core purpose – what value the organization holds for others
2. A clear description of the organization's core values – five or six beliefs or principles that guide the work
3. A vision or the future for the community in which the organization exists
4. A vision of the future of the organization, in line with the community vision

Core Purpose

I have worked with a number of museums, helping them to distinguish between their "core purpose" and "mission." Traditionally, a mission statement tells WHAT you are and what you do. You are a museum, you collect, preserve and interpret. Some mission statements go further, addressing HOW you do things (through exhibits, programs, etc.) Some include WHO is served (eg. the community, children, families). And a few mission statements address WHY the museum exists (eg. to learn from the past.)

The statement of *core purpose* addresses WHY the museum exists. There is an advantage to stating it separately from the mission. The mission statement, because it includes WHAT and WHO, will change from time to time, as the world external to the museum changes. However, the core purpose will not change very often, if ever. The core purpose of the Disney Company, "to make people happy," will not change, although what they do and for whom changes with every new marketing opportunity. For museums, stating the core purpose separately from the mission makes it clear what should not change, and what can change.

WHY does your museum exist? WHY is it important? WHY bother? Here are some answers from some of the museums I have worked with:

"To instill in the people we serve a sense of responsibility for the land and the places in which they live."

"To strengthen in the people we serve a sense of connection with other people, the place in which we live, and our past."

"To enable people to find their own stories within the fabric of our community, and to empower them to participate actively in civic life."

"To share beautiful things."

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Note that the core purpose does not mention "museum." The museum and its work are a means to achieve the purpose, but conceivably the organization could engage in other activities to achieve the same purpose. This makes some museum people uneasy. What do you think?

The core purpose lifts the language used to describe the museum to a higher level. This is important, because we know that people visit museums for purposes that go beyond learning about the past. People have social and even spiritual motivations for visiting a museum. The core purpose speaks to these motivations. Thus, if you spend your time only describing what you do, and not why, you will come across as largely irrelevant to many people. However, if you speak in terms of fundamental human needs (to be connected, to participate, to enjoy beauty) you are more likely to engage people. The core purpose needs to become part of the everyday language of your organization, words that are used by everyone.

How do you come up with a statement of your core purpose? The process I have used is to gather a group of people who really know the organization well, usually a combination of board and staff, and simply ask why the work of the organization is important? If someone says "it's important because of X", then we ask why is X important, and so forth. By going deeper we eventually get to fundamental human needs. In the process I look for key words, and use them to create a single statement that rings true. It has been surprising to me how articulate some people are in this process. In one instance a maintenance man went right to the heart of why the museum's work was important to people like him. Other people in the organization had no idea he felt that way. In another case the board president spoke in spiritual terms about the value of the organization, something you might not expect from a business person.

I think there is great value in discovering your core purpose and stating it separately from your mission. It can serve as an inspiration and guide for the staff and board, like a beacon that gives hope and direction. It can also help you convey to others the real importance of your work, in ways that will resonate.

Core Values

The core purpose answers why the work of your museum is important. The values are the principles that guide your work. Here are some examples from the business world:

3M Corporation's core purpose is to solve problems through innovation. Its values include absolute integrity, tolerance for honest mistakes, respect for individual initiative, and product reliability.

Disney's purpose is to make people happy. Values include fanatical attention to detail; progress through creativity and imagination; and no cynicism.

Merck's purpose is to improve human life. Guiding values include corporate social responsibility, science-based innovation (not imitation), and profit, but profit only from work that benefits humanity.

An example from the museum world:

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Our purpose is to instill and strengthen in the people we serve a sense of connection with other people, the place in which we live, and our past.

Values:

1. We take our work and our humor seriously.
2. Our work is intellectually honest.
3. Our historical interpretation has integrity and is meaningful.
4. We involve the community in our work.
5. The customer is not an interruption of our work, but the reason for our work.

How do you discover the core values of your organization? First, realize that the values already exist. This is not an exercise to describe what you would like to be, but rather to discover what you are. Thus, in the case above the museum sincerely believes in the power of humor to shape a productive work environment. This is the way they are.

Another pitfall is to identify values that reflect only the director's beliefs. The process needs to involve key board and staff members, those who know the organization well.

The method I use to help an organization discover and articulate its core values is to present the key leaders with a list of values and have each person select ten, and then narrow to three, the values that most resonate with them. Then we accumulate the selected values from each person and see what is held in common by the whole group. Then we discuss the values and create statements that clearly define what these values mean to the organization.

You should come up with 3 to 5 values. If you have more, some are probably not core. Core values always guide your work? They are the ones you never forsake, regardless of the issue?

Ultimately, with a well-articulated core purpose and set of core values, you have a firm ideological foundation for your museum. It provides you with a frame in which every activity should fit. If something doesn't fit, stop doing it.

A Bold Vision of the Future of Your Community

The third ingredient in a strong vision is a description of what your community (as you define it) will be like at some point in the future as a result of your work. This is an externally focused statement that builds on your core purpose and values. It should be informed by your understanding of the trends that are affecting your community – socially, culturally, demographically, economically, politically, and so forth. In other words, your vision should respond to the needs and aspirations of the people you want to serve.

Your goal for the future of your community should be bold. It should require ten to thirty years of effort to achieve, and has only a fifty to seventy percent probability of success. That is, it won't be easy, but if you succeed it will bring immense value to your constituents.

To decide on your vision you must talk to community leaders from different walks of life. Select people who are thoughtful about the future and ask them how they see things changing. Talk about trends that are already evident and how they see those trends playing out in the future. Discuss both

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what they think will happen and what they would like to see happen. Capture their words and phrases about the community's future, which you can then use as you create your own vision.

A Vivid Description

Martin Luther King "I Have a Dream" speech is an excellent example of a bold vision for a community. King did not describe a future for himself or his organization. Instead he envisioned a future for all of America. He gave us a picture of the future that was bold, and grounded in fundamental human values. Here is an excerpt:

I Have a Dream

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a *dream* today!

This description of the future (from the vantage of 1963) is audacious. It is also vibrant, engaging, eloquent, inspiring, and specific. It is a picture painted with words. In it we can see what the future will be. Skeptics at the time thought it an impossible future.

Few people are as eloquent as Dr. King. Still, this speech can serve as a model for you as you create your own vision of your community's future. Some qualities that you should consider incorporating in your vision statement:

- Brief powerful phrases
- Visual words
- Paint a picture; tell a story; make it concrete

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- Link to fundamental human values, aspirations and needs
- Appeal to a sense of justice – doing what is right, giving people what they deserve
- Based upon a common understanding of fact and truth; a vision that can be shared by many
- Show a generosity of spirit
- Make it both timely and timeless
- Refuse to be confined by the realities and options of today
- Not punitive or angry, but open and welcoming
- Bridge generations and peoples; create emotional ties to all the people you hope to serve
- A vision that is transformative over time; your community will be a better place; your constituents will have better lives, when this comes to past.

A Vision of Your Organization

The final ingredient is a vision for your organization. If your vision for your community is to come to reality, what will your organization have to become? This is a question that is much on my mind of late. There are some innovative organizational models that can stretch our thinking about what a museum should be. Here are some examples.

- Mega-churches have emerged over the past three decades, even as many traditional churches have experienced decline in membership. These new churches can accommodate thousands of worshippers at Sunday services. However, during the week activity takes place in much smaller groups. There are numerous programs, clubs and ministries that are organized and maintained by the members themselves, with the support of staff. These clubs are not limited to religious activities. Some focus on exercise, losing weight, getting out of debt and investing. These churches are characterized by high levels of commitment, participation, and financial giving. Why not have a museum that is organized into numerous special interest clubs, with the staff providing support and coordination?
- Some successful businesses, called “small giants,” have resisted the temptation to grow excessively large. They could sell much more if they had more customers, by opening branches or expanding into other communities. However, they choose to remain small, foregoing growth in favor of intimacy. They are committed to their local communities and their local customers. They prefer having fewer loyal customers whom they see often, than many more customers whom they see infrequently. Museums have pursued growth, often at the expense of intimacy. We have gone after large numbers of visitors, whom we see only once, rather than focusing on a fewer number of members whom we see regularly.
- Ebay offers yet another model. The internet-based marketplace does not actually buy and sell anything. Rather it provides a structure and system so that anyone can buy and sell. In this sense, a museum would not have to plan or implement activities for its members. It would simply provide a structure, system and resources so that members could do things for themselves.
- There are some organizational structures that have no centralized control. Wikipedia, where anyone can post articles on any topic, is self-policing. The participants take their role very seriously and strive to make articles objective, accurate and easy to understand. Craigslist has no central control: the people who use it post the entries, and they police themselves by flagging inappropriate or

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incorrect information. These are called *open systems* because they allow anyone to interact with anyone else, without a third party telling them what they can or cannot do. Rather than having a central location, a museum might be dispersed throughout the community, with small groups interacting among themselves, learning and exploring relevant topics.

These organizational models suggest that the future museum may be radically different from what it is today. The challenge and opportunity is to determine what kind of organization – culturally and structurally – will work best to achieve the museum’s vision of the future for its community.