

Mission

by Management Consultants for the Arts

Introduction

We wrote this essay in 1993, but it remains true today as the nation's cultural institutions face, following the tragic events of September 11th and its aftermath, a period of intense self-examination, prompted by issues and challenges on all fronts. How to cope with severe, and possibly, long-term financial constraints brought on by reduced public funding and a downturn in private philanthropy? How to ensure the arts are relevant to their communities and the nation? Do they adequately reflect contemporary society? To what degree do they serve an increasingly diverse, multi-cultural audience.

Tough questions, hard dilemmas. Yet, as we stated in 1993, these issues need not overwhelm cultural organizations that have a clear sense of mission: the fundamental reason for the organization's existence.

With mission as their guide, organizations can view turbulent times as opportunities to re-examine themselves, reassess their priorities, refocus on why they do what they do. They should formulate strategic plans to further their mission, recruit and develop people (both trustees and staff) who respond positively to it, and restructure the organization around the work and the audience.

The following essay and a new introductory reflection, *On Mission*, by Kinshasha Holman Conwill, advance our firm's view of the centrality of mission. Through our consulting activities with varied cultural organizations across the United States, we are convinced that mission is an effective and powerful instrument for decision-making.

Given today's climate, it is again with a sense of urgency that we present our thoughts on this subject. We hope that you will find this work provocative and stimulating, and that it will help you and your organization not only survive the times, but move ahead. The organizations cited as examples all survived the early 90s and flourished in the good times that followed. Now, with mission as their touchstone, they anticipate being able to weather current circumstances.

On Mission

Where there is no vision, the people perish

—Proverbs xxix 18

*Love is not love,
which alters when it alteration finds*

—William Shakespeare

The vision that guides many arts institutions resonates in its mission. They are the words, whether simply stated or poetic, that announce to a variety of audiences, the intentions of a museum, a dance company, a theater, an orchestra, a visual or presenting arts organization. Without a clear sense of mission and the vision to animate it, an institution may not necessarily perish as the biblical admonition warns, but it will surely falter. And while, unlike love, mission may not be Shakespeare's "ever fixed mark" – it is a solid and reliable guide that should be altered consciously and not abridged lightly.

What is an organizational mission? Is it the benchmark for all that an institution does? A compass to guide its operations and programs? The basis of inspiration and aspiration? The solid foundation upon which all else is built?

This is both a fitting and poignant time to revisit mission, with all of its implications of self-examination. In good times, mission secures what a museum or performing arts organization does as it goes about its daily work; in troubling times, it becomes a reminder of what lasts. Mission connects us to the essential aspects of our artistic purpose and our role in public service: our collections, our programs, and our audiences. Indeed, it is a relationship-definer. It helps us to answer the questions: What do we value? What do we hold in trust, and for whom?

In calmer times we often worry about "mission creep" or the overly broad mission that allows anything and everything to become our work and blurs our institutional vision. An unclear mission has been the culprit in many an unguided art acquisition, an overly full program schedule, and programs that lack coherence or authentic voices. In these very different and difficult times, an exploration of the role of mission, and our missions as individual organizations, leads us to a deeper examination of why we do, what we do.

Why does what we do in the arts matter? What is important? What endures? The work of human creation, in its myriad forms, marks us as different from the rest of our glorious universe. Our very intentionality affirms our humanity. The arts and cultural organizations that present, interpret, and preserve the works of human imagination are thus fundamental entities. Their presence, growth, development, and constant reenergizing of the ideas they embody are vital to maintaining communities, providing learning experiences for all ages, and enriching our lives.

A museum of jazz makes possible a deeper understanding of one of the world's great musical innovations. A classical ballet company insures that new generations will have their hearts lifted or their blood stirred by the abstract concepts of individual genius made visible. An alternative space offers provocative exhibitions and public arts that engage our senses and our sensibilities.

Endeavors of such ambitions and value require guiding forces, compasses to aid their navigation in good times and bad, in times of certainty and times of upheaval. Institutional mission, a touchstone in the most stable periods, becomes indispensable in this current time of a precarious global economy, social disruption, and widespread feelings of unease.

Whether a theater company is deciding to purchase its first permanent home or a museum is already in the process of renovating its existing space, mission is the starting place to return to again, and

again. It grounds the choice of two organizations considering consolidation into one. It precedes the design plans for a new performing arts center. And in times of hard fiscal choices, its review is the first step in making difficult, but necessary, budgetary choices.

Yet mission is not magic. Unless its original concept is understood and embraced by those at every level of an organization – board, staff, volunteers, and increasingly, the organization's communities – it will not stand as the essential foundation, but may become instead, a collection of words without underlying meaning. And unless it is regularly reexamined, it cannot be the "evergreen" source of imagination and aspiration that reverberates in all aspects of an organization's programs and activities. The renewal of mission – usually in the context of long range planning – is as critical to an artistic body as self-renewal is to each of us as individuals. In the wake of recent events that renewal is a critical step in rebuilding shattered lives, neighborhoods, and our deepest collective feelings of worth and meaning.

It is therefore fitting that the work for an organization's purpose – mission – takes on a spiritual tone. Definitions of mission speak of vocation and journeys undertaken. An arts group's journey is a promising process of discovery and enlightenment with a sound mission as its guide. If the soul of a dance company or an artists' space is the program it creates and presents, then the mission is a catalyst that activates the soul's expression. A company that presents the work of the most innovative playwrights of the last century cannot give life to that art if it is distracted or seduced by the latest trends in market-driven programming. At such times, the "fixed mark" of mission can be the saving grace for sound decisions.

In a time when many of us have come to question our very existence and value as arts organizations, it is not surprising that institutional mission can become the unwitting victim of fear and the need to survive. It is that very uncertainty, however, that allows us to better see mission's vital role in making our organizations authentic and lasting.

A question asked in the wake of the horrible events of September 11 still haunts me: "When is it okay to dream again?" I believe the answer is: Now. And as our dreams unfold, I trust that we will find that the core ideas that give our dreams their potential for realization – our missions – will come to be both anchor and inspiration. After September 11 we ask ourselves if our organizations are too "precious" in the wake of such incomprehensible events. Upon reflection, we realize that our organizations and their missions are indeed precious, in the most profound sense of the word.

Kinshasha Holman Conwill is an arts and management consultant. She is currently project director for A Cultural Blueprint for New York City, an initiative of the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the managing editor of its publication, Culture Counts: Strategies for a More Vibrant Cultural Life for New York City. She is Chairman of the National Museum Services Board, the former director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, and a former commissioner of the Accreditation Commission of the American Association of Museums. She writes on contemporary art and is a frequent lecturer, panelist, and juror.

Mission Touchstone for Turbulent Times

Mission — A Touchstone for Cultural Organizations

Not long ago, a modern dance company came perilously close to giving its last performance. At fault was neither a sudden exodus of talent nor a financial crisis. The problem lay in its strategic plan – a plan that, ironically, had succeeded beyond every hope and expectation.

This plan marked a departure for the company, whose sole mission was centered on the work of its founder. Although she had always created the choreography, music, lighting, and costumes herself,

2004©Management Consultants for the Arts www.mcaonline.com

3

Published 4/04 www.littap.org

LitTAP (Literary Presenters Technical Assistance Program) is presented by the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) Literature Program in partnership with Writers & Books of Rochester, New York.

she enthusiastically endorsed the plan, which for the first time called for collaborations with other artists. Collaborations, it was believed, would generate more touring dates and, thus, increase funding and exposure for the dancers.

It worked. The company secured more touring dates – and more funding – than ever before. The plan seems to be a resounding success. Yet by the tour's conclusion, the company was on the verge of disbanding. Why?

Because in formulating its plan, the dance company had neglected what mattered most: the art of the founder herself. Trustee leadership and the principal had not fully considered how collaboration would impact her work. By the end of the tour, she was disheartened and frustrated. If the company had to depend on collaboration to prosper, she reasoned, it was closing time.

The Primacy of Mission

In moving away from its basic mission (in this instance, to showcase the principal's singular work), this dance company typifies an increasing number of U.S. cultural institutions. Leaders of museums, theater groups, orchestras, performing arts centers, and other cultural institutions are making decisions based on financial, community, or political imperatives and not on what should be the overarching consideration: mission. In the process, they are losing sight of their organization's reason for existence, straying from its founding principles.

This type of management can erode the overall quality of decisions, holding back a successful organization from even greater achievement – the best person for a key job goes unsought, a marketing plan is aimed at the wrong audience, the organization chart promotes "command and control" not "create and cooperate." In the worst case, such decisions can lead to outright failure, measured financially or, as with this dance company, artistically.

Simply saying that mission should be the foundation of a cultural organization is, of course, a familiar admonishment. It would be a rare museum, theater or dance company that did not have some statement of purpose chiseled somewhere in its bylaws.

Yet mission must be far more than a foundation – supportive, but buried and out of sight. It must be the touchstone for every decision. It must be faithfully revisited each time action is taken, in decisions concerning long-range strategy or day-to-day operations, whether the organization is embroiled in crisis or relishing success.

This notion may strike some as self-evident, but it is regularly sidestepped in practice. This is not always a deliberate oversight on the part of board, management, or staff. More often, they simply do not consider mission relevant to running a fiscally sound organization. Yet, in its absence, other imperatives fill the void.

Should the "Bottom Line" be on Top?

The most common imperative involves money. The prevailing economic climate has many cultural groups gasping to stay afloat. In such an environment, it is easy to mistake solvency for mission accomplished. While sound business practices are, of course, needed in cultural organizations, fiscal goals are not ends in themselves.

Consider the experience of a major museum. It had a significant endowment, which had reliably paid operating expenses for years. But when the economy weakened, the endowment's earnings could no longer keep up with these costs, let alone cover needed capital improvements and renovations.

Compounding the problem, the museum's staff was disgruntled. They felt shackled, constrained from improving the way the collection was exhibited and interpreted. Innovative programs, they felt, were crucial to boosting attendance, which had been steadily shrinking.

Their repeated requests for funds had been turned down by the museum's CEO (formerly the controller of a corporation), who arguably saw fiscal management as his first priority. For their part, the trustees were satisfied with his actions. They equated a strong bottom line with a strong, thriving museum.

By letting the CEO make decisions based on financial goals, not mission, the trustees wound up with a museum whose staff was discouraged, professionally frustrated and threatening to unionize, and whose audience had virtually disappeared, leaving dim prospects for new fund raising campaigns.

When Bigger is Bitter

Similarly, some organizations express faith in the "bigger is better" syndrome. They cling to the belief that growth is an intrinsically worthy goal and that, conversely, consolidation is tantamount to failure.

A symphony orchestra in a Southwestern city demonstrates this kind of thinking. The orchestra was under enormous financial stress. It had lost attendance, was deeply in debt, was drawing down its endowment, had consulted a bankruptcy attorney, and was prepared to close within the year. In their attempt to find a solution, the trustees took a greater role in all aspects of the orchestra's operation.

Despite the financial crisis, the board remained obsessed with size. It was intent upon selling enough seats to remain a "major" orchestra (at that time, nationally classified by size of budget). With this as the overriding goal, the trustees proposed to boost ticket sales by increasing the number of concerts. Yet they paid no attention to the kind of music the orchestra performed, an obvious issue that would have surfaced had they re-examined their mission. If the standard fare of Western European classical music could not draw enough people to begin with, would more of the same bring audiences back?

A variation of "bigger is better" is the "edifice complex." The proliferation of large performing arts centers is a prevalent example. Based on the sheer numbers of such centers mired in financial woes or emphasizing Broadway touring productions over local resident professional companies, it is evident that, in most cases, more thought has gone into the buildings than in what programming should or could go in them.

A major university built an impressive performance hall. Even in the planning stages, the founders had no concrete idea of what to put in it, aside from some vague hope of someday presenting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Consequently, there was no clear sense of mission to guide the architect. The hall was not targeted for any particular use or audience and was therefore ideally suited for none.

When the hall was completed, an executive director was hired to literally fit performances into it. This was not easy. Presenting the Chicago Symphony, for example, would have required a huge subsidy, given the hall's actual seating capacity.

In short, what the founders thought would be nice theoretically never made much sense. Their goals were never tied to a clear mission. As a result, the facility lost money in its first year of operation, more the second.

The tantalizing prospect of moving into a splendid new facility has caused more than one organization to run aground. A regional theater company was invited to become the prime tenant in a glorious old movie palace. Despite the fact that the facility needed renovation to the tune of \$7 million, the group jumped at the opportunity. A fund raising campaign netted only \$5 million.

Strapped with debt, the group soon realized that it had not grown sufficiently in size, audience, or artistic accomplishment to service such a cavernous building.

Had it based its original decision on the state of its work – rather the splendor of a building – chances are it would have politely declined the offer or negotiated a more favorable arrangement.

A Case for Fidelity, Not Fanaticism

If cleaving to mission makes so much sense – and can prevent such calamities – why do some bristle at the notion? Possibly it's because they think it means absolutism: pursuing the program at all costs, even if no one comes, even if it rings up big debts.

Their fears may be illustrated by a theater group we'll call the Angry British Playwrights Company. As its name suggests, the company's artistic mission is to stage the latest and angriest plays of this admittedly narrow genre.

Soon after performances begin, the initially curious crowds give way to a few (very few) devotees. Revenue evaporates with the audience. Faced with inevitable demise, should the company forge ahead under the banner of artistic mission until its broke and shuttered? Or should it "sell out" and find less angry plays to perform. Neither option makes much sense.

If, in fact, the company's leadership is absolutely clear that its mission is to stage such unpopular plays, they should remain faithful to that mission. That is, by definition, why the company exists. But at the same time, and in the interests of survival, reason dictates that they lower their expectations about the size of audience and the support that can attract.

This notion of "downsizing" in the interest of mission frightens some people, especially "institution maintainers." Like the trustees of the Southwest city's orchestra, these individuals are preoccupied with size and status.

"If we follow mission alone," they cry, "we would become an insignificant group, smaller than the opera and the ballet." For them, the arts are set pieces for larger social agendas.

A more enlightened approach was taken by that orchestra in the end. Realizing that the underlying source of their trouble was really programming, the trustees and new staff leadership re-examined the mission and pondered the unique aspects of their orchestra and community. One was the large Hispanic population. Plans were developed to include more Latin American influence in programming and to recruit more Hispanic performers. The city's temperate climate also favored such events as open-air concerts. Gradually, the audiences grew and the orchestra's long-term prospects improved. And, although presented as a hypothetical example, The Angry British Playwrights Company, remaining true to its mission and having held on all these years, would see its audiences expand with a resurgent interest in the work of these playwrights.

The Touchstone in Operation

In this way, the touchstone of mission is felt in every quarter of the cultural organization. There can be no exceptions.

Marketing plans, for example, must be related to the organization's purpose. Again, this sounds self-evident, but the field is replete with marketing campaigns that generated first-time, but one-time, increases because they had nothing to do with the organization's actual work.

In staffing, mission would dictate that the best candidate for any job is one who would respond positively to the work. A public television station needed a business manager. Management's first impulse was to go after a competent "numbers" person. But after thinking about the station's basic mission, management found a candidate who possessed both an MBA and a desire to work in a cultural organization. "I never wanted financial figures to be ends in themselves," she said.

Even in support positions, mission should be the first consideration. A photography center in need of a receptionist initially sought only a person with good clerical skills. But then it was pointed out that the receptionist was often the only person on hand to interact with visitors, who typically ask many questions about photography and the exhibitions. Management realized that the receptionist had a major impact on the way the public interacts with the art. So, instead of a clerical worker, a photographer was found who could also handle clerical duties.

Strategic planning offers a final example. Planning based in mission steers the organization toward goals that matter most. This is particularly important in difficult times. Organizations with such plans weather crises with more ease. If cuts are needed, they have a clearer sense of what is truly important. They are prepared to deal with the unexpected in a rational way that doesn't compromise what they want to do.

In the opening example of the modern dance company, the collaboration nearly derailed the group, even though it met all of its financial objectives. Fortunately, the company was saved by a new plan, one that clearly furthered the founder's artistry, which was really what the group was all about.

Why Now, More Than Ever

All of the foregoing can be summarized this way: Before any decision is made, before any action is taken, ask, "How will this affect our mission?"

Once again, circumstances urgently signal a return to this basic tenet. Today, cultural organizations of all sizes and in every quarter of the arts are under extreme and unexpected stress. Fiscally, they are squeezed by reduced and redirected public funding and an unsettled climate for private philanthropy. Others struggle with the question of pluralism and whether they are relevant to their communities.

It is especially in such uncertain times that a cultural organization should return to and rely on its mission.

Mission provides an organization with a point of reference, a constant, a guide to appropriate action. It promotes organizational harmony by stimulating the creative senses of both the organization and its people.

Above all else, a clear sense of mission can rejuvenate and inspire by helping board and staff remember what the organization is all about, reconsider why it was founded, envision what it can be in the future, and prepare for better times.