

Do you already have a mission or are you still stuck with a vision ?

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Recently Steve Holyer gave a talk about the importance of rethinking the traditional project kick-off's in order to create Liftoff's (from the book by Diana Larsen and Ainsley Nies — Scott Ambler would call it "inception"). During a project Liftoff the team and the stakeholders of the project develop a shared understanding of their vision and their mission. In the context of a Liftoff this is part of developing "purpose". The other dimensions of a Liftoff are "alignment" and "context". Understanding team values is part of "alignment". This initiated a discussion between Klaus, Steve and myself about what we understand under Vision, Mission, Purpose, and values. Whilst there seems to be a general agreement that they are a key success factor in most endeavors and organisations, there are a lot of interpretations as to which is what. They help creating alignment between the members of a group and stimulate collaboration.

Diana Larsen and Ainsley Nies use these definitions in their book:

The chartering **purpose** "provides inspiration, and meaning for the project and is comprised of vision, mission and mission tests."

The product **vision** "illustrates the ultimate expression of customer value; it provides the a picture of the desired future that will be created when the product is in use by the customer."

The project **mission** "describes the team's unique contribution to achieving the product vision."

Jeff Sutherland from Scrum Inc. proposes the following definition :

The **vision** is the Theme: what we see as possible, what inspires ourselves, our people, our customers, our community.

The **purpose** is why we are here and what we are here to be, who we are going to be in order to further that possibility.

The **mission** is the Action: what we will do specifically to achieve the vision (our deliverables to stake holders)

Additionally the **values** represent what we see as worthwhile investing in and keeping in good repair.

Roger Schwarz a skilled facilitator proposes a definition where mission and purpose become intermixed as well as vision and values :

A group's mission answers the question "Why do we exist?". A vision is a mental picture of the future that a group seeks to create. Whereas mission clarifies why the group exists, vision identifies what the group should look like and how it should act as it seeks to

accomplish it's mission. In an effective group, members can articulate their mission and vision, find it engaging and use it to guide their work.

Klaus says that for some people Mission is "bigger" than Vision and for some it's the other way around. he tends towards the first type, where the mission of an internal IT department (say in a bank, insurance company, pharma, etc.) for instance is to enable business to do their job faster and better. That's clearly not a vision or a goal that will ever be achieved. But it does give a sense of direction and enables you (as an IT employee) to make decisions ("I did it this way, because that makes it easier/faster for business to do XYZ").

Google has a similar approach :

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.

The mission would be what they describe under "what we do" I

guess: <http://www.google.com/about/company/products/>

Their values would be described

here <http://www.google.com/about/company/philosophy/> under the header what we believe in.

As a further example somebody brought up missionaries. A missionary's mission is to convert as many people as possible, isn't it? It's not an intermediate goal or something you would be able to achieve and go "Done". Right?

So does the missionary actually undertake the one mission to save the world? Or does the missionary have a vision of a saved world, and he undertakes different missions to bring about the vision?

The third example we looked at is from NASA. When he was president of the USA John F. Kennedy famously challenged the American people in 1962 "to send an American to the moon, and to return him safely, by the close of the decade." Many cite this as an example of Kennedy's space program vision which is consistent with the fact the NASA space program launched many unmanned and manned missions in order to meet the challenge of sending an American to the moon and bring him safely home. However, it is hard to distinguish this challenge from Apollo 11's mission which put two American's on the moon (and a third in lunar orbit) and brought them all safely home.

NASA's current vision "to reach for new heights and reveal the unknown so that what we do and learn will benefit all humankind." fits with the first definition of a theme that inspires.

One way to see the distinction between vision and mission in a "product" context may be to distinguish the product from project the way Liftoff makes the vision product oriented and the mission more project-oriented. By these definitions, to realise the vision you probably need to undertake many missions. Diana and Ainsley also say the product vision is not the same as the organisation's vision which "sets the direction for the entire organisation". So, it's probably kind of fractal in the end. Or like Russian dolls. Someone's vision is probably a

mission of an encompassing even larger vision. And so on.

For sure there is no right or wrong answer, but before you go on about defining vision, mission, purpose and values with a group it is worth aligning on the meaning and which you want to be first.

As Steve De Shazer said, "Understanding" does not exist there are only more or less useful misunderstandings!

As a solution focussed coach Steve de Shazer would claim that a good way to create a vision is to have the group think about what the product will look like in the end. "Begin with the End in mind", as Steven Covey ("THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE") said it. Have the group write some imaginary release notes up front, have them produce marketing/PR material as if the product would exist already. Give them cardboard, scissors and pens to build a packaging prototype before they even have discussed the detailed features of the product. What will it read on the box. What is the vision?

Now your mission if you choose to accept it is to define or review the vision and mission of your own organisation, product and project but take your time, and don't expect to get it right the first time - revisit it regularly and check whether everybody still agrees ...

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