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*As we prepare for another year, we often reflect on the direction our company is headed - our Mission. The mission of an organization should provide direction, guidance - keep us on track as we progress through business challenges.*

*I recently read this article about ensuring that all of your employees are partners in your mission. This provided me some Food for Thought in my organization - I hope it does for you as well.*

## **Your Mission, If You Choose to Accept It**

...by Kevin McManus

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In the television show "Mission Impossible", agent Jim Phelps was presented with a new challenge at the start of each episode. Agent Phelps was also given the option of either accepting his mission or turning it down. Well, we have made it into the new millennium, and most of us are now in the process of helping to execute both our own personal mission and that of the organization we are a part of. Have we accepted the organizational mission we have been given? Were we given the option of doing so?

I normally enjoy coming to work. I can remember a few days over the years however where I dreaded coming in to the office -- the days when we annually reviewed our company mission statement. Reviewing the mission should be an invigorating event. After all, the intent of this hallowed phrase is to define what the organization is all about -- what it stands for. If you did not agree with the mission, why would you be working there? My memories of mission-related meetings however are much more of agonizing "wordsmith wars" than they are about organizational invigoration. At least I have had the chance to contribute -- most employees are left out of this process.

Missions are like quality systems, teams, and training -- all organizations have them, even though they might not be very effective. Unfortunately, it is more often than not the case that the mission statement on the mugs, T-shirts, banners, and business cards is largely inconsistent with the ones that are experienced each day in the cubicles, board rooms, and assembly areas. Unlike Agent Phelps, we are rarely given the option of accepting or declining the company mission. Instead, we are expected to not only "blindly" follow it, but in most cases, support it enthusiastically. If we are in management, we are also expected to help sell it to our internal customers. Expectation is one thing however - execution is another.

In one organization that I was a part of, we were given colorful plastic cards with the company logo on one side and its mission, vision, and values on the back. Whenever "the guys from corporate" visited, we knew we would be expected to be able to recite the mission from memory. I always enjoyed watching the frantic attempts my peers made to cram that statement into their short-term memories in the minutes before any meeting with our guests started. All of this made me wonder about the variety of missions that were actually being carried out each day in our company, and how they matched up with the words on the card, if they did at all. By the way, is it coincidence that this company self-destructed?

Having alignment and commitment to a common mission, or set of goals, is critical for high performance. Peter Senge emphasizes this with one of his five disciplines – shared vision. Dr. Stephen Covey's second of his seven habits – begin with the end in mind – also speaks to the importance of having a clearly articulated mission that all associates take ownership in. The challenge comes in getting to that point. Believe me, it is not about wordsmithing a paragraph into something that reads well on a home page. It is about living out those words on a daily basis and creating a workplace environment that also reflects the intent of the mission statement.

In my opinion, it is a waste of time to go through the motions of creating the mission statement if we are also not willing to involve all stakeholders in defining what the mission should be about. More importantly, we must take steps to ensure that our daily actions in the workplace support and are consistent with what we put down on paper. If you question my perspective, take the “shared vision acid test.” Go into any organization with a stated mission, read their mission, and then watch. Are the behaviors you witness consistent with what is written? If you are really feeling bold, take an employee aside and ask them to recite the company mission. More often than not, you will get either a “deer in the headlights” stare or some variation of the finely crafted statement that has been posted prominently in the employee's work area.

Acquiring a shared vision is not an easy task. The time consuming part of this effort however does not lie in crafting the statement near as much as it does in ensuring that the variety of workplace systems are designed to support it. Unfortunately, we tend to place much more of a focus on creating the statement itself. Until we recognize that like Agent Phelps, our people have the option of embracing the mission whether we like it or not, we will not realize the true synergistic power that comes from having a clearly articulated mission that most of the workforce takes serious ownership in.

Missions can be handed down, but their acceptance can't be mandated. Employees can be required to commit the mission statement to memory, but that action in itself is inconsistent with having a shared vision. When a mission is meaningful and supported through complimentary workplace systems and associate behaviors, people commit to the mission as a matter of course. Jim Phelps didn't even need to write his mission down – it was okay if it self-destructed five seconds after he heard it. If all of the mission-decorated banners, mugs, and wall hangings were removed from your organization, would the responses to the “What is your company's mission?” question change?