

Vision

Mission

Values

Lofty & less specific

↑
Mission

Why we exist.

Values

What we believe in and how we will behave.

Vision

What we want to be.

Strategy

What our competitive game plan will be.

The basic elements of a strategy statement are:

Objective = Ends

Scope = Domain

Advantage = Means

Balanced Scorecard

How we will implement and monitor that plan.

↓
Concrete, practical
& unique

Q. How many brand strategists does it take to change a lightbulb?

A. It depends. What type of lightbulb are we talking about? What's its purpose? Is this part of a broader change programme? Is the desired change evolutionary or revolutionary? And what timeline and budget would we be working to?

It's no secret that strategy consultants (particularly the intelligent ones) have a talent for responding to simple questions with overcomplicated frameworks that confuse everybody – including ourselves. For an example of this tendency, look no further than the Vision, Mission and Values framework.

Individually, “vision” and “mission” and “values” feel like fairly natural, intuitive terms to use in the context of brand and organisational strategy. We associate “vision” with clear-sightedness and can talk coherently about establishing a “vision” for the future, as the following headlines from the Financial Times demonstrate:

“To make bright ideas bigger you need cash and vision”

“An investor's ‘prosperity’ vision for Honduras”

“A vibrant vision of the City of London's future”

People and organisations are frequently described as being on a “mission” when they have a specific (non-financial) goal or end in mind:

“Danone adopts new legal status to reflect social mission”

“Levi Strauss bets moral mission can survive public markets”

“The start-ups on a mission to reduce food waste”

And we generally think of “values” as guiding principles that govern how people should think, feel and act: as individuals, or when we come together to form families, organisations, communities and societies:

“European values: Poland's media fears a crackdown”

“Letter: Broadcasting panel needs to protect its values”

“Rishi Sunak is fighting a battle for traditional Tory values”

A problem arises, however, when “vision” and “mission” and “values” are brought together as components in a strategic framework. We are forced to clarify what each of these means in more precise terms:

- What exactly is the difference between a “vision” and a “mission”?
- What are the hallmarks of a good “vision”?
- What are the characteristics of a good “mission” statement?
- How do “vision” and “mission” differ from “purpose”?
- What counts as a “value”?
- How do “values” differ from other organisational constructs, like personality attributes, or principles?
- What role should “values” play in an organisation?
- How many “values” should an organisation have?
- And how do “vision” and “mission” and “values” relate to an organisation's financial and non-financial goals, measures and targets?

Unsurprisingly, there are no definitive answers to ANY of these questions. You could ask ten different strategists and receive eleven different opinions. Pretty much any blog or article you look at will contradict almost every other. Peter Drucker is a good person to start with: shortly before his death in 2005, BusinessWeek magazine described him as “the man who invented management”. And he passionately believed that businesses should be defined by their mission, which he defined as:

“The organization's purpose and very reason for being.”

Drucker believed an organisation's mission should be short enough to fit on a T-shirt and should reflect its opportunities, competence and commitment. He believed that an effective mission should help businesses make principled decisions and should improve performance today by working back from a long-range ambition.

Drucker had relatively little to say about vision statements, presumably because he felt a mission statement alone should suffice. In 2008, the Harvard Business Review published an article titled “Mastering the Management System” by Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton, creators of the [Balanced Scorecard and Strategy Map](#). The authors’ definition of “mission” is broadly aligned with Peter Drucker, but adds a customer dimension:

“The mission is a brief statement, typically one or two sentences, that defines why the organization exists, especially what it offers to its customers and clients.”

Kaplan and Norton also differ from Drucker in suggesting that a vision statement should

complement the mission statement by setting out specific mid- to long-term goals of an organisation. The ideal vision statement should include a “stretch goal” that is difficult for the organisation to achieve, as well as a specific timeline for achieving the goal.

Finally, Kaplan and Norton suggest that “value statements” (which are often lengthy):

“... describe the desirable attitudes and behavior the company wants to promote as well as the forbidden conduct, such as bribery, harassment, and conflicts of interest, that employees should definitely avoid.”

The HBR evolved this thinking into the following “hierarchy of company statements”:

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This feels fairly definitive: mission is a succinct statement of ambition; vision sets out a specific goal and timeline; values establish ways of working. Unlike Drucker, the hierarchy suggests that an organisation isn't defined by its mission, but by its strategy statement and scorecard, which are the most concrete and unique.

But then what's a "purpose" for?

And how does it differ from a "mission" or a "vision"?

These questions were tackled in 2014 by Dr Graham Kenney in another HBR article, titled: "Your Company's Purpose Is Not Its Vision, Mission, or Values". In the article, Dr Kenney proposes the following set of definitions, with the addition of a purpose statement and guiding principles:

- A *vision statement* says what the organisation wishes to be like in some years' time. It's usually drawn up by senior management, in an effort to take the thinking beyond day-to-day activity in a clear, memorable way.
- The *mission* describes what business the organisation is in (and what it isn't) both now and projecting into the future. Its aim is to provide focus for management and staff. A consulting firm might define its mission by the type of work it does, the clients it caters to, and the level of service it provides.
- *Values* describe the desired culture.
- If values provide the compass, *principles* give employees a set of directions.
- A *purpose statement* is designed to inspire your staff to do good work for you, find a way to express the organisation's impact on the lives of customers, clients, students, patients — whomever you're trying to serve.

These definitions seem completely different to those of Kaplan and Norton, as well as Drucker. And the disagreement doesn't end there. Stanford's Graduate School of Business's definition conflates mission and purpose, as well as distinguishing between "core" values (which should never be compromised) and "aspirational" values (which are espoused but not delivered). Bain & Company suggests a mission statement should include a

description of a company's business, as well as its objectives and its approach to reach those objectives. I could go on *ad nauseam*, if not *ad infinitum*. Like snowflakes, no two definitions are the same.

It would be madness for me to attempt to offer a conclusive definition of vision, mission and values; I would only be adding to the din and confusion. Instead, I'll try to introduce a little context to help frame why these differences exist.

Strategists come in all shapes and sizes. We each have our own preferences and biases. And those biases are reflected in the tools we use, the way we define our terms, and the way we define what strategy is. Some of us tend to think of strategy as a formal, analytical endeavour: an evidence-based process that involves identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Others of us are inclined to see strategy as a visionary, creative act: an inspiration-based process that involves imagining a future that does not (yet) exist and then directing activity towards making that future happen. Many strategists sit somewhere or other between these two extremes: our individual definitions of "vision", "mission" and "values" reveal where.

Peter Drucker's insistence on a succinct, purposeful mission statement echoes the broader emphasis his work places on imagination, exploration, experimentation and collaboration, driven by his desire for leadership to make a positive difference in the world. Kaplan and Norton's addition of a customer lens, a goal-oriented mission statement and (often lengthy) set of value statements reveals their analytical, process-driven leaning. Dr Kenney's meticulous, multi-layered approach reflects his belief in strategy as a reconciliation of organisational objectives (vision and mission) with the needs and wants of its key audiences ("whomever you're trying to serve" in the purpose statement).

The more you lean towards a visionary concept of strategy, the more likely you are to prefer a simple model that focuses on a purposeful statement of ambition (WHY), supplemented by a supporting definition of what you will actually do to achieve

that ambition (WHAT) and a set of guiding values or principles to help you achieve it (HOW). [Simon Sinek's golden circle](#) follows this line of thinking. On the other hand, if you lean towards an analytical view of strategy, you're probably more comfortable with a detailed, layered system of ambitions, objectives, activities, cultural values and behavioural principles. I like to have a little bit of both: strategy without imagination is lifeless and dull; but strategy without rigour is make-believe.

I try to avoid the vision/mission/values construct if I can. It's far more helpful to focus on the specific strategic questions that an organisation actually needs to answer. Peter Drucker believed five questions were critical to consider in a strategic plan:

- What is your mission?
- Who are your customers?
- What does your customer value?
- What are your results?
- What is your plan?

Kaplan and Norton, meanwhile, were motivated to ask a longer set of questions:

- What business are we in and why?
- What are the key issues we face in our business?
- How can we best compete?
- Which customers or markets will we target?
- What is the value proposition that distinguishes us?
- What key processes give us competitive advantage?
- What are the human capital capabilities required to excel at these key processes?
- What are the technology enablers of the strategy?
- What are the organisational enablers required for the strategy?

Vision, mission and values were originally developed to answer organisations' most pressing strategic questions, but since there is no consensus on what those questions should be, the construct has evolved into a weird box-ticking exercise in which nobody can agree on what each box represents. Drucker's list is short and sweet. Kaplan and Norton's list is longer and more detailed. But both lists reveal an important truth about the strategy process: it begins with asking the right questions. And the "right" question to ask depends on the idiosyncrasies of an organisation and the context in which it exists. There is no "magic" set of questions, so there is no "magic" framework for answering these questions. As strategists, rather than disagreeing about the "correct" definition of visions and missions and values (as well as purposes, promises and principles), our time is better spent trying to find the best possible questions to ask in a given situation, and then applying ourselves to finding the best possible answers.