

## What is your core purpose?

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Are vision, mission and values at the heart of good cultural fundraising?

**Michelle Wright** explains why arts organisations need to be clear about their fundamental purpose.

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The CEO of the Charity Commission, Paula Sussex recently called on Trustees to consider shutting down their charity if they are not furthering their mission. She said that Trustees were the 'legal front door' to charities and needed to guard their organisation's mission fiercely, with the key aim of ensuring that it was making an impact. It's true - if your charitable mission is done, or you are not the right people to achieve it, then it has got to be ok to call it a day.

In my work at the Arts Fundraising and Philanthropy programme, I have been reflecting a lot on the mission, vision and values of arts and cultural organisations. In the same way that the arts sector often struggles to demonstrate its impact, it can be especially hard for arts organisations to define their core purpose. Do they exist to further the artform, build audiences or for educational and social impact? When is artistic practice for its own sake ok? And if artistic practice in isolation is the sole purpose, then is this enough in a fundraising context when we are in such a competitive environment for raising funds?

I think that ambiguity in these areas can be at the heart of what causes difficulties in furthering the ambitions of arts organisations. If we look at the SME and entrepreneurial community the attitude is very different. Broadly speaking, if an enterprise is not making enough money then it is very usual for that organisation to pivot and find a new direction. Similarly, a radical change of business model is almost a badge of honour for the entrepreneur. The savvy business owner will have no problem in changing things quickly that are not working.

Similarly, in this situation, SMEs look straightaway at their purpose, vision and mission and change it to ensure that they have identified a distinctive purpose that will lead to success. But when I relate this to the arts and culture, I wonder how many organisations change direction when they are not making enough money, and similarly how many look that deeply and regularly at their vision and mission?

And I am yet to know of an arts organisation that has decided that its work is done, or that it is not fulfilling its fundamental purpose. How many are considering calling it a day or merging with another? As Dan Corry, CEO of New Philanthropy Capital, said recently: *"It helps no one to carry on regardless, sucking up money and time."*

In the recent evaluation of the Catalyst fundraising capacity building programme by Arts Council England, the articulation of a clear vision and mission was seen as fundamental to ensuring good fundraising, and a great enabler of positive change for an arts organisation. So I wondered are we really missing this essential key to setting strategic direction?

Sadly, my experience bears this out. I recently took over a senior level training programme for a colleague. She was going to cover vision, mission and values with a group of arts-based CEOs and I questioned the content, slightly embarrassed that it might be considered too basic for this high-powered group. However, rather surprisingly, when I got to this section of the training, 80% of the CEOs in the room could not remember their vision and mission or were not certain of the wording – and so I realised that after all we perhaps should not take this key step for granted.

So why is a strong organisational mission, vision and values so fundamentally important? Here are five reasons:

- It helps pave the way to developing clear fundraising goals and methods, and to be ‘mission-focussed’ rather than ‘funder-led’. A clear vision, mission and purpose states the organisation’s essence, character and direction.
- It is a critical part of strategic planning and deciding what we should be focusing on, and more importantly what we should forget about or deprioritise.
- It is a fundamental part of positioning, ensuring that an organisation is coming across to funders with both a simple and a distinctive message, vital to differentiate from competitors and to be a ‘go-to’ organisation for funders to choose to fund.
- It is a huge, galvanising force for employees and gives a sense of pride, defining why the arts organisation exists and identifying key beneficiaries of its programmes and services. But most importantly, the issue of vision and mission should be understood from a customer or audience member’s perspective, meaning that everyone feels part of something that distinctively stands for something that is bigger than any individual or issue.
- It becomes even more important at times of crisis or difficulty, helping to focus decisions and reprioritising key activities. It is the lifeline to sustainability, ensuring that why an organisation exists today is clear, as well as the aspirations for the future, allowing leaders and staff to adapt to the ever-changing economic and cultural demands of running complex artistic operations.



I can't help but think if we were clearer and more robust about vision, mission and purpose it might help the arts overall make a better case for their existence. And surely if there is one area for Trustees to take charge of, then being the guardians of core organisational purpose, has to be it.

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