Visioning Info

Why do groups write vision & mission statements? To fulfill three needs:

1. Purpose. To know why we are here. Clarifying our vision provides a foundation and clarity for self. It answers the questions: "Why am I here?" "Is this what I believe in?" "Do I belong?"

2. Outreach. To tell the world what we are about. To invite others who will be the right fit. To let people know what we are aiming at here, so they can discern whether or not they might want to live with us. To call in what and who we want.

3. Guidance. A foundation to build on. A touchstone to remind us of what our core is—especially during troubled times—that we can return to as needed. A consciously chosen influence on decisions of how we live together: policy & agreements, resource allocation (time & money), culture and how we relate with one another.

Writing down our vision forces us to get clear on what that vision is. And going through the process together, as a group, helps us connect with each other's passions and build shared understanding.

Sample definition of terms. Example for a nonprofit focused on food and hunger issues:

Vision is what the world looks like when you have achieved everything you want, e.g. "a world free from hunger."

Mission is how you will engage with the issue, e.g. "We will run a soup kitchen to serve homeless people in Lane County."

Goals are the next level down in specificity, e.g. "We aim to open our kitchen by the beginning of next year. We expect to serve dinners 7 nights a week to 250 people. We want to own our own facility within 5 years."

Objectives & Tasks are the next level down in specificity. Objectives are what it will take to achieve each goal (e.g. "in order to own our own facility, we will need to raise X amount of dollars within 4½ years, etc."), and Tasks are actions with names and dates attached.

In addition:

Values are the enduring beliefs or ideals we share about what is good and desirable and what is not.

Core Principles are a combination of vision, mission, and values that provide sufficient knowledge for a very strong foundation with great flexibility as to the specifics of how they are implemented.

All of these definitions vary among different organizations. It can be helpful to adopt a common terminology for an organization engaged in visioning so that the members know which term means what.

Note that agreeing on your group's vision is not the same as determining your group's organizational structure. And it won't make tough decisions easy. Because there will still be varied interpretations, different people will emphasize different parts, new people will come in who weren't there for the original process, and so on. Nonetheless, it's still a good idea. Once you create the shared vision, you'll have years of figuring out how to live it, along with occasionally revisiting whether it's still the right fit for your group. Good years, we hope!