The Case to Discard Hospital Mission Statements and Replace It with A Statement of Goals

Simon W. Rabkin

Professor of Medicine, University of British Columbia, Division of Cardiology, Vancouver, B.C., Canada

Corresponding Author: Simon W. Rabkin

Address: University of British Columbia, 9th Floor 2775 Laurel St., Vancouver, B.C., Canada V5Z 1M9. Tel: (604) 875 5847; Fax: (604) 875 5849; E-mail: simon.rabkin@ubc.ca

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Abstract

Background: Hospitals and healthcare institutions spend a considerable amount of time and capital on constructing an appropriate mission statement for themselves.

Methods: A review of the purpose of mission statements and the statements made by different healthcare organizations was undertaken. For institutions in the USA, their mission statements were examined in the context of their national ratings.

Results: The mission statements of healthcare organizations are often too abstract, using similar phraseology about caring for patients. Concern for the community that the hospital serves is stated by both a hospital listed as one of the best US hospitals and an institution that was considered to be in the lowest tier in the same country. Similarly, the recognition of ‘research’ or ‘innovation and discovery’ was stated by respectively both a top institution in the USA and one in the bottom tier.

Conclusions: Healthcare institutions should replace their mission statements with clear and attainable statements of concrete goals, and indicate how successful the institution is at attaining those goals and improving the experience of its patients and staff.

Keywords

Mission Statements, Healthcare Organizations, Patient Care, Staff Engagement, Burnout

Background and Introduction

Mission or vision statements, in many industries, are key to crystallizing the purpose of the organization and inspiring the people who work within it to unite for a common purpose. In the healthcare field, there is evidence that the mission statements, in their current form, have become irrelevant. Several explanations support this contention. The mission statements of healthcare organizations are often too abstract, using similar phraseology about caring for patients [1]. No hospital would state that they do not provide good healthcare to their community of patients because the provision of good healthcare is the existential nature of hospitals. Thus, if the rationale for creating a mission statement is ‘the development of a clear definition of the organizational purpose and aspirations’ [2], the core aspect of a hospital’s mission and its very existence is self-evident, and any statement of its mission becomes unnecessary. Second, perhaps an extension of the first point, is that mission statements are often very similar for most healthcare organizations and do not sufficiently distinguish one.
from another. Indeed, a standard formula is readily available for guidance in their development [3]. The similarity eliminates the purpose of having the hospital’s workforce identify with their specific hospital. It is noteworthy that mission statements have been dismissed as "an expensive expression of politically correct platitudes which leads to cynical alienation of stakeholders" [4].

**Relationship of Mission Statements to Hospital Rankings**

Let us compare the mission statements of several hospitals in one country (USA) that were ranked either in the top [5] or in the bottom [6] of US institutions (Fig-1). The precise ranking methodology is not critical because the hospitals are at the extremes of opinion.

All institutions have as their mission 'high-quality', 'excellent', 'best', or 'exceptional' care. Indeed, looking at those words alone, it would not be possible to discern which institution belongs to a top-rated hospital or one that is not. Concern for the community that the hospital serves as stated by both a hospital listed as the fourth best US hospital ('people who live and work in Brooklyn and its surrounding areas') as well as an institution that was considered to be in the lowest tier in the same country ('meets the needs of the community we serve'). Similarly, the recognition of 'research' or 'innovation and discovery' was stated by respectively both the top institution in the USA as well as one in the bottom tier. If one cannot differentiate institutions at the extremes of rating performances, what is the value of a mission statement?

One hospital with undoubtedly a lofty mission for patient care was found to be 'rife with bullying, coercion, harassment, intimidation, lack of trust, nepotism, and favoritism', according to a damning survey of its staff and executives [7].

**Mission Statement versus Unstated Goals**

A hospital's or institution's implicit goals may be motivated by cost containment, delivering more care with fewer resources, efficiency, profit generation, or even preservation of administrative structure. The implicit goals, reflected in the behavior or actions of the entire staff, not the lofty vision statement, dictate how that organization functions. If the healthcare staff are overworked, overstressed, or 'burning out', then their attitude towards patients and colleagues will not reflect the 'sunny' words of the hospital's mission/vision statement. Additionally, physician burnout can be a significant monetary cost to a hospital's operating budget [8]. Contrasting an excessively stressed healthcare staff or one operating

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under different implicit hospital goals with a hospital’s
(lofty) mission statement will rapidly ensure that the
mission statement becomes irrelevant, ridiculed, or
worse, a disengaging force for good healthcare.

Bart and Tabone conducted an exploratory analysis
to relate Canadian hospital mission statements with
hospital performance. Hospital mission statements
were rated as to whether they included statements of
values or beliefs, specific behavior standards, desired
public image, concern for employees, and concern for
shareholders [9]. Mission performance was assessed
by hospital administrators according to seven
outcomes: (i) satisfaction with the current mission
statement (ii) degree to which the mission was a
source of energy (iii) degree the mission statement was
used as a guide for decision making (iv) extent to
which the mission influenced respondents’ behavior
(v) extent to which it influences members of the
organization (vi) extent to which the members
throughout the organization are committed to the
mission (vii) qualitative perceptual measure of the
organization’s financial performance success. The
correlation coefficients were low, although sometimes
significant. Unfortunately, no stakeholders other than
administrators assessed performance, and
‘performance did not include the crucial metric
whether or not the hospitals met ‘specific financial
objectives’ or a desired competitive position [9].

Reorientation to Goals
Instead of a mission statement, a healthcare
organization may be better served by a statement of
goals that are regularly updated. Statements of goals
can be diverse and may differ to be consistent with
their functional objectives [10]. Setting specific goals
not only can improve clinical performance [11] but also
organizational performance (Soberman & Ginsburg,
2001). Specific and challenging goals lead to higher
performance than generalized goals [12], so a specific
set of organizational goals should lead to improved
organization performance over (mission) statements
that have nonspecific statements with the objective to
provide high quality or excellent care.

“Goals affect performance by directing attention,
mobilizing effort, increasing persistence, and
motivating strategy development” [12]. The
establishment of a goal statement can be helpful for
organizational change as well as being a motivator for
improvement [10]. One must be mindful that “failure
to have a clear statement of goals, that are refreshed
when needed, will lead to stagnation and will impact
the development of high-performance teams” [1].

In the clinical setting, a randomized controlled trial
demonstrated that attaining appropriate goals
strengthens a physician/surgeon’s confidence [11].
Clearly defined goals that are accomplishable improve
individual satisfaction in their organization [14]. From
a physician’s perspective, increased physician
satisfaction leads to increased physician engagement
with their organization [15] and ultimately improves
healthcare delivery [16–18].

The challenge in setting organizational goals is the
potentially large number that may be necessary for a
large healthcare organization. The proposed solution is
for senior leadership to stretch their goal list while
prioritizing these goals to ensure goal attainment and
ensuing satisfaction [19].

Conclusion
A healthcare institution should replace the mission
statement with a clear and attainable statement of
congrete goals and demonstrate how successful the
institution is at attaining those goals and improving
the experience of its patients and its staff.

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Review Article


