

Do You Have a Mission or Just a Mission Statement?

By Jennifer Kaplan

In February, I had the good fortune to spend two days at the [Institute for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame](#) participating in a [Management as a Calling](#) workshop led by Andy Hoffman, the Holcim (US) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. I spent the weekend with 40 global educators exploring how leadership, institutional change, and purpose intersect and what that means for those of us teaching and building within social impact systems. The depth of the conversations, the diversity of perspectives, and the willingness to challenge assumptions were genuinely inspiring. I left with pages of notes and have already begun integrating key concepts into my [Marketing and Communications for Social Impact](#) course at the [Presidio Center for Sustainable Solutions](#) at University of Redlands.

But, there was one thing that kept nagging at me during those two days that I have not been able to set aside. It was not a framework or a case study. It was a gap.

Ask a room full of leaders whether they have a sense of mission and almost every hand goes up. Ask them if they can write it down in a single sentence, one specific enough to explain why they said “no” to a significant opportunity or held a position that made their institution uncomfortable, and the hands start coming down.

That gap turns out to be central to something I have been thinking about in parallel. And it points to a question worth sitting with before walking into any strategy conversation about your organization.

What is this for? And does the answer actually change anything we do?

Most leaders have a version of an answer. Most organizations have a mission statement. The problem is not the absence of purpose. It is that purpose, at both the individual and organizational level, has a way of living in the aspirational rather than the operational. It describes what we believe rather than what we do.

The work of developing what I call **operational purposing** starts with the individual. Only once that is clear can purpose extend to the organization.

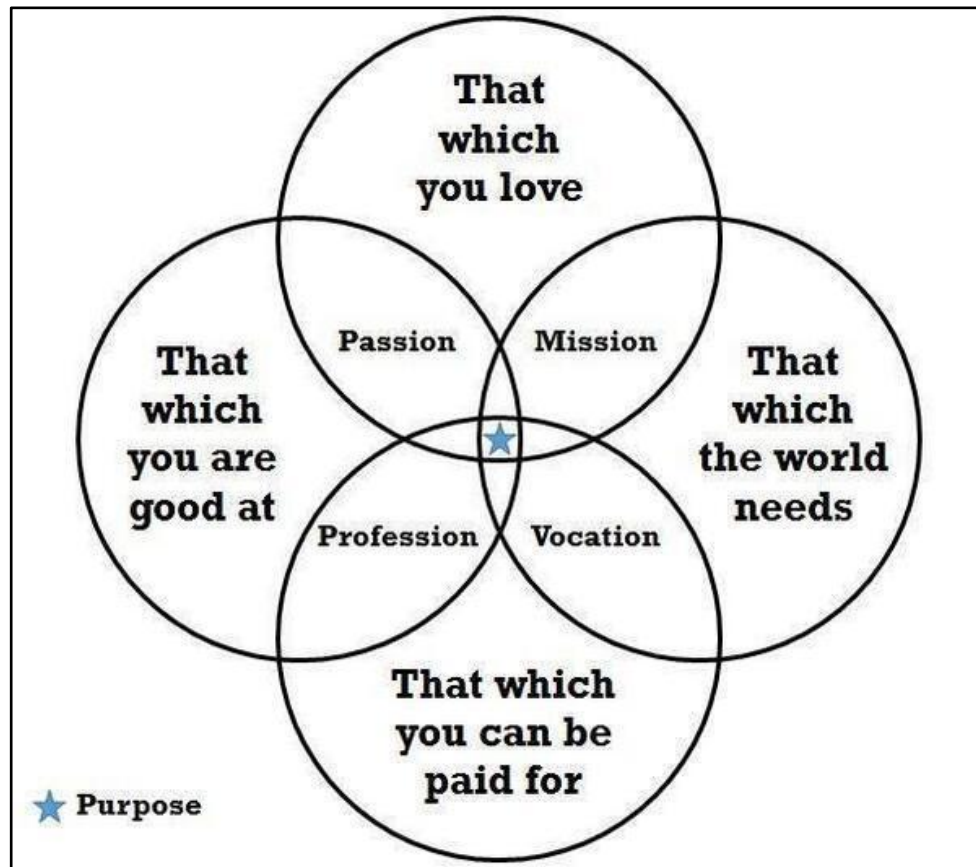
Starting with Yourself

The four questions are deceptively simple...

1. What do you love?
2. What are you genuinely good at?
3. What does the world need?
4. What can you be paid for?

These four questions form the backbone of a Venn diagram most of us recognize as the Ikigai Diagram. Created by a blogger, Marc Winn in a blog post titled [What Is Your Ikigai?](#), he wrote: “An ikigai is essentially ‘a reason to get up in the morning’. A reason to enjoy life...Having spent most of the last few years helping dozens and dozens of entrepreneurs find their ikigai, whilst also searching for my own, I can now visualise where it belongs.”

What Winn imagined was a framework where the ancient Japanese ikigai concept collided with research on living a long and happy life.



Source: [Marc Winn](#), 2014

Winn inadvertently tapped into something big. As he later wrote, “In that blog post, I merged two concepts to create something new. Essentially, I merged a venn diagram on ‘purpose’ with [Dan Buettner’s Ikigai concept, in relation to living to be more than 100](#). The sum total of my effort was that I changed one word on a diagram and shared a ‘new’ meme with the world.” Winn’s meme went viral almost immediately, which says something about how hungry people are for clarity of purpose.

While most people can answer each of Winn’s questions without much difficulty, Winn realized the interesting work happens at the intersections, where love and skill meet, where need and viability overlap, where what energizes you connects to what the world is actually missing. That

overlap is where purpose lives. Not as a value you hold, but as a direction that organizes your choices, that has required something of you, and that holds when things get difficult.

The Same Logic Scales

Alex Busansky, President and Founder of [Impact Justice](#), a criminal justice innovation center, built [The Homecoming Project \(THP\)](#) on the convictions that people who have done bad things are not bad people, that reentry programs require humanity, and that a willing neighbor with a spare bedroom can do what years of institutional intervention cannot. The model pairs people leaving prison with paid volunteer hosts, like an Airbnb, for up to six months, with wraparound case management support to help them secure housing, employment and the basic documentation a fresh start requires. Since 2018, more than 200 participants have completed the program. None have reoffended. Every one has graduated with stable housing and is either working or in school.

THP was not conceived by management consultants or in a strategic planning session. Before founding Impact Justice, Alex spent twelve years prosecuting homicides and serious crimes at the Manhattan District Attorney's Office, then moved to the Department of Justice investigating excessive use of force by law enforcement and corrections officers. He served as counsel on the Senate Judiciary Committee and joined the Vera Institute. He spent decades close enough to the machinery of the criminal justice system to see exactly where and how it fails people.

For Alex, purpose clarity was shaped early. His mother, Phyllis Busansky, built her career on the belief that systems, led with compassion, can change the conditions of people's lives. She ran a half-way house for troubled teens, directed aging and human resources services, served as a county commissioner, and led Florida's welfare-to-work agency overseeing a \$1.2 billion annual budget, always working inside institutions and always pushing them toward something more humane.

Alex took that same instinct and aimed it at the place where he saw those institutions most visibly break down. The Homecoming Project is the output of a personal purpose that was modeled at home, tested in courtrooms and federal investigations, and sharpened over decades of watching what happens when people leave prison with nowhere to go.

The questions Alex asked that led to the creation of Impact Justice, and eventually THP, were not new to him. His personal purpose was woven into the fabric of the organization he founded. Alex's Ikigai maps almost exactly onto the strategic questions he builds into every project.

Four Questions for Organizational Clarity of Purpose

For some leaders, understanding an organization's purpose isn't so organic. If you want to test your organization's purpose clarity, ask these four questions:

1. **What does your organization genuinely care about?** Not the language in the annual report, but the problem your team shows up energized to solve, the conviction that exists beyond the business case.

2. **What is your organization distinctively good at?** Not merely competent but genuinely differentiated. What do you do in a way that others would find hard to replicate, even if they tried?
3. **What does the world actually need?** Not what you offer, but what gap would remain if your organization disappeared tomorrow? What would be worse without the organization?
4. **Where does your impact become someone else's interest?** Who will notice, and fund, and advocate for you, not because they are obligated to, but because what you do provides value to them in a way they cannot easily find elsewhere?

Each question is worth answering on its own. But the real organizational magic is in the overlap.

Think of the four as circles, akin to Winn's diagram. Any two can intersect and produce something useful, a craft, a capacity, a market. Three overlapping gets you closer. But the organization that finds the territory where all four converge, what it cares about, what it does distinctively, what the world needs, and what sustains it, has found something most organizations spend years searching for and never quite achieve.

That convergence is what I call the **Mission Differentiator**.



A Mission Differentiator is not a tagline. It is not a positioning statement. It is the specific, honest answer to the question every mission-driven organization eventually has to face: why should

anyone choose us over the ten other organizations working on the same issue? The Mission Differentiator is the answer that cannot be manufactured by a competitor, because it is rooted in something true about your organization's particular history, people, convictions, and capabilities. It is the sweet spot where your authenticity and the world's needs meet in a way that no one else can replicate.

Why This Order Matters

The reason to start with personal purpose before organizational purpose is not just philosophical. It is practical.

Chris Danner, the Director of Product Management at [charity: water](#), has been quite generously speaking with the learners in my Marketing & Comms class since I began teaching the class. Chris is passionate, funny, and excellent at his job. He understands the organization's mission.

As Chris explains, Scott Harrison, charity: water's founder and CEO, built one of the most recognized nonprofits in the world on a conviction born from personal reckoning.

Harrison was 18 when he began working as a nightclub promoter in New York City, living a life of money, parties, and what he later described as moral bankruptcy. At 28, he walked away from all of it. He quit his job to volunteer in Liberia with Mercy Ships, where he spent two years photographing and documenting patients who had walked hundreds of miles to receive care in a post-war country. What he saw there changed the organizing principle of his life. He had gone from selling Manhattan club kids ten-dollar bottles of water they rarely opened to watching people die from a lack of clean drinking water entirely.

He returned to New York and did the only thing he knew how to do. He threw a party. On his 31st birthday in 2006, he charged friends twenty dollars at the door and sent every cent to drill wells in a refugee camp in northern Uganda, home to 30,000 displaced families with almost no clean water. In one night they raised \$15,000. That night, charity: water was born.

That origin story shaped not just how Harrison thought about the mission but how he thought about the experience of achieving it. Research confirms what fundraisers have long suspected, that [giving to charity is tied to happiness](#). Not metaphorically good, but neurologically good, activating the same reward centers in the brain as receiving a gift yourself. The question for any organization trying to mobilize donors is not whether people want to give. It is whether you give them something worth giving to and an experience worthy of that impulse.

Harrison understood this instinctively, perhaps because he spent a decade in the business of making people feel good about showing up. He did not launch charity: water with a guilt campaign or a montage of suffering. He understood that people do not give because they feel bad. They give because they want to feel connected to something that matters.

That instinct shaped not just the experience of giving to charity: water but the structure of it. What makes charity: water's Mission Differentiator authentic is not simply the cause. There are dozens of water-related charities spread across the globe. Charity:water's model is the message. And the message traces directly back to a founder who learned the cost of living without purpose before

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he understood what it meant to build one. Harrison wanted to share what he personally experienced: Giving feels like being part of something bigger than yourself and worth celebrating.

Coming Into Focus

Leaders who have not done the individual exploration tend to bring the same vagueness to the organizational questions that they bring to their own. The mission statement that could belong to any organization in your sector usually reflects a leader who has not yet found the language, courage or insight, for the specific version of the thing they actually care about.

When you have done the work on yourself first, the organizational questions feel different. They feel like extensions of something real rather than exercises in positioning. Your personal Mission Differentiator, the place where what you love, what you are built for, what the world needs, and what you can sustain all land in the same spot, becomes the lens through which the organizational version comes into focus.

The gap I kept hearing in those Notre Dame conversations, between defining a purpose and feeling like it doesn't translate to your work life, turns out to be the same gap that shows up when organizations fail to articulate why they exist and why anyone should choose them.

What Comes Next

What I am calling Purposing is not a destination. It is a practice, one that has to be tended at both the individual level and at the organizational one. The leaders and organizations that get this right are not the ones who develop the perfect mission statement. They are the ones who keep returning to the hard questions, letting the answers sharpen over time, and building systems that reflect what they actually believe.

I have been developing a more precise framework for assessing where that practice currently stands, for individuals and for the organizations they lead. More on that in the coming weeks.

In the meantime, the question is worth sitting with. If someone asked you to write your purpose in a single sentence tomorrow morning, one specific enough to explain your last hard no or difficult decision, what would it say?

More coming. Because purpose is not a thing you have. It is a thing you do.