

MANAGING THE BUSINESS OF THE FLIGHT DEPARTMENT

Crafting an Effective Mission Statement

Part two in NBAA's resource series focused on small flight department management.

As cost centers that require a substantial dedication of resources to maintain baseline operating conditions while typically not generating any revenue, flight departments occupy unique territory within the business world. Some managers continuously must justify their costs, their operations and often their very existence, while others work for an owner who understands why they have an aircraft and the costs associated with its operation. Regardless of which situation you find yourself in, it is important to clearly define the flight department's role and to be an advocate for the value it brings to the organization. One way of doing so is to develop a strategic plan that includes a mission statement – a concise, effective summation of goals and values, which at the most basic level addresses the question: “Why do we exist?”

Just as different flight departments have unique cultures and standard operating procedures, there is no one universal template for a strong mission statement. Size, objectives, personnel and history are all factors that will differentiate one department's fundamental messaging from another. However, there are some broadly relevant considerations that all flight departments, regardless of size or corporate goals, should keep in mind when preparing to draft or revise a mission statement.

ANSWERING “WHY?” TO BE YOUR OWN ADVOCATE

Leadership expert Simon Sinek studied several companies, such as Apple, and found those that focus on “why” they want to accomplish their goals and then determined “how” and “what” they want to produce, achieved greater success than companies that applied their focus in the reverse order (i.e., ‘what and how’ before ‘why’).¹ Answering the existential question of the “why” of a flight department – its foundational purpose – is not only the most important consideration when drafting a mission statement, but also serves as an invaluable opportunity to advocate for the flight department's essential benefit to the company.

A well-crafted mission statement helps remind you, the other department personnel and, most importantly, the company's senior management that an aircraft is an investment in a time machine and economic multiplier. Time is money and the company has limited human capital that needs to remain efficient; emphasizing the substantial value flight departments provide to this end is a critical component of a strong mission statement. Quite simply, it is an opportunity for self-promotion and to remind all employees of the essential role the department plays in the company's overall success.

Some tips for effectively advocating within a mission statement:

- Resist the urge to inter-focus. For example, it may be your objective to be the safest flight department, but it will be more relevant to external parties and upper management that you highlight the department's role in creating value for the company

¹ Sinek, S. (2009, September). How great leaders inspire action [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action

- Play to your audience. Flight departments save C-level executives 20.8 days per year, or nearly an additional month of productivity.² The mission statement should remind anybody reading it, but especially senior management or the principal, of the efficiency and productivity enabled by having a flight department.
- Codify your value. Flight departments are more than just “A to B” operations; they are living, breathing components weaved into the fabric of a company. Use your words to place the flight department within the greater corporate objective, establishing the department as a vital appendage that is necessary to successfully execute the company’s goals.

THE KISS PRINCIPLE

When developing its vast array of systems, the U.S. Navy adheres to a design principle credited to aircraft engineer Kelly Johnson in 1960: “Keep it simple, stupid.” Crafting a mission statement is less complex than building the world’s most advanced military aircraft, but the same ethos applies: Simplicity, brevity and memorability should be guiding rules when creating a mission statement. Graystone Advisors, who spoke about “simplifying the business of business aviation” at the 2016 NBAA Business Aviation Convention & Exhibition (NBAA-BACE), recommend that any statement should be “to the point and easy to remember.”³

To accomplish this, an effectively written mission statement should meet the following criteria:

- Does it concisely summarize why your flight department does what it does?
- Is it memorable?
- Can it fit on a t-shirt?
- If you asked an employee, would they be able to recite it without thinking for too long?

Excessive verbiage is obviously undesirable in this regard, but there is no ideal length – powerful mission statements come in all shapes and sizes. Three well-known organizations provide an example of this disparity:

TED: Spreading Ideas

Habitat for Humanity International: Seeking to put God’s love into action, Habitat for Humanity brings people together to build homes, communities and hope.

NPR: To work in partnership with member stations to create a more informed public – one challenged and invigorated by a deeper understanding and appreciation of events, ideas and cultures

TED sums up their core objective with two words while NPR uses 28, but both mission statements powerfully convey the most important ideas with just as many words as needed.

STRIVE FOR CONSENSUS

Finalizing a mission statement and putting it on display is the end goal. But if employees aren’t engaged in the process, does it really speak for the entire team? A mission statement that wholly reflects a flight department through personnel involvement, rather than a manager dictating that the statement, will be more representative of all the various facets of the department, and will provide managers with a better sense of what their team is thinking.

Sample strategies for building team consensus:

- Have each employee give their own answer to the fundamental question (“Why do YOU think we’re here?”) – you may get 10 different answers from 10 people
- Use the process as a team-building exercise, where team members provide their own ideas and debate them in a constructive dialogue
- Encourage inclusivity – every employee, even those lower on the department hierarchy, should have a chance to contribute

² O’Leary, Kevin Ph.D. “NBAA SFD White Paper.” Message to the author.

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³ Brecher, S. “7 Ways to Create an Inspiring Team Vision Statement.” Graystone Advisors. Retrieved from: <http://www.graystoneadvisors.com/7-ways-create-inspiring-vision-statement>

As flight departments undergo change, the mission statement may need to be modified or rewritten to keep consistent with the department's natural evolution. Some considerations that will be a factor in whether or not the statement should be updated:

- Have any changes in size (more/fewer employees) had an impact on the flight department environment?
- Is there any organic change in flight department culture that should be reflected in an updated mission statement?
- Has the corporate objective been altered?

CONCLUSION

A mission statement is more than just a declaration of existence. Building team consensus around a powerful statement of purpose is a form of advocacy that enhances the department's identity. A strong statement will speak for the flight department employees, letting them define – to themselves and to the company at large – the critical role the department plays in enabling the company to achieve its goals.

APPENDIX: EXAMPLE OF A MISSION STATEMENT PROCESS

Looking beyond the typical “We want to be the best aircraft management and jet charter company/provide the best service to our customers” mission statement, Reynolds Jet conducted a deep dive into its culture and scrutinized purpose to create a compelling vision and mission; why they exist, why their customers are with them and what makes them different to every-one else in the industry. This was the process they used to end up at their final mission statement.

1. Clarification and evaluation of brand architecture: posture (how we see ourselves & how the world see us), brand personal-ity, the brand pillars (promises we make about our service), brand rewards (of being a customer of ours) and our core values
2. Define and establish employee beliefs, behaviors and tone of voice
3. All the defining words from steps 1 and 2 were condensed to single/three-word max labels, with each one written on post-it notes and displayed on our conference room wall. These were then categorized and scrutinized further to hone down
4. This definition/landscape of the brand meant we could create one-line sentences in the areas of service, our one over-arching benefit, positioning, vision, mission, brand promise, values and our essence
5. That in turn allowed us to generate one-line job descriptions for every employee, linked to the mission
6. We selected champions in the company to continually endorse mission statement, once it had been casted
7. Every employee appreciates this is a journey, not a destination

Final Result: We reduce your costs and burdens of aviation travel allowing you to focus your time, energy and dollars on your family and core business

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About NBAA

Founded in 1947 and based in Washington, DC, the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) is the leading organization for companies that rely on general aviation aircraft to help make their businesses more efficient, productive and successful. Contact NBAA at (800) FYI-NBAA or info@nbaa.org. Not a member? Join today by visiting www.nbaa.org/join.