# Lessons learned in development of vision and mission statements

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## Abstract

Background: Educational institutions need to formulate vision and mission statements to support the alignment of their decision-making and practices, and also as one of the standards for accreditation. However, "vision" and "mission" are misunderstood terms. Organizations may end up declaring quite vague and fuzzy vision and mission statements not owned by members.

What was done: We used Collins and Porras conceptual framework for development of vision and mission statements for five constituent institutes of our university. We carried out Process Documentation (PD) of the activity of formulating these statements. We took the following steps: rapport-building, identifying focus, facilitation of process identification, reflection, and closure. A month later, we invited the participants in this activity to reflect on the entire process. We carried out an inductive thematic analysis of text data generated during guided group discussions, and the participants' reflections.

Lessons learned: To begin with, the participants lacked clarity and ownership of the process, which progressively improved over the course of the activity. The participants felt that several factors contributing to the formulation of the statements were: setting the stage and use of a conceptual framework; probing questions and handholding by the facilitators; and the collective exercise. We, as facilitators, felt that the use of an iterative group process, thoughtful probes by us, and an environment conducive for open exchange of ideas contributed to the development of the statements. We documented ten steps for the development of the vision and mission statements, which might be useful for any academic medical center tasked with a similar activity.

**Keywords**: vision; mission; group process; higher education

## Background

Creating vision and mission statements, and aligning decision-making with them, is an essential practice for organizations. The concepts of "vision" and "mission" are interrelated and synergistic, yet represent different constructs.[1] Vision specifies where an organization is going; mission gives it directions on how to get there. Clear statements of mission and vision are one of the standards by which accrediting agencies for educational programs and higher education judge institutions. Academic medical centers must formulate these statements in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, and make them known.[2,3]

Collins and Porras argue that a well-conceived vision consists of a combination of core ideology and an envisioned future. The core ideology consists of core purpose, and core values of the organization; the envisioned future is what the organization aspires to become.[4,5] Values act as guiding principles for organizations, and ensure their members are clear about what they stand for. Values do not change—but practices can change. It

is pertinent to note that in our case the sponsoring trust had already articulated its core ideology. The core ideology of the trust, and the vision of the medical college have guided the mission of the medical college, and its associated hospital, over the last 15 years.

The mission and vision of our health sciences University, located in western India, formulated its vision and mission statements after its establishment as a private University in 2019.[6] The trust sponsoring the private university declared its core purpose and values in 2008. The medical college, one of the constituent institutes of the University, developed its vision and mission statements in alignment with the core purpose of the sponsoring trust in 2008. The rest of the constituent institutes were asked to formulate vision and mission statements in alignment with the vision and mission statements of the University, and the core purpose of the sponsoring trust. We describe the lessons learned in designing and implementing a process to formulate vision and mission statements.

**What was done**
The Institutes of Physiotherapy, Nursing, Medical Laboratory Technology, Allied Health Sciences, and Public Health conducted guided group discussions for formulating vision and mission statements. The Collins and Porras Vision Framework, used by businesses to develop vision statements, was applied to an academic medical center in India. We studied the process, and its impact on participants, using a process documentation model created by Acharya.[7]

*Process facilitation*
The engagement of institute principals was critical, as was use of well-orientated facilitators. Principals of the institutes were presented with an action plan based on the Collins and Porras framework and asked to nominate articulate faculty, with at least five years' experience in their institutes, to participate in the activity. An experienced lead facilitator oriented the other facilitators. Five faculty from Physiotherapy, five from Nursing and two from Medical Laboratory Technology, Allied Health Sciences and Public Health participated in the process over a two-month period.

*Reflection and closure*
A month after the activity, we invited the participants to reflect on the process, and provide written feedback on their perceptions. We used three open-ended questions: a) What were your earlier views about vision and mission before participating in this process? b) What changes occurred in your thinking after this? and c) Describe the factors that facilitated change in your views. We carried out an inductive thematic analysis of the text data generated during guided group discussion.[8]

The Institutional Ethics Committee of the University granted exempt review to this work.

## Lessons Learned
Application of the Collins and Porras framework, with a few adaptations, taught us several interesting lessons that others may find useful.

1. We set the stage by revisiting the core values and core purpose of the trust, framed 15 years ago, and the process used for its development. Subsequently, we elaborated the framework by sharing core ideology and envisioned future of SONY (1954) as a classic example.[5] Many participants were not familiar with mission and vision development processes and found this orientation helpful. In addition, we used a "U-shaped" seat arrangement for better interactions amongst the participants.[9]

2. The concept of the" Big Hairy Audacious Goal" (BHAG), created by Collins and Porras set the tone for the development of vision statements.[4] Core guidance from Collins and Porras passed on to participants included: "the purpose is to articulate a goal that will stimulate change and progress; it's about going on a mission; linked to core values and core purpose… It is not a word-smithing exercise intended to create a perfect statement."[5]

3. Participants found it helpful to envision a future statement that they articulated as an imagined newspaper article about their respective institute in 15 years´ time, which we asked participants to headline with the key message in the article.[5]

4. The participants were asked to highlight up to five exciting and vivid descriptions from their paragraphs that would bring the envisioned future to life in an effort to converge priority ideas.

5. Participants discussed the emerging themes within their respective small group, and tested each description for its vividness based on authenticity, clarity, and detail, as suggested by Collins and Porras.[5]

6. The participants collectively refined descriptions from among those produced, listed all those selected for the group, and voted for the five best descriptions in each group. While this was not described in Collins and Porras, we found that it helped participants move to consensus. We also encouraged participants to be open in their thinking and allow themselves to change their opinion, if necessary, during the voting process.

7. After further brainstorming, participants coalesced around a single BHAG for their respective institute, merging the vivid descriptions and linking them back to the core purpose of the trust. They then tested respective BHAGs against the questions suggested in the framework.[5] Some participants expressed that the entire process brought a sense of ownership for the developed statements, because this was a collective exercise enriched by working with inputs from the groups working for the sister institutions.

8. We learned that it was important for participants to go back to their respective institute to share the developed BHAGs with other staff of the institution, receive inputs, and revise BHAGs based on those inputs.

9. Iterative feedback improved the final product. Participants presented the goals for their respective institutes to all the participants and the facilitators. The groups were able to get clarifications on unclear points and suggest minor language corrections.

10. Engage leadership from the beginning. Institute principals nominated participants and were kept informed about the process. This activity is not likely to succeed without their endorsement.

Our design was consistent with principles for effective gatherings advocated by Parker: create a purposeful gathering, arrange the room with intention, in our case a sitting arrangement for eye contact and interaction, establish an environment conducive to open exchange of ideas, encourage active participation, embrace unpredictability, and end with a purpose.[10]

The participants felt that the following several factors, consistent with Parker's principles, contributed to formulation of vision and mission statements: a) setting the stage with classic example of vision statement; b) probing questions and handholding by the facilitators; c) collective exercise involving groups from constituent institutes; and d) use of a conceptual framework. The participants felt empowered towards the end of the process.

Construction of vision and mission statements is a creative process where the building of ideas may not occur in a linear manner. The use of an iterative process and thoughtful probes facilitated this creative process. Based on participants' responses, we believe that facilitators were able to create an environment conducive to open exchange, which enhanced the creative process. Facilitators did this through the encouragement of active listening, non-judgmental feedback, and emphasis on equal participation. A participatory process, with opportunities and time to share and validate ideas, strengthened the outcome.

Developing the vision and mission of the institutes was an iterative process spread over six weeks, with weekly meetings of two hours each, guided by the facilitators. Feedback from participants indicated that this process of developing vision and mission statements helped them progressively develop clarity about the importance of process and ownership in formulating these statements.

The lessons learned in planning and implementing this vision and mission project apply to most group creative processes. For us, they succeeded in empowering participants to collectively develop important statements about the future of their institutes. We recommend that others take advantage of the lessons we learned when they develop vision and mission statements.

**Table 1. Summary of discussion during the closure meeting on vision and mission Exercise (n=11)**

| Views about vision and mission statements before attending the workshop | What changes occurred in thinking process during the workshop? | Factors which contributed to change in views during the course of workshop |
|---|---|---|
| *I did not know what vision meant.*<br><br>*There was no clarity in mind as how these statements are framed.*<br><br>*I thought this exercise is to be done by senior leaders.*<br><br>*I felt this was more of an academic and mandatory exercise where we must develop eye catchy statements for the institute.*<br><br>*It was seen as a formality to be completed where statements with nice, fancy, ornamental and catchy words are framed for "others" (accrediting agency) and for the cause of advertisement/publicity. These words often tend to have various meanings to its readers.*<br><br>*I had questions in mind such as —Can we change it? Do we need it [As we had developed it before]* | *I came to know that it is a systematic process of thinking guided by a conceptual framework where we were taken through various steps and exercises (individual and group)*<br><br>*I am clear with the process of development of vision and mission statements as a teamwork.*<br><br>*This process was an "emotion" for me as it illuminated many of our strengths and opportunities to expand scope of our work.*<br><br>*The process of collectively developing the statements, peer feedback and cross-learning from each other brought a kind of "ownership" and [sense of belonging] to the statements developed.*<br><br>*I felt satisfied motivated and stimulated where it was a journey from "others" statements to "our" statements.*<br><br>*I learned to communicate "big thinking" through the vision statements with carefully selected simple yet powerful words which conveys same meaning for all.* | *Use of conceptual framework of BHAG by facilitators to guide the process—4*<br><br>*Healthy group discussions and examples—4*<br><br>*Participants of other institutes people of university was useful [for cross-learning and broaden the thinking]—4*<br><br>*Teamwork—3*<br><br>*Setting the stage by adequate briefing—3*<br><br>*Handholding by facilitators to choose the words to frame the statements.*<br><br>*Thought provoking probes and positive body language of facilitators.*<br><br>*Commitment of team to the assignment* |

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