

An overview on family mission statements

Family Advisory and Philanthropy Services



A sense of shared purpose is key to family flourishing. This article describes what a family mission statement and family mantra are, how to create them, and how to use the mission statement and mantra with your family.

Why a family mission statement matters

Studies of families that have succeeded over generations indicate that some of the factors behind their success include:¹

- Family members who contribute to building a great business, to building great wealth and above all, to building a great family.
- The family supports the separation and individuation of rising generation family members.
- The family celebrates its history and traditions.
- Family members identify their core values and use those values to articulate a shared dream.

There are other factors in family success, but for our purposes we will focus on this last point: the articulation of a shared dream. This is what a family mission statement is all about.



Creating a family mantra

Just like a lighthouse guides ships on their navigational journey, some families add a family mantra to their family mission statement to guide their intentions. A family mantra is a way of taking the life lessons of family members and applying them to the culture of the family.

A family mantra is a short and simple guiding statement that can be used to guide the family priorities for the coming year or years to come. The mantra is about setting intentions with a goal of evoking emotion and the actions following suit.

A key reason for a family mantra is to create a sense of team within the family and sustain cohesion. One of the benefits of developing, using, and living by the family's mantra is to root the family's decisions and choices knowing that words have meaning and they shape the way people think, especially younger people.

Family mantras are about distilling your family values and morals into an easy to recite phrase that will serve as a guide for family members and the family unit.

Examples of family mantras include:

- Love, laughter, loyalty and service.
- We show up—for ourselves, for each other, and for our community.
- The harder choice is nearly always the right choice.
- We are capable of great things which is why we expect great things.
- We are in charge of our attitude and our effort.
- In our family, you can always ask for advice.



What is a family mission statement

A thoughtful family mission statement articulates a shared sense of purpose, provides a comfortable basis for ongoing dialogue, offers guidance to rising generation family members as to what the family is all about, and incorporates each family members' unique thoughts, talents, and contributions. It may be a couple of lines or a few paragraphs. Whatever its length, it ideally tries to answer these four questions:

- Who are we?
- What do we stand for?
- What do we want to do?
- How will we accomplish our goals?²

A family mission statement will reflect the individual character of the family, its history and values, as well as the main areas of its shared efforts, for example, business or philanthropy.

Here are three examples of brief introductions to family mission statements:

“Our family mission is to preserve and promote responsible stewardship by nurturing our passions for self, family and community.”

“We want our capital to allow our children and their children to be able to find their passion and pursue it with excellence.”

“Our family mission is to prepare and uphold the values of our ancestors while encouraging independent thoughts and ideals in future generations to enhance the core values of our family.”

A somewhat fuller introduction looks like this:

“Our family has made a conscious decision to remain connected. We believe that remaining together enables us to actively and purposefully:

- *Support individual members in discovering and pursuing their callings;*
- *Support individual members in developing their gifts for the benefit of society.”*

Here is the beginning of the mission statement of a fifth generation family enterprise that has set its sights five generations into the future; their mission is:

“To be a 10th generation company, we commit to acting with upmost integrity as it relates to the financial capital, social capital, and human capital.”

In the corporate world, people often distinguish action-oriented “mission statements” from broader, more aspirational “vision statements.” This distinction means less in the family space since families rarely distinguish action from vision. As will be discussed in this document, a family may develop a separate “values statement” as a step in the process of creating a mission statement.

The examples of family mission statements appearing in this work are provided for illustrative purposes only. Any resemblances to real persons or circumstances is purely coincidental.

How to create a family mission statement

To endure and make a positive impact on a family, the mission statement usually is created by the whole family, not just by one member. When the patriarch or matriarch writes a mission statement on his or her own, even if it is approved by the larger family, it may soon disappear into a file-folder and be forgotten. There are exceptions. For example, Henry Phipps, the steel entrepreneur, wrote a brief letter to his son in 1911 outlining his wishes regarding the values and practices that should inform the management of their family wealth, a letter that still guides their family office to this day.

Since creating a family mission statement is a group effort, it is important to structure the process. It is best done in the context of a family meeting or meetings devoted to this task. We recommend taking several steps, with ample time for reflection and discussion.

The first step is to set a positive frame by thinking and then talking, as a family, about these questions: What is a time when each of us felt a strong sense of community or emotional connection as a family? What was it about that time that created those feelings?

With this sense of connection established, you can then discuss, as a family, questions like these:

- What are our core values as a family?
- Why do we want to stay together as a family?
- What family traditions do we want to preserve?
- What impact do we, as a family, want to have on the world?
- How much do we want to be connected and how much do we want to be independent?

To discuss these questions, it can help to clarify the family's values. Family values are built upon the shared values of individual family members. Once the family has a shared list of values, it is possible to turn this list into a family mission statement. The list of values, perhaps with some explanation of what each of the values means to the family, can also serve as an addendum to the mission statement itself.

Brevity is a virtue in family mission statements; it can be hard to recall the mission if it is too long. At the same time, the family may want to create an appendix to the mission statement that defines terms used in it. Terms that commonly benefit from such definitions include "education," "work," "self-fulfillment," and the like.

How to use a family mission statement

Just going through the process of creating a family mission statement can strengthen communication and shared understanding. You can then use the mission statement in a variety of ways.

First, it is important to think through what specific goals the family needs to express in order to actualize its mission. Examples of such goals include:

- To maintain frequent, meaningful contact among and across generations through annual family meetings, shared holidays and vacations
- To foster communication among family members through family projects, education and philanthropic programs
- To develop family entrepreneurial interests which will advance the goals and purpose of the family
- To encourage and assist individual family members in pursuing personal goals, passions and talents through emotional and financial support

It can be helpful to attach goals like these directly to the mission statement.

Next, consider what parts of the larger family system the mission statement should touch and how. For example, if a family has an operating business, the family mission statement can be adapted to express the family's desires for the business' impact on the world. In addition, a best practice for families with operating businesses is to establish a family council that expresses the voice of the family vis-à-vis the business; the family mission statement is a natural guiding principle for this body. A family mission statement may also inform a family's philanthropic decisions, whether through a family foundation or donor-advised fund. Some families create family constitutions (which are different than family mission statements) that link together all their operating entities and family council in a system of governance; a family mission statement often heads that document and gives direction to the procedures that follow.

A simple use of a family mission statement is to read it aloud at the beginning of each annual family retreat or gathering, to remind everyone around the table of what really matters to them as a family. As your family grows and changes, it is natural to revisit and revise your mission statement. This exercise is a powerful way to reaffirm shared bonds and to clarify what really matters to all.

Summary worksheet

Now that you have read about family mission statements, you can use this page to put into practice the information you've just read about.

1. Identify your family's core values.

2. Identify some reasons for why you want to stay together as a family.

3. What traditions as a family do you want to preserve?

4. What impact as a family do you want to have on the world?

5. As a family write up a draft of your family mission statement.

6. Identify upcoming gatherings or situations in which family members could discuss or be reminded of the family mission statement.

¹ See Jaffe and Whitaker, *Good Fortune: Building a 100-Year Family Enterprise*, *Wise Counsel Research*, 2013.

² Leslie Dashew et al., *The Keys to Family Business Success*, *Aspen Family Business Group*, 2011.

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