

# Association's purpose and mission

In my talk with associations, principally with members of the Philippine Council of Associations and Association Executives (PCA AE), the national federation of associations in the country which I lead, I always take the opportunity to challenge the audience by posing the question: “Can you state your association’s purpose in 10 words or less?” Then I add this scary message: “If not, you are in deep trouble!”

Usually, the first reactions I get are blank stares and perplexed looks. How can a simple question seem suddenly difficult to answer? I think part of the reason lies in the basic misunderstanding between purpose and mission. Most associations are used to knowing and stating their mission, which basically describes what they do as an organization. There is, of course, no problem with that.

However, purpose has a deeper meaning and impact than mission; it strikes at the very core of an association and answers these basic questions: “Why do you do what you do?”, “Why do you exist?” and “Why do you serve your cause?” So purpose essentially is the beacon that guides you and answers the question “Why?”

In contrast, mission answers the question “What?”—“What do you do to accomplish your purpose?”, “What difference do you make?” and “What significant change will happen if you fulfill your mission?” Mission, therefore, is doing what really matters in achieving your purpose and, thus, the wheel that steers you to achieve your goal.

The other reason for not focusing so much on the association’s purpose is that a member, in most cases, looks only at the tangible benefits of membership (the WIIFM—What’s in it for me?), e.g., getting information and knowledge through seminars and publications, networking with peers for business enhancement, bragging rights by belonging to a prestigious and exclusive society, club or trade association, etc.

In the 2015 membership marketing benchmark report of the American Society of Association Executives, third on the list of reasons people join associations is advocacy (first is networking and second is access to current/specialized information). In advocating for a cause, the first imperative is to know the association’s purpose. Again, many members miss out on this.

The fundamental argument why members and leaders of associations must know by heart its crystal-clear purpose is for strategy and direction’s sake. If you do not know your purpose or reason for being, then you will not know what to do and where to go. I think this is as basic as it can get.

In the case of PCAAE, since our members are both associations and association executives, it is paramount for us to address both their needs and aspirations. So our “not-exactly-10-word” but short and easy to remember purpose is “to advance the association management profession and to make associations well-govern and sustainable.” May I now ask you, “What’s your 10-word or less purpose?”