



STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Upfront

Brevity Is the Soul of Innovation: How clear, brief mission statements inspire progress

By Alana Conner

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Fall 2007

Copyright © 2007 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved



STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, www.ssireview.com

Brevity Is the Soul of Innovation

How clear, brief mission statements inspire progress

“MAKE CANCER HISTORY.” THAT’S THE SHORT VERSION of the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center’s mission statement. Such a concise and snappy mission statement not only sticks in the mind, it can also drive an organization to innovate, finds Robert E. McDonald of the Rawls College of Business at Texas Tech University. His study of nonprofit, public, and private hospitals suggests that well-crafted mission statements lead organizations to generate, evaluate, and adopt innovative ideas.

“When people write mission statements, they struggle to find cute and creative words that cover everything,” says McDonald. “But if you really want to motivate innovation, you have to distill your mission to its essence.” He notes that CEOs should be able to “explain their organization’s mission, vision, and core values during a single elevator ride in a short building.” That way, everyone in the organization can rally around the same message.

Houston-based M.D. Anderson’s mission statement isn’t all that’s popping at the nonprofit hospital. *U.S. News & World Report* ranked it the No. 1 U.S. cancer hospital four times in the last six years. And the National Cancer Institute awards M.D. Anderson more grant money than it does any other hospital.

For his study, published in the *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (vol. 36, no. 2), McDonald asked 349 hospital administrators around the country to rate their organization’s mission’s clarity, ability to motivate, and buy-in from employees. Administrators also rated their organization on its innovativeness, which McDonald defines as “the ability to offer new products and services and to keep abreast of advances in technology and practices.” For a more objective measure of innovation, respondents checked off the technical innovations – such as MRIs and robotic-supported pharmacies – and administrative innovations – such as alliances with other providers and patient-answer telephone lines – their hospitals use. McDonald then demonstrated statistically that hospitals with clearer and more widely accepted missions are able to identify, select, and implement more innovations than are hospitals with less gracefully worded missions.

An innovation that M.D. Anderson adopted was to organize its departments around disease sites – lung,

breast, and brain, for example – rather than around medical specialties – such as pharmacology, imaging, and pain management. As a result, “people from a number of different areas have eyeball contact with each other and with the patient,” says John Mendelsohn, president of the cancer center. “Your colleagues are right with you, which is a tremendous help in developing research.” The center then administers research-based, novel treatments. “That’s driven by our goal of making cancer history,” he says.

Hospitals differ from other nonprofits in many ways, so McDonald is not sure how well his findings generalize to other kinds of organizations. “That question needs to be pursued,” he says. –A.C.

tcc group

For over 27 years helping nonprofits, foundations, and corporate citizenship programs develop strategies to achieve social impact.

Services include:

- Evaluation
- Planning
- Program and Strategy Development
- Needs Assessment and Competitive Analysis
- Capacity Building
- Governance
- Grants Management

To learn how TCC Group can help your organization, visit us online at www.tccgrp.com, or give us a call at 888-222-2283.

New York ■ Philadelphia ■ Chicago