Does your library or information center have a mission statement? If so, can you and your co-workers repeat that statement without having to look it up?

If not, that’s okay. You don’t need to pull everyone together in a huddle every week, like a high school football team, to get them pumped up to help people “Learn, Live and Lead” or “Foster Inspiring Environments for Today’s and Tomorrow’s Innovators.”

If you don’t even have a mission statement, that’s okay, too. The people we work with don’t get good or better at their tasks simply because they can recite the magic words. They’ll only perform at expected or higher-than-expected levels because they’re passionate about their work—whether they can put the reasons into words or not.

So, why write a mission statement at all? When it’s based on what your team is already doing and where it’s going, a mission statement can do three things:

• clarify the task for new team members;
• keep current members from experiencing “mission drift”; and
• help leaders understand what ideas to say “yes” or “no” to.

Writing a mission statement should be one of the last things your team does, not the first. Why? Because the only successful mission statements are those that are based on what your team is already doing anyway.

For example, I’m the pastor of a church that was in crisis when I came to lead it. Instead of trying to superimpose a mission statement on them, we worked together on becoming a healthy church by doing what churches are supposed to do: loving God and serving others.

After doing that passionately for a few years, we discovered we were better at being a training center than we were at building a large organization. So now we do that intentionally. We train people to be great leaders and send them out to other organizations (e.g., churches, schools, and businesses) and to their families to lead with passion, humility, and skill.

We know what we are good at and what we are not good at. That isn’t because we wrote out a statement, but because we did what we needed to do, paid attention to the aspects of it that we did especially well, then became very purposeful about doing it better.
motto that was supposed to turn failing companies into successful ones, and good companies into great ones. But after the vision-casting weekends were over, everything went back to business as usual.

Today, it seems as if every business, church, hospital, and college has jumped aboard the mission statement train. Even some families and individuals feel like they’re missing out on something if they can’t quote a personal mission statement or life goal at a moment’s notice.

So, what’s wrong with having a mission statement? Nothing. What’s wrong—or backwards, really—is the notion that great teams or organizations flow from great mission statements. It’s actually the reverse.

Very few great companies started with a mission statement. Instead, they started with a passionate idea in the heart of their founder(s).

Eventually, others got swept up in the passion. Not because of a cool slogan, but because that passion was turned into a real-world product or service that customers or clients wanted to use and employees wanted to deliver.

So, what’s the passionate idea behind your library or information center? What’s the service or benefit or value you want to deliver?

How to Write a Mission Statement
If your team isn’t doing good work, a clever slogan or mission statement won’t bond the team together or engage your customers. In fact, it’s more likely to be a source of ridicule and embarrassment, especially for the person or people who wrote it.

On the other hand, if you’re already doing great work without a mission statement, is such a statement really needed? Maybe not. But if you think a mission statement will help define and clarify the purpose for your team and the people you serve, try this exercise:

1. Using simple, clear words, describe what your team already does. Forget about being clever or having the statement rhyme or alliterate—that’s usually more hassle than it’s worth.

2. Write something that clearly says what you do now, but also points to where you want to go. It can be as simple as “we do this and we hope to do this.”

3. Keep doing what you’ve been doing, but try to do it better.

Does Your Mission Need to Be Stated?
How can your library team start a project or deliver a service without having a mission statement? That’s where passion comes in. Most great ideas start in the gut, not the head. There’s no fully-formed statement in the heart of most creative people—not at first, anyway. Creative people feel an irresistible urge to do something, and they pursue that urge, not knowing whether they will succeed until they do (usually after several failures along the way).

Too often, we follow this sequence of events to try to reach our goal(s) as a team: mission statement → passion → task → goal. The problem is that mission statements almost never produce the necessary passion. Instead, we need to tap into our passion at the outset to start the engine toward creativity, innovation, and accomplishment.

Goals are most often achieved when we do things in this order: passion → task → mission statement → goal. In this sequence, the passion and task help to create the mission statement, making the goal much more achievable.

Mission statements aren’t bad; most great organizations and teams have one. But we shouldn’t write a statement or slogan until we’re already doing the work that will support it. We have to do the task first.

Statements don’t come first—passion does. Communicate your library’s mission by feeling it in your heart, then living it. The statement will write itself. SLA