

Mission Statement for the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

Daniel C. Durham

Sam Houston State University

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In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was established as a single cabinet-level organization focused on ensuring that the United States is protected from terrorist events. Conceptually, combining 22 existing federal agencies with responsibilities for protecting the United States into a single department was intended to result in improved accountability, information-sharing, and a unified command structure. However, in practical application, the prevailing focus on terrorism failed to adequately address various other hazards and issues that were critical for the successful response to crisis events by the diverse agencies within the Department of Homeland Security. Given this consideration, the Department of Homeland Security (2019) website identifies that the mission of approximately 240,000 employees is “to secure the nation from the many threats we face.” The question then becomes one of whether this superficial statement adequately expresses the unique internal capabilities and external opportunities that should be recognized when describing a mission purpose for use across numerous separate agencies. Accordingly, the goal of this essay is to delineate a mission statement that considers the diverse makeup of each agency within the Department of Homeland Security.

Literature Review

From the initial focus of preventing terrorist attacks within the United States, the Department of Homeland Security has evolved into a massive government agency with over 240,000 members focused on preventing future attacks, responding to natural and human-made disasters, and ensuring economic security (Department of Homeland Security, 2019). However, this mission has been the subject of near continuous political debate concerning the organizational goals and priorities as well as spending by the Department of Homeland Security.

The Purpose of a Mission Statement

The development of an effective mission statement requires a focus on why an organization exists rather than the specific products or services that are provided. As such, the mission statement identified by the Department of Homeland Security (2019) “to secure the nation from the many threats we face” would then seem to be adequate. However, a quality mission statement should incorporate multiple components that outline goals and objectives in a manner that can be used to shape the culture of an organization (Bartkus, Glassman & McAfee, 2006). In effect, a mission statement should be formulated in a manner that can provide organizational leaders with an opportunity to set the direction for strategic and operational planning while simultaneously providing a positive impact on employee performance, values, and organizational culture.

Organizational Management

Studies have shown that the success of a complex and constantly changing organization requires strategic leadership capable of managing complex and constantly changing organizations in a manner that allows individual members to focus on a unified mission (Richardson, 2008). However, the Department of Homeland Security has suffered from a relative absence of long term and consistent senior leadership that is crucial to reforming the bureaucratic behemoth known as the Department of Homeland Security. The inherent complexity of aligning the responsibilities of aligning the varied responsibilities of the myriad of disparate federal agencies within the Department of Homeland Security into a single mission statement is made all the more difficult in consideration that the upper management echelon of many agencies is predominantly comprised of political appointees entrenched in isolated divisions with competing, if not sometimes conflicting, priorities (Jo & Rothenberg, 2011).

Leadership and Policy Changes

There is a persuasive argument to be made that the Department of Homeland Security's primary focus on preventing terrorist acts is adversely impacted not as the result of an inability individual agencies to function within a larger organization, but rather the result of a frequent change in mission focus, inexperienced senior leadership, and a politicized environment (Kahan, 2015). To this end, each successive leadership and policy change extends the length of time that it will take for individual organizations within the Department of Homeland Security to unify their efforts in a manner that allows for a cohesive response in fulfillment of the overall mission in defense of the American public.

Employee Engagement

As a result of changing agency goals and priorities, the Department of Homeland Security has evolved into an organization where employees consistently rank last in job satisfaction as compared with other large government agencies (Byrne & Holcombe, 2017). Contributing to this overall sense of job dissatisfaction is the diverse makeup of agencies within the Department of Homeland Security. While all employees may be expected to work together, despite the best of intentions, their work-related goals differ dramatically on a day-to-day basis in consideration of the varying cultures, training, and tasks assigned to diverse agencies such as the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), Secret Service, Coast Guard, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The wide array and often conflicting goals of these individual agencies that comprise the Department of Homeland Security has resulted in many employees working on multiple tasks and has led to confusion, burnout, a decline in quality, and loss of mission focus within the organization as a whole (Friedman, 2011).

Discussion

The process of creating an organization to address a given problem often creates new issues that were as bad or worse than the ones attempting to be solved. In the case of the Department of Homeland Security, combining 22 existing federal agencies into a single entity responsible for responding to both natural and human-made disasters has proven to be significantly more than merely an exercise in placing boxes on paper to create an organizational hierarchy. There is the real day-to-day struggle associated with meshing competing cultures that have been adversely impacted by recurring leadership changes affecting both employee performance and morale. Further complicating the issue of developing an effective mission statement is the inherent difficulty of the general public to understand the exact relationship and specific responsibilities of various agencies within the Department of Homeland Security.

A well-crafted mission statement should be easy to understand by all members of an organization and be free of jargon and buzzwords that have little meaning in actual practice. More importantly, to better provide a common focus for a large and geographically dispersed organization such as the Department of Homeland Security, a mission statement should outline shared expectations of separate agencies within the department as a whole. In addition to having a positive impact on the performance, values, and culture of an organization, a mission statement can also provide an effective means of driving an organization's day-to-day decisions. Conversely, a poorly crafted statement that is too generalized or lengthy fails to provide definitive goals for employees resulting in organizational efforts that can be scattered in many separate and often conflicting directions. As a result, a mission statement is often little more than an empty public relations statement that is not meaningful or memorable enough to capture the imagination and spirit of employees.

Conclusion

For a bureaucratic behemoth such as the Department of Homeland Security, the creation of a mission statement that can organize, unify, and focus the actions of over 240,000 employees working in 22 disparate agencies toward a single objective is, at best, a daunting task. Making this task all the more difficult is the need to focus on the core purpose of the Department of Homeland Security rather than an aspirational vision statement for choosing current and future courses of action. That said, the mission statement developed for the Department of Homeland Security for this topical essay question is provided below.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Mission: *To leverage the expertise of each member agency through the combined efforts of all organizational member to strengthen the coordinated Federal, state, and local effort for prevention, protection, and response to natural and human-made threats to the interests of the United States and its allies.*

References

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