

# The Eight-Word Mission Statement

by Eric Hellweg

Day one of the [PopTech conference in Camden, Maine](#) was a polyglot delight. Presentations covered topics as far afield as the establishment of jaguar preserves to the neurological patterns that occur when humans encounter non-expected data. Fascinating stuff. My colleague Associate Editor Sarah Green and I have been Tweeting the conference in process. You can follow our real-time reports at [twitter.com/skgreen](https://twitter.com/skgreen) and [twitter.com/ehellweg](https://twitter.com/ehellweg), respectively.

One of the many presenters who spoke on a topic of real interest to the HBR community was [Kevin Starr](#), the executive director of the [Mulago Foundation](#). Mulago channels investments to socially-minded businesses. It looks for opportunities to invest in "lasting change that goes to scale." The social sector is a young sector, and as such, is awash with many different ideas, companies, and approaches. There's also a strong amount of investment in the sector, and like any burgeoning field, there's a range of quality when it comes to the approaches to and efficacy of the various companies'.

Mulago has a compelling approach to help it winnow out the pitches and approaches of lesser quality, and it revolves around the mission statement and a very simple way to stay focused on a single issue. Most companies, regardless of their sectors, have a mission statement. And most are awash in jargon and marble-mouthed pronouncements. Worse still, these gobbledy-gook statements are often forgotten by, misremembered, or flatly ignored by frontline employees.

To combat this, Starr insists that companies he funds can express their mission statement in under eight words. They also must follow this format: "Verb, target, outcome." Some examples: "Save endangered species from extinction" and "Improve African children's health."

The mission statement is a key part of Mulago's approach, but it's not the only part. Once the mission statement is established, Starr insists that companies that get investment "measure the right thing" and "measure it well."

Mulago's approach is refreshingly sparse, and really helps to clarify the thinking. It's a great "forcing function" as well. As Starr spoke, you could almost see PopTech attendees workshopping their mission statements, trying to get them down to under eight words in this format. It can be quite hard to do.

How long is your company's current mission statement? Do you think you could get it down to under eight words using the "verb, target, outcome" format? It's a good exercise to consider running, if only to start real conversations at your company about what you're doing, to/for whom, and toward what outcome. Fascinating approach.