

TOOLKIT #5

Why & Where We Win

A positioning canvas for mission-driven organizations: why you exist, who you are best for, and why they should choose you.

A Lever & Core toolkit

Drawing on Simon Sinek (Start with Why) and April Dunford (Obviously Awesome)

Every complex organization is inherently simple.

01 · WHAT IT IS

Know why you exist, and where you are the obvious choice

Most NGOs can describe what they do. Far fewer can say, in one breath, why they exist and why a specific donor or partner should choose them over every other option. This canvas closes that gap.

What it is

The canvas joins two ideas. The first is **purpose**: leading with why you do the work, before what you do and how. The second is **positioning**: a disciplined way to define the context in which your strengths are obvious.

That means comparing yourself with the real alternatives a donor or partner has, focusing on the people who care most about what makes you different, and backing every claim with proof.

The result is not a slogan. It is a shared, written answer the whole team uses in proposals, donor meetings, the website and board conversations.

When to use it

- Your proposals and website sound like every other organization in your field.
- Donors say “great work” but do not commit or renew.
- Your team describes the organization five different ways.
- You are launching a program, entering a new market or rebranding.
- You chase every funder instead of the ones who fit.

You walk away with

- A one-sentence purpose: your why
- The alternatives you are really compared with
- Your unique value, in terms others care about
- A profile of best-fit donors and partners
- The proof behind each claim
- One positioning statement the team shares

The session at a glance

90–120 minutes, one working session.

3–8 people: leadership, development and program leads.

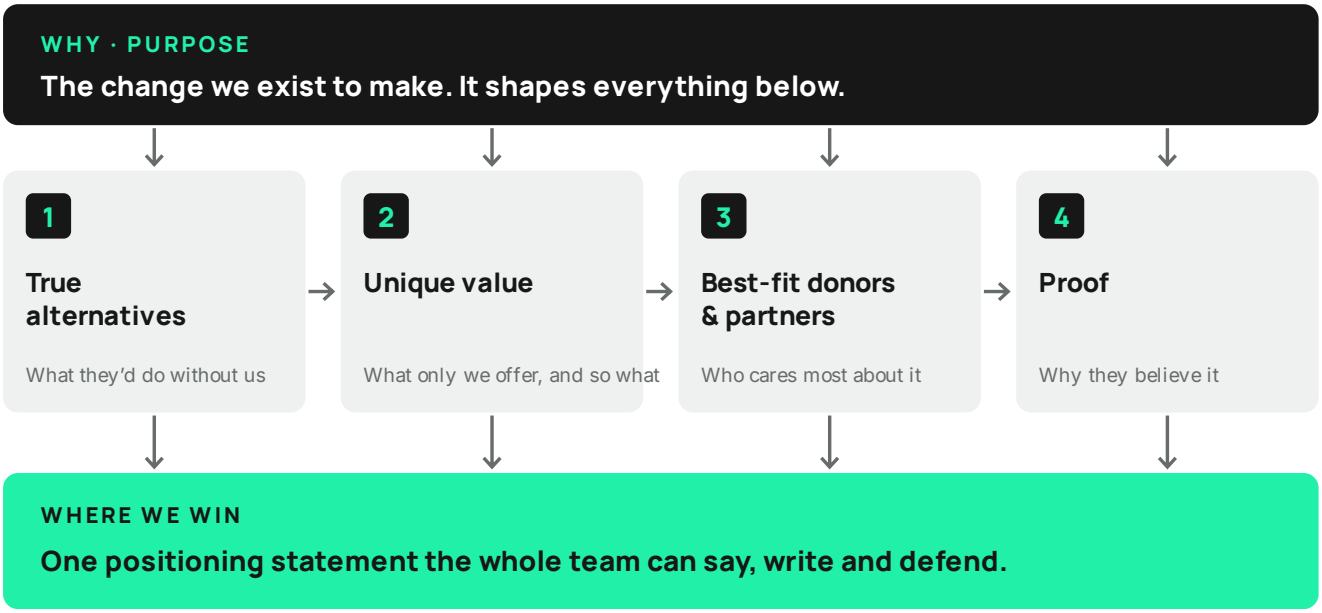
Bring notes from three to five recent donor or partner conversations, including ones that did not go your way.

Sources. The purpose layer draws on Simon Sinek’s idea of starting with why, from his book *Start with Why*. The four positioning components draw on April Dunford’s positioning method, from her book *Obviously Awesome*. This toolkit is an original adaptation for mission-driven organizations by Lever & Core.

02 · THE FRAMEWORK

One purpose, four positioning components

Purpose sits on top: it explains why the work matters. The four components underneath explain why you, specifically, are the best choice, and for whom. Work them in order, left to right.



Why: purpose

The reason the organization exists beyond its activities: the change you believe in. One sentence, no jargon, still true if your programs change.

1 · True alternatives

What a donor or partner would actually do if you did not exist: fund another cause, give to a bigger name, do it in-house, or do nothing. Their real options, not your list of "competitors".

2 · Unique value

What you have that the alternatives do not (an approach, access, expertise, a way of working), and what that delivers for the people you serve and the people who fund you.

3 · Best-fit donors & partners

The donors, foundations and partners who care most about that value, and why. Defined by what they care about, not only by size or sector.

4 · Proof

Evidence that makes each claim believable: outcomes you can document, a method you can show, stories you have permission to tell, endorsements you actually have.

Where we win

One sentence that joins it all. The template is on the worksheet; every part of it comes from a box above.

Why start with the alternatives? Strengths only mean something in comparison. "We are experienced" says little; "unlike one-off visits, we stay with the same group all year" tells a funder exactly why to choose you.

03 · STEP BY STEP

Running the canvas with your team

W

Draft the why

Each person writes one sentence alone, then the group merges them. Strip out activity words (“we run”, “we provide”) until the belief remains. About 15 minutes.

Ask: If we disappeared tomorrow, what change would stop happening?

1

List the true alternatives

For your current donors and partners, write what they would do if you did not exist. Use what you heard in real conversations, not assumptions. Group the answers into three to five types.

Ask: When someone said no to us, what did they choose instead?

2

Name what is unique, then translate it into value

List the capabilities, access or ways of working the alternatives do not have. For each, ask “so what?” until you reach a benefit the people you serve, or the funder, would care about. Cross out anything that only matters to you.

Ask: Would a donor notice this, and would they miss it?

3

Define best fit

Look at who already values those benefits most. Describe them by what they care about, how they decide and what they need to see. Write down who is a poor fit, too.

Ask: Which supporters “get it” fastest, and what do they have in common?

4

Attach proof

Next to each value claim, write the evidence you can show today. A claim without proof goes on a “to build” list, not into your pitch.

Ask: If a sceptical funder asked “how do you know?”, what would we hand them?

✓

Write the statement and test it

Fill in the positioning sentence on the worksheet. Read it to someone outside the team. Revise until they can say back why you, and for whom.

Ask: Could a board member say this at a dinner without notes?

> **Timing.** A first pass fits in one 90–120 minute session. Expect to polish the statement over the following week, then use it everywhere.

04 · WORKED EXAMPLE

An environmental education NGO that sounds like everyone else

TYPICAL SCENARIO

A composite situation that shows the pattern. It is not a client and does not describe any real organization.

THE SITUATION	A regional NGO runs outdoor nature programs for primary schools. Its proposals talk about “inspiring the next generation” and list activities. Funders are friendly, renewals are slipping, and the team pitches anyone who will listen.
WHY first draft	Every child should know, and care for, the nature on their own doorstep.
1 · ALTERNATIVES	Schools: free online lesson packs, or a one-off visit from a large national conservation brand. Foundations: tree-planting projects with easy photos. Companies: a single volunteering day.
2 · UNIQUE VALUE	Trained educators return to the same class several times across the school year, at local sites, linked to what pupils study. For schools, learning that sticks; for funders, a lasting relationship with a community, not a single event.
3 · BEST FIT	Head teachers who want curriculum-linked outdoor learning; regional foundations focused on this area; local employers who want an ongoing link with nearby schools. Poor fit: funders who only want one-off, high-visibility events.
4 · PROOF	A written curriculum map; the teacher feedback forms the team already collects; schools that book again; photos and stories shared with consent. To build: a simple before-and-after pupil survey.
WHAT CHANGED	The team stops pitching one-off events and leads every proposal with the statement below.

> **Where we win (draft):** For schools and local funders who want children to know and care for the nature around them, we are the outdoor-learning partner that returns to the same class all year, tied to the curriculum, unlike one-off visits or online packs, as teacher feedback and repeat bookings show.

05 · WORKSHEET

The positioning canvas

Organization / team

Date

Facilitator

W **WHY: OUR PURPOSE**

If we disappeared tomorrow, what change would stop happening? One sentence.

1 **TRUE ALTERNATIVES**

What would our donors and partners do if we did not exist?

2 **UNIQUE VALUE**

What only we have → so what? → the benefit they care about.

3 **BEST-FIT DONORS & PARTNERS**

Who cares most about that value? How do they decide? Who is a poor fit?

4 **PROOF**

What can we show today for each claim? What must we still build?

✓ **WHERE WE WIN**

For **[best fit]** who care about **[need]**, we are the **[kind of organization]** that **[unique value]**, unlike **[alternative]**, as shown by **[proof]**.

Outsider test: could someone outside the team repeat it back? ☐ Yes ☐ Not yet: revise

06 · FOR THE FACILITATOR

Tips and common mistakes

The hard part is not filling in boxes. It is helping a team let go of claims it likes but cannot prove.

Facilitator tips

Start with real voices

Read two or three short excerpts from actual donor or partner conversations before anyone writes. It anchors the session in what people said, not in what the team assumes.

Write alone, then merge

Give everyone a few silent minutes per box before discussion. You get more honest alternatives and fewer opinions from the loudest person.

Keep asking “so what?”

Push every feature until it becomes a benefit someone outside the organization would care about.

Park it, don’t argue

When a claim has no proof yet, move it to a “to build” list. The debate ends and the gap becomes a task with an owner.

Invite one outsider

A trusted donor, partner or board member who joins for the last 20 minutes is the fastest test of whether the statement lands.

Common mistakes

Starting with features

Listing programs first produces a brochure, not a position. Begin with the alternatives and the value.

Treating everyone as best fit

If the best-fit box describes every donor, it describes none. Naming who is not a fit is part of the work.

A why that is really a what

“We provide mentoring” is an activity. A purpose names the change you believe in.

Unproven superlatives

“Leading” and “most innovative” mean nothing without evidence. Plain and provable beats impressive.

Filing it away

A canvas that never reaches proposals, the website or donor meetings changes nothing. Decide where it will be used before you close.

After the session. Use the statement to open your next proposal and the first lines of your website’s About page. Revisit the canvas once a year, or whenever a major funder, program or market changes.

Want help running this with your team?

Lever & Core — Uriel Edery

We help NGOs and mission-driven organizations find the few things that really limit their impact, and build simple, focused ways of working around them.

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