

Making Vision Work for You

by Karen Ayas

Vision describes the future we want to bring into reality. Many organizations struggle with making vision really work for them. While vision can undoubtedly be very powerful, it is also highly elusive. It is only effective when it is truly shared and meaningful for those involved. As many of us have probably witnessed, in many organizations large or small, profit or nonprofit, vision ends up as a statement hanging on a wall at best.

I have encountered very few organizations where everyone is familiar with the vision of the organization or division they are part of—let alone be energized or driven by it. The majority of leaders would rather work on a competitive strategy—a concrete activity with tangible results—than develop a vision. Very few realize that vision can also be very concrete and tangible, and at the same time much more engaging. Nothing compares to the power of a compelling vision—one that is emotionally appealing and intellectually convincing.

Developing a Vision

Making vision work for you is tough. We tend to get stuck in the “how” and focus on obstacles. We quickly indulge in thinking about “why it is impossible,” since we have thought about it before, of course, many times. We focus on what we do not want rather than what we really want. We prevent ourselves from considering the real possibilities before we even begin to imagine.

Vision can be best described as an “image of a desired future”. It is an emotionally driven destination that provides the means to inspire, coordinate, and align people around shared purpose and destiny.

Vision reflects personal aspiration and passion and is therefore highly subjective. It expresses commitment to a future that is desirable for some, but it may be unappealing or irrelevant for others unless it frames a shared purpose and clear direction: what you stand for and what you are seeking to achieve.

Vision therefore has to be both intellectually convincing (provide the sense of common purpose) and emotionally appealing (infuse passion and inspiration). Expressed and enhanced by memorable images, metaphors, and stories, vision should paint the picture of what the desired future might look like.

An effective vision is:

- Imaginable
- Desirable

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- Feasible
- Focused
- Communicable

Sharing the Vision

Vision is elusive and meaningless for those not involved in creating it. The biggest challenge is connecting with the wishes, needs, and desires of everyone involved. You need to reach out and engage a majority of the organization members in shaping the future. While this is almost an impossible mission, the goal should be at least to invite everyone in and to engage a critical mass of people.

To be owned and shared, vision should:

- Be communicated effectively
- Inform and excite
- Carry meaning
- Have an impact

Vision does not automatically cascade down; rather, it needs to be articulated endlessly by leaders drawing a clear picture of what success looks like and why it is important. Leaders should communicate through vivid and inspiring stories, infusing passion and energy while being in touch with the reality that people are experiencing, and addressing particular concerns.

Making the Vision Tangible

Vision statements do not work mostly because they are not tangible. Vision is a destination, and therefore, a concrete path to progress must also be laid out. Vision needs to be translated into strategic imperatives and concrete action plans, and it requires a rigorous strategic planning process with goals and measurable objectives. Using the Balanced Score Card (Kaplan & Norton) as a management system enables measuring the progress against vision at all levels in the organization.

Keeping Vision Alive

While accomplishments and results speak for themselves, claiming success with respect to vision is always tricky. Since vision reflects aspiration, more can always be done to bring vision into reality.

Vision needs to be kept alive to continue to be effective. One must periodically review and update the vision to identify gaps from current reality, generate creative tension, and sustain momentum.