

## **Power of Women and Vision: The Boston Club**

by Karen Ayas

In October 2002, a group of about 20 women who are members of the Boston Club—an influential community of senior executive and professional women in Boston—convened to kick off a series of visioning sessions. The goal was to shape the future of the club: to envision the future and make it a reality. Within 2 months, 25% of the organization members (120 strong) had participated in shaping the future. By June 2003 the vision had been shared with the majority of members. The vision shaped the overall strategy of the Club, and it became part and parcel of all committees’ action plans. The Club continuously measured and marked progress against the vision, and it brought many of its elements into reality against all odds. The Boston Club is a voluntary organization of members with highly demanding schedules and practically no staff or support. The presidents of the Club and committee chairs change every two years. There can be no better testament to the power of women and vision to mobilize change.

### **Creating the Vision**

There we were, that October morning, 20 strong, including the board members and invited members from other constituencies of The Boston Club, convened around a big black polished table. Entering the room for the visioning session, I did not know what to expect. Surely, I wanted this initial session to be a memorable one. Would we be able to tap into the tremendous power of the women in the room through the power of vision?

I started by giving a brief introduction on vision, what it is and what it is not, why it is so elusive and why it is so tough. And then, I asked everyone to close their eyes and imagine: imagine it is October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007, and you have just walked out of the most extraordinary event at The Boston Club, energized by what you heard, the conversations you had, the people you met, the accomplishments you are proud of. How does it feel? What does it look like?

After lingering 5 minutes or so on the Club as they wanted it to be, I asked them to paint the picture of the future in as much written detail as possible. Then they spent some time sharing their visions in pairs; several rounds of sharing created new pairings. The buzz in the room kept growing. Were they enjoying themselves in the Club of the future? No question!

After a break, they sat in small groups identifying the shared elements of their visions: what they collectively wanted to see happen. We put it all on a white board, making sure that all agreed with the collective picture that was beginning to emerge:

The Boston Club is the place to be for women achievers. We are the “one-stop, first-stop” resource for powerful women, connected on personal and professional levels. We are a source of inspiration, knowledge, and

networking. We are the national model for developing, promoting, and recognizing women leaders—diverse in race, profession, sector and age, yet with a unique and distinctive voice. We make a difference in our organizations, in the corporate world, in our communities, and beyond.

Letting this sink in, two weeks later, we reconvened with the same core group plus a few additional members. We spent time refining the vision and further clarifying the future we wanted to bring into reality within four major constructs: Image, Impact, Relationships, and Purpose.

### **Sharing the Vision**

The biggest challenge was connecting with every member's wishes, needs, and desires. We needed to reach and engage a majority of the club's members in shaping the future of the club. As in most volunteer organizations, not every member is active. While we were aware this was an impossible mission, our goal was to at least invite all in and reach a critical mass of people.

In the following months, three roundtable sessions were conducted, involving an additional 10-15% of the club's membership. The vision was shared at the club's annual meeting with all participants. Each of the board members who chaired acting committees also shared it with her committee, making it their own. The marketing committee revised the mission and core messages both for internal and external use. By the annual meeting of 2004, the vision had become the fabric of the Club, reflected in all its activities.

### **Making the Vision Tangible**

Visions are intangible and therefore require a concrete path to progress. In the case of The Boston Club, the vision was successfully translated into strategic imperatives and concrete action plans. Each one of the Club's twelve committees has a Committee Action Plan (CAP) that defines the mission, functions, objectives, and deliverables of each committee. The plans of each acting committee are then aggregated into a holistic view in order to analyze the objectives and deliverables of each specific committee against the annual priorities of the Club. Still, to translate the vision into a club-wide action plan, a modified and much more rigorous strategic planning process was put into place.

Perhaps most instrumental was the adoption of the Balanced Score Card as a management and measurement system to complement the annual planning process. This would enable measuring the progress toward the vision both on a committee and a club level.

The Boston Club scorecard is a dashboard for the four vision attributes and balances internal goals with external goals. The vision attributes Image and Impact reflect the external audiences: the communities the Club influences, the boards Club members sit on, the differences they make in women's lives as leaders and individuals. With the

vision attributes Relationships and Infrastructure, the focus is on the internal audience: the membership.

### **Results Along the Way**

It did not take very long to make some elements of the vision a reality. Already in 2003, actions that supported the vision were visible. The brand new research committee was the conduit to more aggressive media visibility. A high-profile membership campaign drew many C-level executives, as well as Governor Jane Swift. In September 2003 the first mentoring program was put in place. Off to an excellent start, the program grew year after year, with more engaged and delighted participants. Around 30% of the Club members have participated in the program, now in its fourth year. The number of members who serve on nonprofit boards has reached 335. 101 New England companies with two or more women on their board were honored at the 2006 annual corporate salute, which drew over 630 participants. The program committee explored non-traditional venues and events such as “unusual passions” to allow for women to go beyond names and professional affiliations and really discover one another and engage in different kinds of conversations.

These are just a few highlights, as there are too many achievements to list for the five years. But success didn’t happen by luck or by chance. It was the result of deliberate, dedicated planning to bring the vision into reality and of exceptional execution by all club members involved—the executive director, the board, and the committees.

### **Keeping the Vision Alive**

While accomplishments and results speak for themselves, claiming success is always tricky. Based on the full description of the desired future and the 2007 member survey results, there is still more to do in bringing The Boston Club’s vision into reality.

Vision needs to be kept alive to continue to be effective. In 2007, there was an intensive effort to review and update the vision to continue to sustain progress. Following a board discussion, taskforces were created to realize this. The findings reaffirmed a continued belief in the vision and mission of the Club. They also helped assess the current reality, the desired future, and the gaps that needed to be addressed.

Dedicated to making its vision a reality, The Boston Club continues to be “an influential community of senior executive and professional women that offers opportunities for connections and access as well as personal and professional growth for women.”