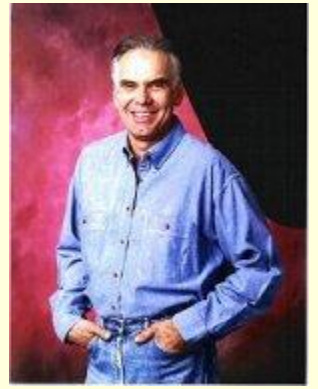


Foresight First



Article by James Mapes

An organizational consultant/speaker was hired to develop and facilitate a series of half-day programs on communication, empowerment and teamwork for both mid-level and senior management of a large oil company. Fifteen minutes into the first presentation, he fell prey to dead-end path of assumption. With laser-like intent, he laid the groundwork for what he considered the heart of empowerment and teams: family, a sense of community, partnership and trust. He praised the need for energy, commitment and passion.

At what he thought was the appropriate time, he asked the group of forty the simple question on which he would base his entire program: "What is the vision of your company?"

No one raised his or her hand.

The speaker thought they might be self-conscious or shy, so he gently encouraged them. The room grew deadly silent. Everyone was looking at everyone else. A sinking feeling began to creep into his stomach. "Your company does have a vision, doesn't it?" he asked.

A few people shrugged, and a few shook their heads.

The speaker was me and I was dumbfounded. How could any group or individual strive toward greatness and mastery without a vision, especially in the era of technology overwhelm, constant change, increasing competition and rapid communication?

That's exactly the point. They can't. They can, perhaps, maintain. They might even be able to survive; but they can't expect to achieve greatness.

Many organizations not only lack a vision, but they are unaware of the power that a vision generates. Not so surprisingly, many individuals haven't given a minute to thinking about their lifetime purpose and they also, do not have a vision.

Corporations make the common mistake of equating a mission statement with a vision statement, and individuals make the common mistake of believing that setting a goal is the same as defining a vision.

But, so what? Is vision really important?

A vision exceeds importance!

It is vital. It is necessary. It is at the core of passion. It is what takes us beyond just "doing" for the sake of doing. We either create our destiny, or we live out someone else's creation. That's the only choice.

A vision is like a lighthouse, which illuminates rather than limits, gives direction rather than destination. Almost all successful individuals and organizations have one thing in common: the power and depth of their vision. A positive, meaningful vision of the future, supported by compelling goals, provides purpose and direction in the present.

A vision is not something that happens by accident. It is purposefully created. Meaning flows from the act of any creation, and passion comes into our lives when we act congruently with our vision.

What exactly is a vision?

First of all, a vision is greater than ourselves. A vision may be eliminating world hunger, cleaning up the environment, raising the quality of education, or serving others. Vision is always about greatness. A vision expresses our values and what we hope to contribute. Vision is about creating an organization that expresses our deepest values about work, family, achievement, or community.

Vision transforms momentary strategies into a way of life. A vision engenders change. Vision gives energy to the mundane. Vision is creating an ideal, preferred future with a grand purpose of greatness.

It plays a core role in many activities ranging from career choices to family vacations, from the quality of relationships to withstanding mergers and acquisition. Vision gives us the capability to deal with change.

Creating a Vision

The first step in creating a vision is to know what a vision is not. It is a common misunderstanding to equate a mission statement with a vision statement. In fact, one of the most often-heard comments is: "But we already have a mission statement."

The difference is vast. A mission statement comes from the head; a vision comes from the heart. A mission statement is a statement of what the business is; its goals and ranking, return on equity and net assets, increased profitability and the bottom line. But, a vision cannot be expressed in numbers. Numbers are only a manifestation or consequence of a vision yet to be defined.

A vision is a consciously created fantasy of what we would ideally like the organization to be, a waking dream. This idea is not new to many organizations. A vision statement is often another name for "guiding principles" or "core values." What is new, is that in the cutting edge organization of the future, it will be a challenge of its leaders to make sure each and every employee, on some level, is involved in creating the vision. The task of each employee is to create his or her own Grand Vision which, in turn, ties into and supports the team, division or organizational Grand Vision.

Goals vs. Vision

The second most common mistake is to confuse goals with vision. A goal is a baby step toward a vision. A goal may be short-term or long term; it has a beginning and an end. But, a vision is on-going, endless, guiding.

A goal is task-oriented; a vision is process-oriented. A goal, by its nature, is limiting; a vision is open-ended, limitless. A goal is often boring, mundane, non-inspirational, but a vision always provides the energy, power and passion to achieve goals.

In order to construct a grand vision - a vision of greatness - you have to be aware of its qualities.

Vision is About Others

To have a great vision, we have to challenge the short-term, quick-result, "me, me, me" way of thinking. A vision of greatness must focus on service, on adding value to and empowering others. The long-term success of any organization represents more than market share or profit. Long-term success reflects making a contribution to others.

A vision of greatness is about what we offer each other. It is an act of service. The greatness of a vision statement inspires commitment because it is worth pursuing for its own sake.

Tom Peters brought Stew Leonard's in Norwalk, Connecticut, the world's largest dairy store, to prominence in his best-selling book, *In Search of Excellence*.

To call Stew's store a dairy store is like calling an ocean a bog lake. Stew Leonard's carries a carefully selected and purposefully limited number of products ranging from fresh produce and dairy products – they have their own bakery and dairy – to fresh meat, coffee, soda, juices, paper products, laundry detergents and freshly cooked food of all kinds.

Walking into Stew Leonard's is like walking into an edible Disneyland, with fresh fudge and popcorn, ice-cream cones, a singing band of animated animals, a children's petting zoo... and many, many smiles.

In front of this massive store sits a six-ton rock, and carved into this rock is the Stew Leonard company policy:

Rule #1: The customer is always right!

Rule #2: If the customer is ever wrong, re-read Rule #1

What a vision statement! There are others with similar rules, but what they usually mean is that the customer is right when it's convenient to have the customer be right. Not so with Stew Leonard's. The customer is *always* right, even when it's extremely inconvenient. And, it is that vision that empowers employees to do whatever it takes to make the customer happy, even if it might mean a short-term loss.

How powerful is a vision really? A number of years after Tom Peters wrote his book, Stew Leonard senior was sent to prison for skimming off a large sum of money from his company. Everyone seemed to think that would be the end. It was not. With Stew Leonard junior at the helm the store has thrived with yet a second successful store in Danbury, Connecticut and a third in the planning stage. A grand vision will help weather adversity of all kinds.

Vision is Idealistic

A vision of greatness is an expression of the spiritual and idealistic sides of our nature. After all, the business world as well as our day-to-day existence is mostly about practical matters. When we touch the spiritual nature of people, they are much more likely to be moved to action than if we try to appeal to their logic.

Observe history on both the micro and macro level and you will observe the elements of greatness in action. Victor Frankl, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, recounts his experiences at Auschwitz and the role vision created in survival. For many, survival was beyond personal control. But for others, it was their responsibility to their own future that empowered them to press on and survive. Viktor Frankl has been a source of inspiration for thousands of individuals in all walks of life.

People need to know that the vision will accomplish some greater good to mankind. It is no accident that almost every organization in the modern world of business is exploring ways to accomplish this higher purpose.

It's From the Heart

Vision may not necessarily be considered practical or reasonable. Goals are practical and reasonable. The loftiness of a vision may seem as though it asks too much of us. If it does, that's the signpost that you are on the right track. How can vision be grand if it doesn't require us to stretch? A great vision often requires great sacrifice. But, if the vision generates passion and commitment, the payoff is greater than the sacrifice.

It's Authentic

Authenticity means the vision statement comes from you. No one can create the statement for you. It must be personal in order to us to "own" it. It must be recognized as uniquely ours. The vision must be an extension of our personal being.

And Extraordinary

A grand vision must take a **quantum leap** from the ordinary. If it spells out our highest ideals and wishes, it stands to reason that it will stand above the commonplace. It will set us apart from the crowd.

It is easy to allow ourselves to be manipulated. We are constantly presented with a social mirror - magazines, advertisements, television shows - that purport to be a reflection of normalcy. We are led to believe that being normal is to create a vision like everyone else's. If we choose to venture outside the box of normalcy, we will be criticized; yet people have great respect for risk-takers.

Theorem:

An organizational vision will be successful only if the team vision is part of the organizational vision. The team vision will be successful only if the individual vision is part of the team vision. An organizational vision will be successful only if the team vision is part of the organizational vision. The team vision will be successful only if the individual vision is part of the team vision.

Great visions are not handed down from above. They are not dictated or manipulative. That would be yet another form of control. Visions are created, crafted, and shaped by those in partnership, built by those

who will be living the vision.

The usual pattern of behavior is for top management to spend months creating and defining the vision statement and then devote weeks, months or years communicating the vision downward, throughout the organization. The leadership paradigm is mistakenly viewed as a machine to create the vision and then enroll the rest of the organization to support it. It's no wonder management encounter solid resistance and lack of inspiration, often matched by open defiance and rebellion on the part of their employees. Why should they care about the vision if they have not chosen it?

The empowerment paradigm focuses on empowered leadership and inspires a different kind of role. The act of creating and communicating a vision is indeed an act of leadership, and each employee needs to do this. He/she needs to become a leader in his or her own right.

Therefore, the vision of top management and the people on a higher level becomes input for lower-level management, team leaders, team members, and each individual. Every person who wants to be empowered is committed to taking the quantum leap. He/she wants to take ownership of the job; he/she must create a personal vision.

In the empowerment paradigm, the individual's values must become part of the organizational vision. The challenge of management is to create that ownership by sharing the vision.

The Power of Individual Vision

Dr. W. Edwards Deming was a man driven by his vision. In the 1950's, after his ideas on quality were not accepted in the United States, he went to Japan. He didn't alter his vision, but he did alter his platform, and he was to have a major impact on business and quality, not only in Japan, but also throughout the world.

It is ironic that American business has now adapted total quality as its byline. And with the need for creating organizations where quality and customer service is part of everyday decision-making, Deming has become something of a legend. Deming's "14 Points to Achieve Quality" have become the guidelines for many major corporations today and, his philosophy outlives the man.

His credo was constant learning and growth. He lived his vision. His vision of greatness has touched thousands because his vision met the criteria: it is idealistic, authentic, and extraordinary.

But vision, like so many other things, is a whole, much greater than its parts. And, vision cannot be built by simply assembling its pieces.

It has to come from the heart.

Words of Vision

"It is always important to have something yet to do in life."

~ Viktor Frankl ~

"If a man advances confidently in the direction of his dreams to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."

– Henry David Thoreau ~

"You are not here merely to make a living. You are here in order to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world, and you impoverish yourself if you forget the errand."

– Woodrow Wilson ~

"Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds."

~ Albert Einstein ~

"Wealth, like happiness, is never attained when sought after directly. It always comes as a by-product of providing a useful service."

~ Henry Ford ~