

## **Envisioning the Future in Organizations: From Theory into Practice**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although vision-building is not a new concept in change technology, few organizations have managed to implement this process in a way that has a lasting impact on the culture, processes or productivity. This article explores some of the obstacles that an organization might encounter in successfully creating and implementing a vision and outlines a process that can help in overcoming these barriers.

# ENVISIONING THE FUTURE IN ORGANIZATIONS: FROM THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Marilyn E. Laiken, PhD, 2005 (adapted from a 1996 version)

## INTRODUCTION: WHY VISIONING?<sup>1</sup>

For decades, Organization Development professionals have recognized the fact that job satisfaction, and consequently productivity, are supported by placing decision-making power in the hands of those who are directly affected by the decisions.

In response to this notion, large organizations have begun to decentralize, creating organizational structures that are functionally autonomous, but organizationally accountable. These decentralized forms require coordination among their various units. In the past, the most common method of ensuring such coordination was by imposing policies and procedures that set standards and codified performance. The resulting bureaucratization was an attempt at homogeneity; however, there were some serious drawbacks. It produced an organizational form that is not adaptive to changing conditions, cannot respond well to local variations, stifles creativity, and tends to have a dehumanizing effect on the workforce.

This raises a paradox with which organizations have begun to struggle — how to free individual units to function in unique and creative ways, while still maintaining organizational integrity. Many organizations have found that defining a vision of the future they wish to create has helped to coordinate otherwise disparate individual sectors (Senge, 1990, 1994; Field & Ford, 1995; Wheatley, 1992; Kline & Saunders, 1993). As short-term objectives, priorities, products and processes shift and change, a shared vision can help employees remained focused on longer-term organizational goals. The vision, in expressing the basic beliefs and values of the organization and its members, provides a mutual identity that informs daily action. A vision can influence recruitment and hiring practices; it can provide a framework for setting business unit goals and objectives; it can offer directions to take during a crisis, and it can clarify and define the relationship between the organization and all of its stakeholders. Thus, although particular individuals or teams may function in ways that are unique to the needs of their work unit, the entire organization is aligned by a shared set of values and common purpose that together comprise its vision.

In brief, an organizational vision has the potential to align values, goals and action; to create a shared framework for decision-making and problem-solving; to inject a new level of synergy and creativity into day-to-day functioning; and to engage the commitment and unique resources of each individual member of the enterprise.

If this is the case, why then do employees typically complain that the organization's vision is nothing more than a fancy framed statement adorning the office walls? What is it that prevents organizational vision-builders from "walking their talk".

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to acknowledge Dr. William Alexander, with whom I co-authored the unpublished paper "Why Have an Organizational Philosophy?" (1990). Elements from that paper have been incorporated into this article.

## WHY VISIONS DON'T WORK: COMMON PROBLEMS

### *Lack of "ownership" for the vision across organizational sectors*

The task of vision-building may be initiated from the top of the organization down, from the ground up, or both. However, researchers and practitioners in this area seem to be in agreement on one key point: the vision must include the ideas of all stakeholders, and be crafted towards a truly shared outcome, or there will be little likelihood of implementation and follow-through (Senge, 1990; Harshman & Phillips, 1994).

In my own consulting experience, I find that, typically, senior management teams approach vision-building in one of two ways. Either they want to take full responsibility for creating the organizational vision, or they delegate the task to others, without the senior managers' active participation. In both cases the effort often fails in the implementation phase. Employees, whether management or not, will be unable to enact with commitment an organizational vision which they have had no part in creating. However, employees may comply, if they perceive their job to be at risk.

Peter Senge, in *The Fifth Discipline*, differentiates between "compliance" and "commitment". He warns against mistaking genuine compliance for the latter, saying: "The committed person brings an energy, passion, and excitement that cannot be generated if you are only compliant, even genuinely compliant" (1990, p. 221). "Rolling down" a senior management-created vision, however carefully thought out, will at best result in compliance, and not commitment to its implementation.

### *Difficulty in creating a shared vision from unique individual views*

The experience of vision-building is essentially a communications process, starting with the unique personal vision of each organizational member, and culminating in a mutually shared picture of the organization's desired future. One of the challenges in this process is the fact that people often bring quite disparate, and sometimes conflicting values and beliefs to the dialogue. Senge (1990) says: "One of the deepest desires underlying shared vision is the desire to be connected, to a larger purpose and to one another. The spirit of connection is fragile. It is undermined whenever we lose respect for one another and for each others' views" (p. 230).

The fear of surfacing diverse views (and therefore potentially unmanageable conflict) sometimes inhibits a full exploration of personal visions, thus undermining the depth and potency of the outcome statement. What is required here are the often under-developed skills of genuine dialogue and polarity management (Johnson, 1992) — the ability to actively inquire into the views of others, and equally, to advocate for one's own views with clarity and assurance. Kline and Saunders, in *Ten Steps to a Learning Organisation*, say: "We must allow multiple visions to coexist, listening for the right course of action that transcends and unifies all our individual visions" (1993, p.218). Field and Ford, in *Managing Organisational Learning*, add: "The more that can be done to air different perspectives, the more likely it is that the final vision statement will be robust and realistic" (1995, p.31). However, our conflict adverse organizational cultures (Laiken, 1994, 1995) mitigate against surfacing and confronting differences of any kind. Moreover, the value differences that inevitably arise in vision-building are particularly difficult to explore, because they represent our most deeply-held beliefs.

### ***Wording of the vision statement is too vague to imply specific action***

Even if a truly shared statement of vision does emerge, it is often not usable as a guide for action. This lack of potency usually arises from a challenging paradox. On the one hand, an organizational vision, to be inspiring, must be lofty and idealistic. However, in order to drive action, it also needs to be clear and specific — or, as Senge says, it must be "palpable ... people (need to) begin to see it as if it exists" (1990, p.206). Although the vision itself is comprised of impressions and abstractions, these eventually need to be expressed more concretely, if people are expected to move towards the ideal in their day-to-day activities.

The terms in which the vision is expressed must also represent a shared understanding by all employees. For instance, a statement such as "globally recognized as the best in the field" might need to be further refined into statements such as "having a unique, worldwide distribution system", "a process for continually tracking clients' needs" and "an ability to produce the product (or service) for half the cost of any other supplier". Specifics such as these lead naturally to planning for implementation, which ultimately is what brings the vision statement to life.

### ***The gap between the vision and the current reality is discouraging***

A vision statement, simply because it is intended to represent an ideal and unique image of the future, can be disheartening if the gap between the vision and the current reality seems too large to close. In an implicit way, the vision signifies our disappointment with what currently exists. Stating a vision is a way of "coming out of the closet" with our doubts about how we treat our clients and one another. This then causes a tension between what we are, and what we wish to be. Senge refers to this as "creative tension", and notes that the ability to hold the vision and the reality simultaneously is one of the key skills required for the discipline of "personal mastery". He says:

We allow our goals to erode when we are unwilling to live with emotional tension. On the other hand, when we understand creative tension and allow it to operate by not lowering our vision, vision becomes an active force... Truly creative people use the gap between vision and current reality to generate energy for change. (1990, p.153)

Since people can become overwhelmed by the demands of the current organizational reality, and thus lose their focus on the vision, Senge suggests creating "skunk works" which allow some employees to experiment with creative and possibly high-risk approaches, while others "hold the fort". It was just such an incubator environment that produced the Apple Macintosh and allowed 3M to invent their invaluable Post-it Notes.

### ***Not viewing vision-building as an on-going process***

Framing vision-building as an on-going process is one way to avoid the uncertainty and cynicism that can result from recognition of the "gap" between the ideal and the present reality.

Employees can be helped to view such gaps as problems to be solved rather than a failure to reach the desired future state, and can learn to celebrate incremental steps towards their vision. The process thus becomes one of continuous learning and improvement. In *Managing Organisational Learning*, Field and Ford say:

Ultimately, the most important thing about developing a vision statement is not the wording or the way it is communicated. It is the ongoing process of conceptual change associated with its development and with attempts to implement it. (1995, p.32)

Seeing visioning as a solution to a problem, as a one-time experience, or as training event that can be managed during a two-day retreat will all ensure that the exercise is exactly that — simply an exercise with no likelihood of significant impact on the organization.

### ***No "modelling" - especially by organizational leaders***

One final point on which researchers and practitioners are agreed is that actions which support the vision, once it is created, must be modelled in the behaviour of every organizational member, especially that of its leaders (Block, 1987; Senge, 1990, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 1991). About this, Peter Block notes:

Articulating a vision of greatness forces us to hold ourselves accountable for acting in a way that is congruent with that vision. Once we have created a vision and communicated it to the people around us, it becomes a benchmark for evaluating all of our actions. (1987, pp. 104-105)

In my own consulting practice, it is common to hear the complaint from employees that their managers are "not walking the talk". I often challenge them to constructively confront their managers when this is the case, as well as to examine their own behaviour to ensure that direct reports are not making the same complaint. All of this requires a level of authenticity and congruence that has not been the norm for organizational functioning in the past. However, this must change. Walking the visionary talk is now central to successful leadership at all levels. As Kouzes and Posner point out in *The Leadership Challenge*: "...it is consistency between words and actions that builds a leader's credibility" (1991, p. 187).

## **BUILDING A SHARED VISION, STEP BY STEP**

The process that follows provides one way to overcome the previously outlined barriers to effective visioning. There are probably as many versions of this model as there are organizations, as well there should be. An organization is most likely to engage in a process that is customized to its own unique needs and situation. However, the following provides a framework which organizational leaders might find useful in designing their own visioning activities.

### ***1. PREPARATION***

Although organizational vision-building is a mutual process, it needs to begin with strong personal beliefs — shared visions grow from the interaction of individual visions. Senge says, "If people don't have their own vision, all they can do is 'sign up' for someone else's" (1990, p. 211).

Thus, in preparation for the initial visioning session, I usually suggest some pre-work that begins to surface participants' individual views. I request that each person think creatively about an 'ideal future' for their organization, with the following guiding questions provided to help trigger their thoughts:

- \* Why am I committed to this organization?
- \* Why does the organization exist? What makes it unique?
- \* What are some creative ways that the organization could be serving its members/customers/clients?
- \* How would the organization operate if it were the best it could be?

## *2. SETTING THE STAGE*

An introduction to the concept of visioning helps to set the stage. Participants are told that visioning is useful for new groups, new projects, or new thinking about on-going work. Visioning balances reasoning with intuition and creativity. It answers the question: "If we could be the best we can imagine, without constraints, what would that look like?" When a group develops a vision, it becomes deeply purposeful - there is an alignment of thought and action. A vision should be deeply felt and lofty. If people are attuned to what they want, they find ways to achieve it. This is the management of attention, and it works equally well for individuals, teams, or the entire organization.

## *3. GENERATING VISIONS*

The first step involves clarifying individual visions. Participants are referred to their pre-work, and asked to jot notes to themselves on their vision of an ideal future for their organization.

They are then asked to share their ideas with a partner for one minute, change partners and do it again, for three rounds. Between rounds, people are encouraged to improve and enhance their descriptions, making them more precise and succinct each time. The purpose of this activity is not to influence others to change their ideas, but to clarify one's own vision through interaction. Because there is no attempt to achieve agreement at this point, participants are encouraged to express freely their unique ideas; however, the activity itself has the effect of beginning a consensus-building process.

The third step asks people to form groups of five or six, and in turn, to share one key idea from their vision, until all have been recorded. In order to help in building consensus from potentially very diverse views, the recorder, with the group's help, is asked to categorize the statements under headings generated from the data (similar ideas under common headings). Only those statements with which everyone agrees are recorded in this way. If there is even one objection to an idea, it is recorded on a separate sheet to be considered when the subgroup shares its results with the remaining participants. The small groups are encouraged to dialogue about the ideas being presented before they are recorded, using both the skills of advocacy (taking a stand for what you believe) and inquiry (genuinely listening for understanding to the ideas of others).

In the fourth and final step to generate the vision, each group presents their categorized statements to the whole group, with the facilitator collating the results into one shared listing. Part of the conversation at this point involves dealing with the areas of disagreement. The facilitator plays a key role here in helping group members clarify, paraphrase, and express their concerns to one another, to the point where there is at least a mutual understanding. Vision statements are not recorded as consensual until every member agrees that they can live with the idea, even if it is not their highest priority.

## *4. FROM VISION TO REALITY — "GAP ANALYSIS"*

This phase addresses the need for specificity as a guide for action. Because vision statements are necessarily lofty and idealistic, they are not useful as a support for organizational change unless the ideas are grounded in concrete reality and expressed as specific goals for problem-solving.

The gap analysis explores the difference between the organization's current reality and the shared vision that members have created. Essentially it responds to two questions:

- \* What have we done/are doing well?
- \* What areas need to be developed?

An examination of the current reality can occur in a variety of ways. It can result from a survey conducted with all organizational members; it can be determined by a SWOT analysis, which explores the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats which exist for the organization; it can involve an environmental scan, which considers external conditions and trends; it can simply be a synthesis of participants' perceptions of current organizational realities, or can result from a combination of some or all of the above.

## 5. DETERMINING STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

This step responds to the concern that the gap between the vision and the reality, once it is identified, can be disheartening. The goal here is to begin closing that gap — while recognizing that this is a slow and on-going process, and not a "one-shot" event.

Organizational members are encouraged in this phase to accept the creative tension between the vision and the reality as a problem-solving challenge. The task, in sub-groups, is to identify the issues raised by the gap analysis for each area of the vision, and to express these in terms of goal statements based on the following criteria:

- \* we have the power to act on this goal
- \* we are committed to working on this goal
- \* we have the necessary resources, or can create a plan to get them
- \* the goal is manageable in the time we have available (may imply sub-goals).

The resulting list of goal statements is then discussed by the whole group to ensure a shared understanding, and finally is prioritized using a nominal group technique.

## 6. ACTION-PLANNING, NEXT STEPS

The final phase of the process involves creating specific action plans to respond to the highest priority goals. These plans are intended to answer the questions: "who? what?, when?, where? and how?"

## CONCLUSION

Kline and Saunders, in *Ten Steps to a Learning Organization*, say:

Through the magic of synthesizing its ideas to a level of complexity and richness no one had previously thought of, the group may rise beyond the capacity of its individuals to something surprisingly original, unique and powerful. (1993, p. 160)

The creation of an organizational vision can be the first step towards inspired performance. It is the underpinning of the organization's mission, goals and objectives. It is a clear statement of what organizational members truly believe, and describes how they should behave in every aspect of their day-to-day functioning. It is in this arena that we begin to see if compassion and honesty might work together to produce deeper and more profound relationships. It is here that we examine our inner strengths, fears, dreams and illusions. It is here that we explore our courage to take action in those areas most critical to our own lives and to the lives of the organizations of which we are part.

It has been said that "the unexamined life is not worth living". The act of creating an organizational vision provides a unique opportunity to examine our work lives, and to construct a values-driven working environment with a bias for action that supports our loftiest ideals.

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