

Project Leadership and Creating a Shared Vision

What is a vision?

A vision is a mental picture or image of a possible or desirable future state for an organization, a project team or an individual. Creating a vision is a key activity that good leaders do well. They have a picture in their minds of what they want the end product to look like before the project ever gets started – much like an architect creates a blueprint or an engineer builds a prototype. A vision describes the image that a project is intended to fulfill and it typically describes a future that is not quite achievable, but at the same time not as fantastic as to be a pipedream. Leaders envision the future and in so doing they inspire others to follow them. Visions challenge people to stretch, to grow and to be more creative and innovative. They create a bridge between the present and the future and draw people towards wanting to be involved in something quite special.

How is a Vision Different from a Purpose or Goals?

A mission statement describes what the organization does and describes its purpose and broad objectives. A mission is about “what” – a vision is about “why”. The vision describes why an organization or project engages in activities and focuses a team or a group on far-reaching aspirations – not the bottom line or profit margins.

A strategic plan is something different again – at the most they reach about ten years into the future.

Goals are much more concrete and specific and provide people with definable targets against which they can measure their achievements. All of these are important and have an appropriate use; however it is the vision that tends to excite people and enlist their interest and enthusiasm.

A vision is more than a set of strategic objectives or a business plan. It requires a long term view and describes the finest expectations that we see for ourselves and our project.

Goal	Vision
To raise \$100,000 for the United Way.	To eradicate child poverty in Canada.
To convert the hospital's Y2K compatible code.	To keep patients, families and children healthy.
To develop and install a computer application for the provincial government.	To fund health, education and welfare in the province.

How do Leaders Get People to Commit to a Vision?

A vision that is seen only by the leader doesn't change the organization and doesn't propel a group forward. A leader with no followers is not a leader and people will not follow until they have bought into the vision as their own. Leaders can not command commitment – they can only inspire it. Leaders must enlist others in a common vision.

To enlist others in a common vision leaders must know their people and be able to relate to them in ways that energize and uplift them. People must believe that the leaders understands their needs and has their interests at heart. Only through a genuine knowledge of people's dreams, hopes and values are you able to enlist commitment. Leadership is a dialogue – not a monologue.

Involving others in the visioning process allows others to share their dreams and values and brings about a broader range of viewpoints and expertise in search for new direction. It makes it easier to gain commitment to the vision at the end of the process.

How Does a Leader Develop a Vision Statement?

The most powerful visions often use metaphors or visual analogies to change abstract notions into tangible, meaningful images. For example, you might say that your project is like a skyscraper because it is far reaching – ambitious – requires a team and lots of coordination. Other metaphors to describe your project could be a cocoon emerging into a butterfly, the ascent of Mount Everest, an eagle's flight, a revolution, etc.

A vision usually describes the image that a project intends to fulfill. It often includes elements about:

- Its primary service or product
- Its commitment to total quality
- It's commitment to service and satisfaction
- Its commitment to continuous improvement

It typically helps people to identify with purposes and goals that transcend anything they could accomplish on their own. It helps to focus a team or group on goals, service and continuous improvement. It is not about word smithing – it is about inspiring passion. Some of the most effective visions live in people's minds and hearts – not on a boardroom wall.

A vision is doomed to fail if the leader doesn't walk the walk. It requires passion and a deep visceral commitment that signals to others what you stand for and who you are. It also depends on the ability to communicate this emotion. It is important for each individual involved in the process to look inside and talk about what is really important to him or her

How do Leaders Get Team Members to Hold the Same Vision?

First and foremost is communication! It is important for leaders to talk to people about the vision, in their own way using their own language. Stories are profoundly powerful, especially stories of organizational heroes whose values are embedded in the vision or vivid stories about what the future will look like. In order for people to buy into a vision it must have markers of progress – measurements to indicate whether progress has been made.

Rewarding people when they act in ways that are consistent with the vision and they also need to be punished when their behaviour is inconsistent. People who are challenged and motivated by the vision will stay and those who cannot buy in ultimately leave.

How is a Vision Different from Values?

Values are part of the genetic code of an organization – they are the norm – “the way we do business around here.” For example:

We value experiments around here and we take responsibility for our successes and our failures.

We believe knowledge is power and we respect the right of individual team members to access the information they need to do their jobs.

We believe in everyone's right to be listened to and heard regardless of their point of view.

Values get passed down within an organization and can form the basis for decision making – hiring – promotion. Values that are sustainable over time are not constraining – e.g. efficiency, innovation and continual learning. They provide people with clarity and allow them to act on their own for the good of the company. The leader's values, the values of the team and organizational values need to be consistent and aligned if a project is to succeed. The values for each help to support and inform the vision of the team. A vision challenges people to do their best and improve their best and affirms the team's core values that underlie its decisions and performance.

Guiding Questions for a Project Team Developing a Vision Statement

How do you see your group's core values being reflected in this project?

What excites or inspires you about this project.

How would describe the ideal desired future for this project?

What are the future trends that are likely to influence this project?

Beyond its business or financial objectives what higher meaning or purpose could this project serve?

Who do you want your vision to inspire? i.e. Who are all of the stakeholders?

How does this project contribute to the larger vision of the organization?

What metaphor would you use to describe this project?

Guiding Questions to Critique a Vision Statement

√ Is the vision clear and short?

√ Can a person who is not familiar with the project understand what the project hopes to achieve by reading the vision statement?

√ Does the vision statement describe a future that all the project stakeholders share?

√ Does the vision paint a picture of the future situation for this project?