



LEADERSHIP ACUMEN Issue 24

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Where Does Vision Come From?

*The world will stand aside for those with a compelling Vision
and a convincing plan for how to get there.*

Vision – or a picture of a future state that we are pursuing – is one of the most powerful tools in a leader’s toolkit. Far from being just consultant-speak, Vision is what moves us all forward – improving, adapting, progressing, in a world constantly in flux.

Our communities need it, some even thirst for it; as Vision provides context in which to make decisions, settle disagreements, and for individuals to build their careers.

And, while we often talk about Vision as if it is a straightforward thing; creating, communicating and energizing people around a compelling picture of the future is not an easy task.

Un certain je ne sais quoi

For over 10 years now I have interviewed people acknowledged by others to be excellent leaders. They have come from business, the arts, medicine, the clergy, politicians and senior civil servants, social activists, educators, the military and more.

The number one trait that distinguishes these exemplary leaders from others is, in fact, “energy” – the ability to manage their own energy as well as the ability to infuse others with energy.

The second most significant trait however, is Vision. The ability to clearly articulate where their organization/community/profession needed to go for the next few years in order to distinguish itself, solve the problems they faced, or just “survive” amid the relentless competitive pressures and release of new, valuable products or services; plus their ability to engage others to assist in achieving that vision.

On the flip side I have witnessed many people in the position of authority (CEO’s, political leaders, etc.) who try to cling to authority without any sense of Vision. Indeed – I suspect we have all witnessed individuals in such positions – when asked by their followers or potential supporters about the Vision they will respond indignantly that it is “in the plan”, or worse, muddle through some non-understandable explanation of, well, something that wasn’t very clear.

This is both disturbing, and causes us to look elsewhere for a compelling Vision to pursue.

We all need a sense of purpose in our lives.

We all need a sense of purpose in our work.

Leaders bring us that purpose, context, and also fire-up our energy, when they create in our mind’s eye a compelling picture of success, benefit and excitement in an achievable “future state”.

So, How Do We Do Vision?

Given its importance, this begs the logical question. Also one might ask – is it a singular process? I.e. do we wait for the leader to be struck by lightning and “have the Vision”? Or, does the leader surround themselves with their senior advisers, executives, and/or Board members and wordsmith a statement that everyone can agree with? Or, do we invite the contributions from broader community members, customers, suppliers, front-line staff, managers, and more.

The answer is Yes! Yes, any and all of these approaches can lead to a compelling Vision. And, of course, they can all lead to boring, fuzzy, confusion-inducing Vision too!

The “lightning-strike” scenario is of course not really one of divine intervention. Instead it is a pattern-recognition and pattern-building process; born from extensive scanning and exploration of environmental/industry sector trends, global dynamics & shifts in societies’ perceived value or expectations. It is often anchored by some analysis of demographics, psychographics, geo-political and economic trend knowledge. And, it is augmented by personal networking, hands-on wrestling with policy/technical/product issues, plus face-to-face interviews with various community members. Then, given some reflection time and consideration, the patterns come together. While this can (and generally does) happen individually for the senior leaders, it can also be facilitated to engage a wider group – such as the executive team and Board; or even on a broader basis with the inclusion of customers, stakeholders and community members.

The challenge for Vision building in today’s complex, fast-paced world is whether any one person or even small, elite group of people can know enough to both see & interpret all the dynamics, trends, factors and opportunities themselves. Then, can they be creative enough to build new patterns that are truly “break-through”. If there is a “magic” to Visioning, it is in the pattern recognition and pattern building process. This is the art, beyond the science of technical considerations and systemic trend-scanning!

Also, we know the simple truth that people will support what they help create. So, if delivering upon the vision will require many people, often working independently to exert judgment in advancing the Vision, then engagement of wider participation in the Vision development process is probably an advisable thing.

Ultimately however, a broadly facilitated Visioning process still requires the leader(s) to consolidate, and then enunciate a compelling picture of the future that will engage others in its pursuit. For today’s educated and experienced workforce, this “engagement” will be easier if they have contributed to the Vision’s development process.

Vision as Dialogue

Imagine the next time there was an election that the political leaders actually engaged the public in dialogue about substantive issues. Far-reaching, high-impact issues such as: access to a reliable supply of fresh water; how the country would ensure the workforce could provide high-value services/products to the rest of the world; how we might ensure our elders are both listened to and cared for; how we can simultaneously sustain economic development and the environment upon which it depends; and how we might contribute to the safety, security and sustainability of other “troubled” parts of the world.

Imagine the next Board/CEO of your organization engaging employees, suppliers and other stakeholders about the substantive issues lying below the surface of most motivation “talk”.

How will we generate enhanced value or improved cost/productivity with a 10 year-old production or IT system? How can we sustain high quality programs/services delivery into the future when 30% of our workforce is due to retire in the next few years and there are no upcoming/incoming people with their knowledge and experience in sight? Where will “growth” come from if our innovation processes are dormant, sloppy or time-pressured? How will we provide enhanced return to shareholders if we stick to our core products and markets?

In one of history's most visionary speeches of all time, Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech ultimately engaged dialogue. It was difficult and at times soul-searching dialogue. The path to the Vision was obstacle-ridden. Similarly, John F. Kennedy's Vision to "put a man on the Moon by the end of the decade" also engaged great dialogue and debate.

Both leaders were resolute in their Vision. And, their Visions were not born of political expediency or false sentiments. Both truly believed in their Visions, that the "patterns" were both right and timely to achieve. Both Visions did galvanize, energize and set context. Both Visions advanced, improved and caused real adaptation to changing circumstances. And none of this would have been accomplished if the Visions didn't engage dialogue around substantive and often difficult issues.

Sometimes today, I think leaders are too busy being "careful" and avoiding the difficult discussions, to truly be Visionary. Instead, let's get our people and community focused on both the outcomes we aspire to achieve, and the real challenges that lie in our way. By engaging meaningful discussion and exploration, the elements of a potential Vision will start to emerge and the leader will gain great insight into front-line realities. Engaging the customer and broader community ensures both diversity of perspective and insight from the very people we seek to serve.

Vision and Passion

Like chicken and egg – does Vision come from passion or does passion result from Vision?

Either way, Vision and passion for moving forward against obstacles are closely linked.

In scanning the network, identifying challenges and opportunities, seeing the dynamics at play and focusing on the outcomes to achieve, passion often wells-up inside participants in such a dialogue. Personally, I can't help it. But clearly it is more than an analytical process of pros and cons. While I do carry out multiple analyses, it is in going beyond – to see the dynamic nature of the marketplace and environment around us, to sense the sword-edge of failure/success in our directional decision-making that stirs the soul. To start to put patterns together in a new way that are strangely recognizable yet never done before brings a warm glow inside and smile to the face.

It is in focusing on outcomes and the results/benefits from achieving the Vision, that I become convinced about its value and resolute in its achievement. This helps me suffer the self-doubts and doubts of others. This allows me to be flexible in its achievement as we trouble-shoot the obstacles, and it allows me to argue for its merits against the inevitable challenges to its validity.

These are crucial aspects for a leader and their Vision. Passion towards the Vision is what gets you to achievement when so many other forces would try to de-rail you. As a leader you had better have passion for your Vision! And, you must build the passion in others towards obtaining the Vision too.

Vision and Planning

Vision is much more than a tick-box element in the annual planning process! In many ways it is the sum-total of a richer, broader strategic thinking and network exploration endeavour.

Vision is hopefully formed from a variety of knowledgeable inputs and framed by the pursuit of both uniqueness and sustained value. It surely comes from deep thought and thorough reflection.

Vision is outcomes-focused and also seeks to "position" the organization/community amid the dynamics of a complex and ever changing world.

A Vision without a plan to get there is clearly difficult and not advisable; though a compelling Vision will almost always call-forth plans to get there. A plan without Vision however, is neither engaging nor sustainable. Yet, this is often what we see in organizations today – a short term focused business plan for yet another cycle, based upon status-quo assumptions.

In building the planning process and timelines, it is advisable to start the “strategic thinking” component far in advance of the business plan/budgeting activities. This will allow for appropriate exploration, engagement, dialogue, reflection and ultimately Vision enunciation. If the Vision is already established, and the business planning/budgeting cycle is coming around again, there is still terrific value in making time for strategic thinking. In this case, the thinking can be around review of the dynamic forces that are at play, consideration of various scenarios for the future and how that might affect the existing Vision or plan. And finally, it can provide time to discuss how or whether the organization & Management is truly living the Vision.

Vision at the Personal Level

As a student, a vision for our profession or career helps us choose our university/college, then it drives every decision from course selection to study discipline to extracurricular involvement. Our youth often find this a difficult process as it is hard for them to imagine forward into a working world they have never been involved in. They also wrestle with what “success” means for them. So, they will look around at family members, perhaps go and explore various institutions or job sites to start to envisage their future.

Once in the work world we build new visions – of our family, or dream home, or style of living to which we aspire. This further shapes our decision-making in career advancement choices, the choice of a mate (or not), the savings we make and major purchases. Again we revisit our assumptions of how “success” is defined. Some of us are caught up by advertising or magazines or media that drive us towards their definitions of success. Others are influenced by their employers, professional bodies, and family members. Still others look within and are guided by an inner sense of what “success” means. But we all do this – we all try to envisage our future – so we have context within which to move forward, feel confident, and improve our lot in life.

Within organizations, the Vision for our individual role is contextualized by the goals of the team within which we belong. This work of the team is further contextualized by the goals of the organization, which are in turn further contextualized by the goals of the community. In trans-national organizations, our organization lies across many communities, and as a result have to have resonance within many contexts. Often, when there is conflict – between individuals, between teams, between organizations – we look upward for context to assist us in resolving that conflict. Again, this is why Vision is crucial. In the absence of community or organizational vision, then the sub-components are often in conflict or at the risk of existing without clear purpose and energy.

As a senior leader, we “are” the organization or community to many, many individuals. We are the face of the faceless organization, or the face of the community in its dealings within and without. As such, we need to be able to convey a strong sense of Vision for the others to contextualize their own contributions. Of course, we also should have our own sense of personal Vision too. Hopefully, this personal Vision is in-synch with the Vision of the organization we lead, for if it is at odds, it will be quite obvious to those we lead, and diminish the power of the organizational Vision, and potentially our people’s commitment to it.

It is at this senior level that we also hope there is Vision beyond the organization – to a sense of Vision for the world we live in. Only a select few get to be senior leaders in the world. And they have at their disposal resources, time, and insight into the bigger patterns that few others get a chance to witness. This really does suggest that senior leaders should have a context for a larger world view, and one that is both sustainable and achievable through their organization’s actions and their own personal actions. This is a significant calling.

In Conclusion

A Vision is so powerful, so necessary, and so sought-after by people and community that it just might be the most important capacity for a senior leader to exercise.

As a senior executive or a Board member you might regularly ask yourself what is your Vision for the organization you lead and the world you live in. You might regularly ask the people around you what Vision they are pursuing and advancing the organization towards. And, you might want to compare these answers to ensure there are no surprises!

Finally, you should have a clear sense for your own personal Vision. What is your Vision for yourself for the coming year and beyond, and where does your Vision come from? Hopefully some personal exploration and reflection can bring these clearer into view.

Exploring the Web!

This month, the connections below take you to sites with more perspectives, commentary and discussions of Vision and the Vision process.

“I Have A Dream”, Martin Luther King (Video, mp3 and text)
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm>

John F. Kennedy’s Address to Congress where he establishes the goal of landing a man on the moon (and bringing him safely back home). (Video, audio and text) <http://er.jsc.nasa.gov/seh/ricetalk.htm>

Tips for creating a Vision statement.
<http://www.growthconnection.com/Creating-Vision-Statements.htm>

Future Vision 2015 from Intel. Going beyond trend watching, scenario building, and other traditional approaches, Intel now integrates explorations with: community, institutions, the human body’s evolution, and spirit. It makes you go “hmmm”; this is a rich site! <http://www.intel.com/cd/corporate/techtrends/emea/eng/244620.htm>

An EU future Vision (2030) for Photovoltaic Technology. This has the potentials to solve some of the world’s more challenging energy sustainability challenges! http://ec.europa.eu/research/energy/photovoltaics/introduction_en.html

State of the World 2010 & Future Vision. This certainly will get you thinking!
<http://www.worldwatch.org/files/pdf/Chapter%201.pdf>

What’s your Personal Vision statement all about? 7 Articles on how to write a personal Vision.
<http://www.helium.com/knowledge/47869-writing-a-personal-vision-statement>

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