

Re-visiting Vision: What We Still Don't Get

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Perhaps I shouldn't be that bothered.

Maybe I should just succumb to realism and admit that the vision fad has run its course. Just like the Management by Objectives (MBO) fad, the Zero-Based Budgeting (ZBB) fad, process re-engineering, team-building, the list goes on and on.

I guess in the deep recesses of my psyche I continue to harbour the hope that there are astute leaders and managers who eclectically not only grasp the core logics of these recurrent fads (while stripping them of all the commercial hype), but actually assimilate them into the ongoing practices of their organisations.

My concern is that, lacking adequate perspective and suffering from the tyranny of the urgent, leaders and managers continue the perennial search for the silver bullet, the panacea that once and for all will cure the ills of the organisation and usher it into a new golden age. Well, accept my apologies up front, but I fear that too many organisations suffer from an apparently incurable condition that Martin Luther had in mind when he said, "*The history of humanity is like a drunk trying to mount a horse. He falls off on one side, only to remount and fall off on the other side.*"

But, unlike all the other recurrent fads, which generally have core ideas of significant merit but predictably fail when embraced as panaceas, the "vision thing" is radically more important. The truth be known, the issues of vision are only secondarily of importance to organisational productivity, although when the impact of vision (or lack thereof) on organisation's worldwide is considered, this impact remains incalculably huge.

Even more fundamental than organisational productivity is the impact vision can have on the fruitfulness and quality of individual lives, both inside and out of the organisational context.

The heliotropic hypothesis

“We see what our images make us capable of seeing.”

— David Cooperrider

Ask peak performers what’s the drive behind their performance, and a compelling image of the future is likely to be the answer. They may call it a personal dream, a mission, a calling, or a vision, but there’s a good chance they’ve developed a clear, compelling visual image of a desired future state. That future state might be as personal as shedding the “keg” for six-pack abs, seeing oneself in a cap and gown receiving a degree, wearing a black belt, or simply crossing the finish line in a marathon. Or, it could be as global as envisioning a world where AIDS, poverty, or the wanton destruction of our natural habitats are things of the past.

How important are these images? In a profoundly important book, *Appreciative Inquiry*, David Cooperrider explores the criticality of mental images and the extent to which they actually create the realities in which we live. Called the *heliotropic hypothesis*, based on the directional growth of plants in response to sunlight, this hypothesis contends that in individual, team and organisational contexts, we tend to grow most rapidly and healthily in the direction of positive, affirming images. Claiming that, *“the positive image may well be the sine qua non of human development,”* Cooperrider cites hundreds of empirical studies attesting to its theoretical and practical importance.

In fact, in a sweeping study of Western civilization, the Dutch sociologist Fred Polak speaks to the power of our mental images of the future as the single most important dynamic and explanation for understanding cultural evolution:

“Any student of the rise and fall of cultures cannot fail to be impressed by the role played in this historical succession of the future. The rise and fall of images of the future precedes or accompanies the rise and fall of cultures. As long as society’s image is positive and flourishing, the flower of culture is in full bloom. Once the image begins to decay and lose its vitality, however, the culture does not long survive.”

Because this is absolutely critical to our whole understanding of the real importance of vision, let’s say it again in a different way. When it comes to organisational health and performance, there may be no single factor more important than positive images of the future, consistently communicated through vital internal dialogue that eventually becomes external through the organisation’s branding and communications.

Vision vs. vision statements

What far too many leaders and managers still fail to grasp is that true vision, these powerfully positive images of the future, has almost nothing to do with popular vision statements. While it would obviously be folly in an organisational context to invest the time, energy, and money often required to discover, detect,

or discern a powerful vision and then fail to communicate it, far too many vision statements fail to achieve what should be their very purpose: to unleash human energy and potential and focus both on extraordinary performance. Put simply, the effective communication of vision, which goes far beyond mere vision statements, can be measured by two simple “heat and light” questions:

- How much energy (enthusiasm, passion) does it release in individuals and teams?
- How much light does the vision cast in clarifying the organisation’s direction?

Even a casual review of many vision statements will reveal that most fall flat in answering these questions and for a number of reasons. First, the authors simply don’t understand what vision is. As a result, the vision statement often appears as a restatement, merely in different words, of the organisation’s mission. Mission answers the purpose question: *‘Why does the organisation exist?’* Vision answers the direction or destination question: *‘Where is the organisation headed?’* Confusing the two only continues to add to the muddle surrounding which is which.

Second, far too many vision statements are verbal abstractions devoid of compelling images. One reads the vision statement, but conjures up no concrete visual images (in reading some organisational vision statements, I have the distinct impression they were sculpting fog!). Recalling that vision is a “see” word just as “calling” is a “hear” word, vision statements often fail because we can’t see where it is the organisation is headed. (If some readers think I’m picking semantic nits here, just imagine the futility of a “calling” that can’t be heard. What’s the payoff in yelling louder at people who are deaf?)

Third, many vision statements strive for misguided and ultimately inept brevity. The authors rightly value brevity but, too much brevity (pardon the oxymoron) is dead on arrival. Capturing the distilled essence of a vision in a tagline is one thing, but the simple truth is that more than one-line vision statements, most organisations would do well to at least have a vision document (and ideally multi-media presentations adding the power of sound) - that add compelling photos to help the reader see and thus grasp and digest the emotional power of the vision. If the real purpose of the vision is to inspire involvement and investment, what’s gained by being so brief that it motivates no one?

Concluding thoughts

“In truth, the ideas and images in men’s minds are the invisible powers that govern them.”

– John Locke

If vision is, as I believe someone has rightly said, “the force that invents the future,” how can you quickly gauge the clarity and vitality of your vision?

Here's a short checklist:

- Does your vision statement reflect true vision for the future, or is it just the inert residue of a largely ritualistic portion of a strategic planning retreat done years ago?
- What is the length of your vision statement? As mentioned above, a tagline summary is fine, but if that's the extent of your vision, it's time to head back to the drawing board (and before that, time to dive deeper into the collective yearnings and aspirations of your organisation's leadership and staff).
- Does your vision statement contain compelling metaphors or visual images, or is it laden with abstract propositions? Great communicators have almost always mastered the art of the metaphor, and they speak in terms of "the bread of life" and "fruit of the vine," not in terms of carbohydrates and fructose.
- Have you added visuals – especially photographs – to your statement of vision? Remember, vision is a see word. Better yet, do you have a compelling multimedia presentation of your vision?
- Does your vision have real life inside your organisation? Does it surface continually in your organisation's internal dialogue? Does it shape what board, leaders and staff constantly think about? Pray about? Invest in?
- Can everyone in the organisation do a "car park" or "lift" talk on vision? That is, between the time you leave the building and get to the car park, or between the first and fourth floors on a lift, can you share your vision in your own words in a persuasive and engaging way? Trust me, that won't entail pulling a vision card from your wallet, or unemotionally parroting some statement rich in strategic abstraction but poor in heartfelt passion.

If you can answer yes to each of these questions you're in a very small – and potentially powerful minority. You do indeed "get" the vision thing.

For help in discerning or revitalizing your organisation's vision, or for assistance in strategic planning and other aspects of organisational development, contact Larry at: larry_johnston@mconkey-johnston.com