

Paint a Picture of Possibility

BY MICHAEL BRENNER

Developing a meaningful organizational vision can be done in five steps.

CHECKLIST

Creating a Compelling Organizational Vision

- They should be crafted with care.
- Great visions point to a superior future.
- Think bold and confident; dream big.
- Tap the power of arts-based learning through illustration.
- Ensure that multiple voices are considered, not just those of senior leaders.
- Integrate the vision into your organization's DNA through every available communication channel.
- Check the temperature of your own culture. Would it benefit from the creation of a compelling vision?

As a professional jazz musician, I've always been intrigued by the notion of artistic vision. Miles Davis had a vision—a clear, resolute conception—of how he wanted his music to sound at each stage of his mercurial career. John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" was described as "an unusually complete vision of one man's spirituality expressed through his art" by music historian and author Ashley Kahn. Indeed, developing a unique artistic vision is one of the most challenging aspects of learning to play jazz. Just as an artistic vision is critical to jazz musicians, having an organizational vision is critical to business leaders.

What it is

A vision defines an optimal future state toward which the organization strives. It serves as the organization's North Star, whose steadfast guidance focuses and unites people in the drive to achieve ambitious goals. The best organizational visions are aspirational yet succinct; they paint a compelling picture of a desirable destination, one that influences every interaction and inspires people to endeavor for something greater every day.

As author Max DePree writes, "Management has a lot to do with answers. Leadership is a function of questions. And the first question for a leader always is: 'Who do we intend to be?' Not 'What are we going to do?' but 'Who do we intend to be?'"

Why it works

Organizational visions tap into our innate need to aspire, to seek something greater than what we have today. The word "aspire" has roots in Old French (*aspirer*) or classical Latin (*aspirare*) meaning "to breathe." In a very real sense, then, pursuing a vision—striving to achieve a goal or dream—is an energizing life force. When an organizational vision is magnified through the collective actions of an aligned workforce, the results can be astounding.

You often can get a sense of a company's vision after spending a short amount of time there. Last summer I conducted a workshop at Maliban, one of Sri Lanka's largest biscuit manufacturers. As I waited in the lobby, I couldn't help but notice the energy in the place. Employees greeted me with a friendly "Good morning" as they passed. TV screens played Maliban commercials filled with colorful images and catchy songs. Awards and trophies lined numerous glass cases. I wasn't surprised to later learn that Maliban's vision is "To be the most successful and respected food company in Sri Lanka." I'm not suggesting the company's vision was solely responsible for the energy and enthusiasm I observed, but I'm confident it played a critical role.

Guidelines

Here are five recommendations to help business leaders develop a vision that will energize and inspire their organization.

Think future. Don't confuse mission and vision. A mission defines what an organization does today, how it does it, and who it does it for. A vision is future-focused. It typically contains aspirational language and defines an as-yet-unrealized ideal state. Some examples of great visions include:

- Cleveland Clinic: "To be the world's leader in patient experience, clinical outcomes, research and education."
- Hilton Worldwide: "To fill the earth with the light and warmth of hospitality."
- Best Friends Animal Society: "A better world through kindness to animals."
- Southwest Airlines: "To become the World's Most Loved, Most Flown, and Most Profitable Airline."

Think big. The hit song "Dreamer" by British band Supertramp asks: "Can you do something out of this world?" That question is at the heart of every great vision. The Cleveland Clinic's vision is to be the world's leader; not Cleveland's leader or even America's leader.

Amazon's vision is "To be earth's most customer-centric company; to build a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy online." There's nothing meek or mild about these visions. They're bold and confident, even audacious. Yours should be too.

Think visual. In a previous Learning Blueprint column, from the November 2014 issue of TD, I discussed the benefits of arts-based learning. Developing a vision is the perfect opportunity to use this methodology. Rather than start with words, start with images.

The arts tap into our emotions in ways that defy rationality, often leading to startling "ah-ha" moments. The power of illustration, in particular to elicit creative insights and generate new connections, is remarkable. So, get a piece of paper and a box of crayons and start drawing.

Think collaboration. Creating a vision is viewed by some as the purview of senior leaders. It shouldn't be. When voices throughout the organization have an opportunity to contribute, the vision becomes more inclusive and reflective of the culture.

While senior leaders may ultimately refine the vision, the input of multiple perspectives galvanizes employees and pulls them forward like a great sports team on the verge of a championship.

Think communication. Rarely are visions adequately communicated throughout the organization. Consequently, they remain nebulous concepts that few employees devote much thought to. That is unfortunate.

It is every leader's responsibility, from the CEO to frontline supervisors, to integrate the vision into the organization's DNA through every available communication channel. And while cafeteria posters are nice, they're no substitute for ongoing dialogue that makes explicit the connection between people's work and the company vision. It's at that nexus where people's hearts are won or lost.

Results

In a 2014 Forbes.com article titled "8 Ways to Ensure Your Vision Is Valued," author Joseph Folkman cites his research that looked at the impact of having a meaningful vision on employee engagement. The study found that employees who saw their organization's vision as meaningful

RESOURCES

Brenner, M. 2014. "Incorporate Arts-Based Learning in Leadership Development." *TD*, 68 (1): 76-77.

Lasley, M. 2004. *Courageous Visions: How to Unleash Passionate Energy in Your Life and Your Organization*. Burlington, PA: Discover Press.

Lipton, M. 2003. *Guiding Growth: How Vision Keeps Companies on Course*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.

Spearmon, S. 2013. "Your Company Vision: If It's Complicated, It Shouldn't Be." *Forbes*, October 14. www.forbes.com/sites/johnkotter/2013/10/14/the-reason-most-company-vision-statements-arent-effective.

were significantly more engaged than those who didn't.

But you shouldn't need a research study to convince you of the power of a compelling organizational vision. Just look around your own organization. Is there a palpable sense of energy? Do people walk the corridors with a sense of purpose? Can you hear laughter emanating from meeting rooms? As Boston Philharmonic conductor Benjamin Zander asked, are people's eyes shining—or glazed over?

Depending on your answer, it may be worth recalling the words of legendary jazz vocalist Ella Fitzgerald: "It isn't where you came from; it's where you're going that counts." That's the power of possibility. That's the power of vision.

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