

The Leadership Seven

Focal Capability: Vision

"You are not here merely to make a living. You are here in order to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world, and you impoverish yourself if you forget the errand." --*Woodrow Wilson*

Leaders cast vision—an idea that almost feels cliché for all the rhetoric related to the importance of vision to successful leadership. While many would agree that “vision” is vital to extraordinary leadership, it’s development and communication remain to most a mysterious and daunting responsibility. We know it matters, yet the process of developing and communicating a vision remains elusive to many.

A leader always looks forward, guided by a clear picture of a future they are working to create. A well-crafted and communicated vision provides clarity of purpose and provides direction. Let’s explore the essential elements and benefits of a compelling vision.

The Anatomy of a Vision

Often, we perceive vision as a succinct sentence designed to fit neatly on the letterhead or above the reception desk. However, for a well-led team or organization, it is the product of an on-going conversation among team members related to three critical elements—the purpose of the organization, the current state of the organization, and how the journey from the current state to the vision state aligns to the interests and ambitions of the stakeholder. In the following section, we examine the role of each of these elements in creating a vision that motivates and directs.

Visions begins with “WHY?”

“Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.”—Viktor Frankl

Every organization exists to serve some foundational purpose or reason for being. Generally, it is a problem that must be resolved or a need that must be met. A vision describes the organization’s aspiration to fully solve that problem or meet that need. It creates a picture of the future the organization is working to create—in short, a vision articulates the “why” of an organization’s existence, creating a picture of the future it aims to realize.

Leadership, at its core is directional; it exists not for its own sake, but rather to stimulate progress and advancement toward a desired future. When a vision describes the fulfillment, the “why,” or purpose of any effort, it gives form and direction to its leadership and is the basis for the imagined future described in the vision. For a bank, the “why” may be ensuring customer security or the creation of opportunity; a health system might focus on community wellness; a student group might prioritize connecting people, learning, and creating opportunity for its members. For the E.C.U. College of Business, it is creating

leaders and change-makers who contribute to creating, advancing, and driving innovation in our communities, state, and global communities.

“A change in perspective is worth 80 I.Q. points”—Alan Kay

The “Why” provides perspective. In his seminal work “Man’s Search for Meaning,” Dr. Viktor Frankl concludes that “people can live with any what, if there is a sufficient why.” Said another way, when the purpose or goal of any endeavor is sufficiently worthwhile, people will sacrifice and find the necessary strength and means to make it a reality. A vision leverages the truth of Dr. Frankl’s observation by providing a worthwhile destination and meaning to the journey.

Consider two stone masons found methodically and patiently passing their days shaping rough stones into squares. When the first was asked what he was doing, he simply responded, “My job is to convert these rough stones into perfect squares.” When asked the same question, the second responded, “I am providing perfectly honed stones that will be used to build a magnificent cathedral that will endure for millennia.” Two people performing the same task. Two vastly different perspectives. While the first may take some satisfaction in the repeated creation of perfect squares, the second is surely tapping a deeper well of purpose and motivation by leading with the “why” of the effort.

John Scully, CEO of Pepsi during the period it grew to become world’s largest brand, was recruited by Steve Jobs to a fledgling Apple Computer with a simple question— “do you want continue to make sugar water or come with me and change the world?” Steve Jobs knew intuitively the disruptive potential of Apple and leveraged this potential future to not just recruit and retain the best talent but generate a consumer loyalty that is the envy of every consumer brand company.

Focusing on the ‘Why’ centers attention on the end goal rather than just the means. Regular reminders of vision remind all involved that the organization’s first loyalty is to the future it is trying to create, not a particular process, approach, product, or service. In fact, by definition, a vision implicates the present state. The vision becomes a benchmark, suggesting that any new idea promising to align better with the organization’s purpose deserves consideration. The prioritization of the ends we are trying to create, rather than the means (products/features/services), protects a team or organization from the surest path to obsolescence-- falling in love with today’s approach.

Two organizations in the same industry and serving the same customer are in a race to better meet the needs of their customers. Simon Sinek points out that most organizations are so focused and in love with the “how and what” (specific processes, products, or services), that the “why” of their existence is lost. The inevitable outcome of this misplaced priority is team/organizational obsolescence as sooner or later another team/organization will discover new and better answers to fulfilling the “why”.

A vision provides the leverage and mandate to challenge and improve current approaches. It also liberates people creatively and allows them to explore new and different answers to how we most impactfully progress towards the vision. In a vision led team or organization, the future is not simply the past plus 3-4%-- more is possible and the answers to the question of “how’ we get there is always open to challenge.

Visions induce healthy tension.

Leadership focuses on catalyzing change—moving from the current reality to a hoped-for future. To do so, it is necessary to challenge the status quo, and that is never easy. We all know change isn't easy, but it is essential for growth, innovation, progress, and true leadership. Motivating others to embrace the new or unknown means creating a healthy tension in others between the reality of the current state, and the promise of a better way.

While a vision describes what could or should be, without the clear articulation of the problem or gap a team or organization is trying to solve, the team's position relative to the vision is unknown and tension is absent. For example, if your student group is working to eliminate food insecurity for adolescents, you should understand in clear terms the size and scope of the problem. Understanding that 9,300 children (actual number) in Pitt County face food insecurity every day adds a critical tension and urgency that the vision alone cannot generate. If our vision is to "eliminate food insecurity in Pitt County adolescents," this number anchors the team in their reality and provides a clear measure of progress in their journey towards vision attainment.

Consider Sheetz, an innovative convenience food chain. Despite having a commendable vision for providing the friendliest, cleanest, and most convenient shopping experience in the world. However, the organization soon discovered that the vision alone was insufficient. It was not until they began to ask and answer the questions of how friendly, how clean, and how convenient they were that progress towards the vision was possible. When they asked the customers these questions, their customers were clear—at the time, the answer was "not very." What they learned left the organization in tension. There was a sizable gap between their hoped-for vision and their current reality. A fundamental tenet of human behavior is that we move in the reduction of tension. Because a vision remained fixed and the only relief from this tension could be found in improving their reality, which they now work on relentlessly.

Creating urgency and overcoming complacency means that painting a hopeful future isn't enough. This picture of the future must be held in contrast to the hard truths of the current situation. Here again, we see the importance of courage to leadership—the courage to **tell** the truth about the current state is an inescapable responsibility of leadership and the catalyst for inducing healthy tension in people, teams, and organizations.

Visions are about others

"The greatest leaders mobilize others by coalescing people around a shared vision." --Ken Blanchard

Dr. Frankl emphasized the lasting and healthy purpose must be "other-centric," meaning it focuses in benefiting others rather than oneself. Building on this idea, Simon Sinek, author of "*Start with Why*" and a familiar name to anyone with an interest in leadership and access Google or YouTube, builds on this idea and asserts that a distinguishing characteristic of a worthwhile vision is it is foundationally 'other' centric in its orientation. Aspiring leaders should reflect on all stakeholders impacted by the organization and ask how their interests are served by the journey.

Similarly, Kouzes and Posner, in their work "*The Leadership Challenge*", include "casting a shared vision" as one of the five elemental behaviors discovered in their research to be common to incidents of exemplary leadership. Noteworthy is their emphasis on the importance of the "sharedness" of a vision. This sharedness is maximized when the interests and aspirations of key stakeholders are met through the

vision's achievement. Rarely do leaders beckon others towards the path of least resistance as this is most often the status quo. Instead, they are charting paths where resistance is inevitable. Aligned interests act as a force multiplier by personalizing the pursuit and adding weight to the “why” which we know is critical to navigating the inevitable sacrifice associated with the journey to vision accomplishment.

In sum, leaders should think deeply about all stakeholders—the customers, investors, community, employees/volunteers/members, to name just a few possibilities, and work to understand and align their interests to the achievement of the vision.

Where to begin

We conclude with a discussion of steps you can take to develop your own vision casting capability. The discussion of the anatomy of a vision above provides a framework for all of us in building a vision. Before we begin, acknowledging the parallels between visions and goals is helpful and can help simplify your thinking as your experiment with vision-casting.

The overwhelming consensus in research is that setting clear, specific goals boosts performance for individuals and organizations alike. A review of the scholarly literature on performance would suggest that if you do nothing else as a leader, set goals for yourself, your team, and your organizations. We also know that the more specific these goals are—i.e., the clearer and more focused they are, the more powerful the impact on performance. Further, we know that when goals are measurable, they provide a clear contrast to the current state and allow for the celebration of progress and milestones.

Think of the vision as the organization’s macro goal, while individual and the team-level goals can be viewed as mini visions. Think of vision as an organization’s overarching goal and individual or team goals as sub-visions. Essentially, setting goals equates to vision-casting.

Developing a personal vision

Everyone should have a vision for themselves that describes the person they are working to become. This personal vision should include a clear and detailed picture of your future self-- spiritually, physically, vocationally, financially, recreationally, and relationally. A useful (and a bit morbid) way to begin the development of this personal version is by asking what you might hope to hear during your eulogy. What would you hope to hear if you were present? How would they describe your contributions to your family, your community, your organizations, and others? The answer provides the picture of your future self you are working to become and is the beginning of a personal vision.

Still missing, however, is the all-important tension with the current state. Therefore, the next step is to set the contrast with the present reality. Relative to all the adjectives, contributions, and accomplishments used to describe the idealized “future you”, where do you currently stand? If you are described as generous, how generous are you currently? If you are described as a developer of people, who are you developing currently? Answering these questions honestly is difficult for even the more self-aware individuals. You should seek out candid (and sometime difficult) feedback related to your current state. Doing so will provide the necessary tension so critical to informing your next steps and creating a lifetime of steady progress towards the you that you hope to become.

Developing a vision for a team or organization

Every vision paints a future where a specific problem is addressed, or a need is met. Therefore, any problem of consequence represents an opportunity to cast vision. Few get to cast visions that transform industries or change our daily lives, but we can all leverage the power of a clear vision. Every leader, regardless of the scale of their team, has a responsibility to shape their collective vision. When embedded in a larger organization, they must ask themselves and their team the question: if the organization is to achieve its vision, what part does my team play in making it a reality? If you consider a vision as a portrait of the future, what portion of this portrait must we paint for it to be fully realized? Aligning the objectives of individuals, teams, and larger organizations acts as a catalyst, propelling everyone toward achieving the main vision. However, it means every leader in the organization is helping their team create a picture of the desired future. When these mini visions all point in the same direction, amazing things happen.

Here is a simple three step process any leader can undertake to create a vision:

1. Clear statement of the problem.

- The problem should be present in stark and unvarnished terms.
- What is the available evidence of the problem—ultimately, you are endeavoring to awaken people from their complacency. In effect, you are sounding an alarm.
- What are the stories that describe the problem? Where is the need clear?

2. Clear picture of the future we are working to create.

- What is our “why”, our purpose, our reason for being?
- What if we do something about the problem? What could the future look like if we are successful beyond its wildest dreams?
- Useful group exercise to get a team thinking and the future they might create together: If the team/organization was featured on the front page of a magazine or newspaper in five years for its amazing accomplishments, what would the headline say? What would be happening in the accompanying pictures? Why does this matter? What is this future worth creating?

3. What is in it for the key stakeholders.

- Recall the vision needs to pass the “others” test—that is, does it consider the interests of all stakeholders of the team or organization?
- How are people benefiting in the imagined future? How are their lives healthier, fuller, or easier? How are their gifts celebrated?
- What interests are served through the journey from current state to future state? What about this future inspires and motivates you? Others?

The answer to these questions is input to the vision. Over time, leaders and organizational members will find simpler and more direct ways of saying things. Rally cries can emerge from these contemplations.

It is your Move...

Becoming skilled in leveraging vision requires a forward focus. It also requires deep thought about the “whys” of teams and organizations, and the imagination to develop a picture of a future worth creating. You can build this skill by giving it proper attention.

Start with Why? Why does the organization exist? What purpose does it serve? What problem does it solve? How does this organization enrich, or simplify life?

- **Find the “whys” that matter most to you.** Ask yourself what purposes matter most to you? Helping others, curing a particular disease that has impacted your family, leveraging technology, etc. Pursue a “why” that matters to you. Ignite your passion!
- **Seek feedback.** Feedback is an invaluable input to creating an accurate picture of reality. Who are your trusted sources of feedback? If the answer is not immediate, get to work finding trusted others to provide this all-important feedback.
- **Practice vision-casting.** Think of it as “leading out loud”. For the organization to which you belong, consider the future it is trying to create (its why) and the current reality. How can you express and highlight this **tension**? If you had five minutes to wake the organization from its complacency, how would you express this tension?
- **Be a fan of the future.** Stay abreast of future trends, including technologies, and the possibilities they unlock in terms of the fulfillment of the purpose of the organization. For example, think deeply about the implications of Artificial Intelligence on your life and your organizations. How does it equip you to better serve your purpose?
- **Find the thought leaders.** What are the leaders in any field or endeavor doing? Where are they headed? Where is the frontier in your field of study?
- **I have a dream.** Listen to Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech (link: [MLK- I have a dream](#)), widely considered one of history’s great rhetorical achievements. Note as you listen that Dr. King describes both the desired future in clear and vivid terms but sets this picture in stark contrast to reality of the situation at the time (e.g., Stone Mountain, GA and the then Governor of Alabama refusal to comply with federal desegregation orders). The contrast these realities provide creates a tension in people that endures.

Suggested Readings:

Coleman, J., & Hedges, K. (2019, August 14). *Are you pursuing your vision of career success - or someone else's?* Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2019/08/are-you-pursuing-your-vision-of-career-success-or-someone-elses>

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Verganti, R. (2014, July 23). *Having ideas versus having a vision*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2010/03/having-ideas-versus-having-a-vision>