

VISIONING

by Robert Leaver
New Commons

The dreams were eloquent, but they were also beautiful. That aspect seems to have escaped Freud in his theory of dreams. Dreaming is not merely an act of communication (or coded communication if you like); it is also an aesthetic activity, a game of the imagination a game that has value in itself. Our dreams prove that to imagine -- to dream about things that have not happened -- is among mankind's deepest needs.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being

-- Milan Kundera

Vision Defined

Vision, as defined by Webster, "is the act or power of seeing with the eye, sense of sight; something seen other than by normal sight; something perceived in a dream, trance or supernaturally revealed, as to a prophet."

With a vision, a future is imagined so that one can be created. Vision is achievable and not timeless like purpose. Thus, vision is both imaginative and concrete. Without vision, an organization or community repeats the past or is too embroiled in the present. If we hold constant in our minds a vision of the future and strive to achieve it, the chance of it coming to pass is greater than if we have imagined nothing.

Vision Fixes Something or Creates a Fresh Future

A vision can either describe one of two different worldviews or integrate both. Some leaders believe, "if it is working right, don't fix it." For these people, a vision describes more perfectly what is presently happening or has happened before. Their boundaries are historical. Such people adapt to change when what is suggested helps them to keep things working right or fill in the missing pieces to fix it.

For other leaders, a vision is something fresh and exciting that has not existed before. They require bold visions and do not care what or who they change to get to their desired place in the future. These persons hold the position that creative destruction of what is in place may have to occur before the something new comes into being.

Vision as an Achievable Step Toward Purpose

Vision is a step toward making tangible the organization's or communities' purpose. Purpose is the ultimate timeless result, which may take one or many lifetimes to achieve: It is the guiding North star. Vision is a focal point, the next evolutionary level between present reality and purpose. An organization or community may have many sequential visions as it strives to make concrete an often intangible purpose. Vision communicates

purpose to stakeholders, customers, employees, and the community. Vision (and purpose) provides focus for the action to be taken.

Vision as a Heartfelt, Future Story

Vision has to be felt and expressed from the heart. Staff, clients or customers and community stakeholders feel its power and are inspired by its intentions. A vision conserves important aspects of the past and, where essential, describes what is to be invented. There are images and symbols in a vision. You see a picture. A vision tells a story and unfolds a plot with characters and events.

A vision is a dream that asks to be real. Vision is beyond self; it is for the sake of others. It begs to be let into the hearts and minds of others. Vision requires something of us, but for a while one does not quite know what to do with it. It feels like an obsession coming deep from within. Birthing a vision can be truly painful at times. Vision emanates from what one loves and wants to see happen. A vision may be "seen" first by one person but eventually the forces at play and the philosophy of the organization shape it, so it becomes shared. As the vision unfolds, all must feel part of and experience different facets of the vision. There has to be enough differences in the vision for all stakeholders to own their piece of it.

In the early stages of evolution the vision should be contained tightly as if one was cooking a good stew. You want all of the juices to work into a nice broth so the chunks of the vision are drawn together. Cooking a vision gives it the strength to carry it to others. The foundation is built for passing it on. In the early stages you have to "leave room" for others to influence and shape it.

Movement of Client/Customer and Community is Central

A vision describes the qualities of how the customer or the community moves and evolves. For example, in serving the common good, caring for the community is the primary intention. In a nonprofit this might mean the movement of clients along a service continuum. In business this might mean increasing the level of market share, service quality and overall wealth creation -- wealth being the well being of people and the community.

A well-crafted vision inspires customers to buy from you or clients to be served by you. Staff-persons find genuine inspiration in the vision, so much so that performance is improved. Constituents feel like engaged citizens when the vision is present.

A Vision Makes the Organization or Community Distinct

A vision describes intended distinctness in and mastery of what you want to create. Vision is a choice from several possible futures. There is a clear organizing pattern in the vision drawn from an analysis of the forces at play, customer needs, wants and requested benefits. The overall position vis-à-vis competitors (cities or businesses) is stated without declaring war on them. When we choose a vision, we say "no" to some options and let go of some opportunities to concentrate resources to build capacity and capabilities to achieve the vision.

Content of the Vision

1. Describe the effects on future generations e.g., when the Iroquois nation made a community decision they used the criteria of what impact it would have on seven generations in the future.
2. What do you want to put in place?
 - What is spoken from the heart, what fire is in your belly? How will the heart be aroused?
 - What is to be conserved from the past/what has to be invented?
 - What images or big ideas pull it into the future?
 - What is the next story? (Give it some plot and characters!)
 - What results will it forecast?
3. What is distinct and masterful about the vision?
4. Describe the vital signs for a healthy (local) community and the role the vision will play in achieving this health.

Some Criteria for Expressing a Vision

1. Does it draw from a mix of the founding and emerging stories?
2. Is it movement toward purpose?
3. Does it express true convictions as represented by the core value and unifying principles of the organization or community?
4. Does it demonstrate customer movement or the evolution of a caring community?
5. Does it make us distinct and demonstrate mastery in the marketplace in the eyes of stakeholder customers/clients -- both what we are and what we are not?
6. Will it inspire confidence in our customers, staff, and constituents?
7. Does it include the right measure of risk?
8. Is accountability for our actions demonstrated?
9. Is it clear and concise, but inspiring? Dynamic and evolving, not static?

Communicating the Vision

The message and vehicles for carrying the vision to others has to be designed. Who hears the vision and in what order should be listed. Time it well so that the unfolding builds momentum. The unfolding is best done in concentric circles moving from the inside out. If you are a CEO, start with your closest confidants and then move it down the line and up to the board. Vision is a continuous story to be told. Communicate the vision orally in person as much as possible in small groups and preferably one-on-one—make it story telling. And communicate the vision in writing, and distribute it to the stakeholder groups. Once it is launched, spread it – make it contagious – "talk it up" every day. Leaders are the storytellers and champions of the vision.

A vision may have to be adjusted when environmental or market forces challenge its premises. Although, when the vision is powerful enough, a person or an organization can manipulate the environment to rally stakeholder support, resources and market share. A community or an organization can get what it wants.

A Vision Check: Is it Grounded Enough?

Some questions to keep asking as you step into making the vision happen:

1. What are the best stories, both founding and emerging?
2. What in this vision distinguishes you from your competitors?
3. What is current reality – key points?
4. What forces at play – the opportunities, trends to maximize – will be “worked” to accelerate the vision’s momentum?
5. Where does symmetry between stakeholders exist? With which stakeholders does a mutually rewarding relationship exist? Which stakeholders are intentionally left out? What are the ramifications of leaving them out?
6. What will you sacrifice by acting on this vision? Say no to? Give up?
7. Where is the risk – describe in detail.
8. Where do you face hurdles and roadblocks? What are they?
9. As a leader, what deep personal fears arise when you consider moving into the reality of achieving this dream?

Vision Matters

Vision manifests itself, when, for example, the fifty-four year old business woman fulfills a life-long dream and joins the Peace Corps. Or in the Chicago taxi driver, who drives his sparkling clean cab, playing classical music and opening the door for you. Such men and women are living their dreams. People or communities who betray their dreams become ghosts.

There is an artist in each of us. And our artistic energy calls for an expression, a manifestation—a form. Art is the substance of vision. Vision or art by itself will fail unless it is grounded with tangible, intended results. Where will you begin?

