



Today's Leadership Challenge: The Leader as a Source of Vision

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In today's environment, now is not the time for short-sighted actions or short-term fixes. When analyzing today's leadership challenges, we focus on helping leaders demonstrate their leadership and more effectively guide their institutions through critical change. In this "Today's Leadership Challenge" article, we spotlight the leader as a source of vision.

"Yesterday's idea of the boss, who became the boss because he or she knew more than the person working for them, is yesterday's manager. Tomorrow's person leads through a vision, a shared set of values, a shared objective."

Jack Welch

Leaders as a Source of Vision

Leaders must understand the power of ideas and the power of painting a picture of a desirable future. They should deal in symbols, and they must be good at communicating these key symbols.

In this article, we will explore the critical role vision plays in leadership, as well as some rules for formulating this vision into a simple, clear, yet powerful way. We will also discuss some important rules for communicating this vision effectively.

The Importance of a Vision in Organization Change

John Kotter, author and leadership expert at Harvard, states that the role of the leader is to define what the future looks like, align people with that vision, and inspire them to make it happen despite obstacles.

People in an organization need a picture of a desirable future that inspires and makes them want to be a part of a change effort. Just as importantly, they need to see the reason why they are called upon to perform tasks and make decisions, and how those actions and decisions fit into the overall picture of the future. Otherwise, motivation levels can be low as people in the organization move through their workday performing lists of tasks that are meaningless at best, and confusing and incompatible with the organization at worst.

Vision on Projects

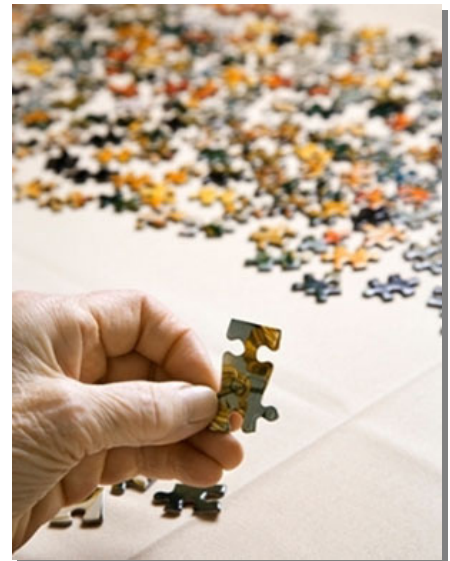
Vision is important, not just for leading an organization through change, but also for implementing successful projects. Having a vision of success for your project can make the difference between a lackluster project implementation – one full of resistance, obstacles and problems — and a highly successful project characterized by high levels of motivation from all team members and better results.

For example, a project leader from one of our higher education ERP implementations used a strong vision to encourage a successful project implementation and to create motivation around a higher purpose. His project objective was typical: to implement the selected software modules no later than (as specific date) at a cost not to exceed the proposed project budget. His vision, however, was inspiring: Carry out the best software implementation ever, and in doing so create teamwork, leadership, and pride in the institution.

Trying to lead a team or organization without a vision is as difficult as trying to piece together a 1000-piece puzzle without looking at the box cover. Both are nearly impossible. With a clear vision in place, leaders can focus employees, improve perceptions of the organization, and keep everyone moving toward the same goal.

Perhaps even more importantly, a vision can be the source of tremendous motivation and effort. Whether that vision is “to put a man on the moon in the next decade” or simply “to be recognized as the best IT help desk in higher education,” a clearly stated idea or picture can unleash people’s potential and energy.

Finally, the right vision can differentiate your organization and improve your likelihood of success, even in today’s challenging economy.



I first saw the importance of vision in business when doing consulting work with UDS Motorola in the early 90s. At that time, cell phones were virtually unknown. Mobility was being defined as being able to speak to another in a car. During this time when AT&T was betting its future on car phones, Motorola’s CEO Bob Galvin’s vision was that people didn’t want to talk to cars, they wanted to talk to other people, no matter where they were located. What a difference in these two visions, and as they say, the rest is history!

Communicating the Vision

In leadership workshops I usually ask the following question: How many of you have a picture of where you’d like your organization to be? A number of hands always go up, although many confess they are so caught up in managing the day-to-day and solving current problems that they haven’t given this much thought. I then ask those who raised their hands: How many of you have a clear picture and have put it in writing? Fewer hands stay up. Finally, I ask: How many of you are spending time on a regular basis communicating your vision throughout your organization? Very few hands are still up, and sometimes there are none.

The point of the last question is, of course, that even if you have a clear vision, you have to communicate it to your organization and persuade others to make it their own.

Effective communication of a vision doesn't happen by "coming down from the mountaintop" (otherwise known as an offsite strategic planning session) and announcing a new vision in a kick-off meeting. Nor is it a document that ends up on an organization's webpage, or a plaque on the wall. Instead, a vision should be a living message, one that is frequently and vividly communicated.

We find that effective communication of the vision has two key steps: **formulating the content of the message** and then **effectively communicating the message**.

Content: Rules for Formulating the Vision

The first step in formulating your vision involves putting the *picture* of a desirable future into words. This step is easier said than done; however, you can master the art of powerful messaging with a little help.



Start by simply writing your thoughts out in a brainstorm fashion. Capture your key ideas without worrying how they are stated or in what order they appear. Your questions could include:

- What do I want this organization to look like in 3-5 years?
- What competitive issues are driving us?
- What is the key idea/concept that will guide our actions and inspire our people?

A good example is the vision Tom Monahan built for Domino's Pizza. He shared one simple, yet compelling, idea of delivering a standard pizza in 30 minutes.

The best leadership vision is a shared vision. The vision could include elements of an innovative picture of the future, your desires for the organization, or the desires of those closest to the customer. A shared vision comes from listening to and soliciting input from the people in the organization. No matter the elements of the vision, the best leaders understand that their key task is inspiring a *shared* vision.

After a first cut at your vision message, share it with others. Pretend you only have the length of time of an elevator ride with this person to get their understanding and perhaps buy-in or motivation. Use their questions about your message to clarify and simplify your message.

Then focus on crafting the message in an effective, powerful way. Following are rules we have found to be very important during this step.

RULE ONE: FOCUS YOUR VISION

Typically, you should cover no more than three to five major concepts in your vision. Why? First of all, your vision needs *focus*. Today's environment is forcing organizations to limit the number of areas on which they can focus their efforts and resources.

Secondly, the statement needs to be one that people will *remember*. People can absorb, retain, and deliver no more than two or three key points. So the vision must be concise and straight to the point.

A format I like includes an overall theme, rallying cry, or tagline such as "We will be recognized as the best IT help desk in higher education." The theme is then accompanied by two or three areas of focus to help the organization reach the vision.

RULE TWO: KISS (KEEP IT SHORT AND SIMPLE)

The shorter and simpler a vision is, the easier it is to relate to, remember, and internalize. Most vision statements I have seen through my consulting can be cut edited and made easier to understand through the use of simpler language.

For example, compare these two statements:

- To develop a comprehensive human resource development system to realize the potential of our employees and accelerate the growth of talent in our organization.
- To realize our potential through personal and individual development.

The second statement is not only easier to remember, but is also much easier to interpret.

RULE THREE: USE VIVID LANGUAGE

People have an easier time rallying behind a vision that is vivid, descriptive, and exciting. These traits make the vision easier for employees to visualize or *see*. Try to create a slogan or a battle cry for each of your key concepts. For example, for a consumer products company supplying to retail stores, "Take back the shelves" is more vivid and expressive than "Try to increase our share of the market from 12% to 33% over the next three years."

RULE FOUR: CONVEY A HIGHER PURPOSE

Look for what gives meaning and purpose to the people carrying out the key tasks of your organization. People commit to causes, not plans. People become more committed when they see something much bigger than themselves and their individual work. People respond and perform at higher levels to serve something with a compelling purpose compared to the ordinary corporate-type goals and milestones.

For example, on a number of occasions I have appealed to "leaving a legacy" as motivation for extraordinary effort from an individual or group.

The vision we shared of the software implementation project manager in our previous example illustrates the power of appealing to a higher purpose.

Delivery: Rules for Communicating the Vision

Once the vision has been established, it must be communicated effectively to all stakeholders for maximum impact. As a leader, your job is to internalize this vision and communicate it in a way that inspires your team to work towards that vision.

Clearly communicating the vision helps people make better, more informed decisions and keeps their eyes on the bigger picture. Your team is also able to understand how they fit into the overall vision of the organization. When people understand the vision and their role in the big picture, your bottom-line business results will improve.



The most powerful and vivid way to get the message across is face-to-face communication where the leader talks from the heart, using his or her language and the language of the audience that is in front of them.

In fact, the primary task of a leader is to have powerful conversations during the course of a day that furthers needed agendas and builds ownership and commitment to actions. The best leaders I have worked with have learned to present their message in simple, powerful ways, painting pictures with vivid language, examples, and stories.

When I worked as a team leadership consultant with GE Appliance in the early 90s, I watched in fascination as Tom Tiller, recently promoted to Head of Manufacturing, used inspiring stories from his “growing up” years to share his vision of how the various manufacturing plants were to respond positively to the extreme challenges within the appliance industry.

Below are some basic rules to help you effectively communicate your vision with your team.

RULE ONE: USE MANY SOURCES

Employees must hear the vision from everyone: their peers, direct reports, immediate supervisors, department heads, as well as top leadership. The more sources the message comes from, the more trusted it becomes. Employees retain the message and are able to incorporate it in how they operate day-to-day.

Identify credible, trusted sources in the organization that can and will deliver the message. A critical turning point in a change effort I was involved with came when one of the union presidents endorsed the vision of the General Manager. He became very vocal and persuasive in painting the GM’s picture to members of his union.

RULE TWO: REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT

Do not think that reciting your vision at the beginning of the annual meeting is enough to keep it fresh in your employees' minds. The vision needs to be communicated as frequently as possible.

Take the advice from advertising people who make their living on messaging: a message has to be repeated at least seven times to be absorbed.

RULE THREE: REINFORCE THROUGH A WIDE VARIETY OF COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

I challenge my clients to explore all the possible channels for communicating their visions. Most clients are amazed at the many channels they have available and even the number they currently use. Following is just a partial list of the possible ways to communicate vision:

- Email
- Team or departmental meetings
- Planning meetings
- Newsletters – electronic and paper
- Internet or Intranet sites
- Town Hall type meetings
- Banners, tent cards in break rooms
- Electronic message boards in high trafficked areas
- Taglines on email signatures

I then challenge them to be creative and develop even more innovative ways to communicate their message. For example, one of my clients has their vision on the desktop for the more than 1000 computers in their home office. The vision includes their key focus areas and the latest metrics to illustrate how they are performing in those key areas.

After you have selected your communication methods, then develop a plan for using these channels to get your message to the organization. A communications plan matrix helps you plan for, track, and measure the effectiveness of your communications.

Put the Rules to Work for You

Use these rules as a starting point for developing your vision and communicating it to your organization. As a visionary leader, find creative ways for creating and sharing your vision.

Use our [Vision Worksheet Tool](#) as an aid in drafting a vision statement that will effectively focus and inspire efforts in your organization.

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