

The Power of Visioning in Strategic Planning

If you don't work to shape your future, someone else will.

A vision is a future state or condition that serves as a motivating force. It is an inspiration that compels people to action. It may appear as an abstract idea but when people begin to see that it can be achieved and exist, it becomes a powerful guiding principle.

Setting high level directions through visioning processes has emerged as a discipline in the last decade, fueled by increasing turbulence in the external environment. Industry shapers tend to do better than followers, especially when it's not clear what to follow. Being "visionary" is also a widely touted competency of leadership. Vision processes seek to create a compelling picture of desirable future states that often represent quantum changes from the past. They develop memorable imagery and stories about the nature and benefits of this future, and work backwards to understand the journey that could carry people to this vision.

There are plenty of critics of visioning as an isolated approach. It can generate impractical and ungrounded concepts. In highly dynamic industries, it may be better to work with multiple scenarios and potential future states rather than over-focus on one vision which, if wrong, could derail the organization. When visioning focuses on the generating short, exciting vision statements, it can result in banners and slogans so abstract they have little utility, especially if management doesn't truly "walk-the-talk".

On the other hand, robust visioning processes that engage people in thorough exploration of possibilities, using different media to portray possible futures, and engaging leadership directly in the process can be extraordinarily energizing for an organization. It can help an organization break out of overly constrained view of the future and is a powerful way of tying values to action.

Your vision communicates what your organization believes are the ideal conditions for your community—how things would look if the issue important to you were perfectly addressed. This utopian dream is generally articulated by one or more phrases or vision statements, which are brief proclamations that convey the community's dreams for the future. By developing a vision statement, your organization makes the beliefs and governing principles of your organization or project clear to the greater community (as well as to your own members).

Vision Characteristics

There are certain characteristics that most vision statements have in common. Professor John Kotter, in *Leading Change* (Harvard University Press, 1996), identifies key characteristics of an effective vision:

- Imaginable: conveys a picture of what the future will look like.

- Desirable: appeals to and inspires employees, customers, and others who are stakeholders. Should be broad enough to allow a diverse variety of local perspectives to be encompassed with them (the "Big Tent" approach).
- Feasible: comprises realistic, attainable goals.
- Focused: is clear enough to provide guidance in decision making.
- Flexible: is general enough to allow individual initiative and alternative responses in light of changing conditions.
- Communicable: is easy to understand and communicate; can be successfully explained in two minutes.

Vision Examples

In the late 1980s, Ford Motor Company had slipped way behind most of the major auto makers, especially the foreign car manufacturers. In 1990, Ford's management designed a transformation to work teams and developed a very simple vision mission statement—Quality is Job 1. This simple phrase packed a big message. Ford was moving its emphasis from meeting production line quotas to keeping its cars on the road longer (reducing mechanical problems after sale), a revolutionary change. Pride in quality workmanship was replacing speed and volume of production. The statement had the advantage of being easy to remember and understand. Anyone on the shop floor could tell you the new vision and what it meant. The same cannot be said today of many of our community policing vision statements. Ford's simple message also resonated with the public and Ford's position in the auto market improved dramatically.

Below are a few vision statements that have been used by community groups:

- Healthy children
- Safe streets, safe neighborhoods
- Every house a home
- Education for all
- Peace on earth

Sources: Citizen's Handbook and Community Toolbox

Developing a Vision

Vision development should be tailored to the group and its readiness for different kinds of work. It is very important at this stage to leave evaluation behind, and open your collective arms to the voices of the intuition and deep feelings. Visions are most powerful if they represent real

aspirations. They do not need to be worked out in every detail, but imagined powerfully and vividly. Productive approaches include:

- Conducting a vision retreat or search conference with a lateral slice (all divisions, departments, and units represented) of the organization
- Using the Cover Story visioning exercise: imagine being featured in a major magazine in the future—how will your organization or project be described.
- Using the Hot Air Balloon visioning exercise: imagine that you have come back to your neighborhood after 10 years have passed. You are floating over and what do you see.
- Exploring metaphors and stories that describe the future organization
- Creating a Vision Map that integrates information about vision elements, values, critical issues, and competencies

Visioning Exercises

Guided visioning exercises have become popular in many fields as a way of defining and achieving a desirable future. Recent studies have shown that we are more likely to reach an objective if we can see it, and can imagine the steps to reach it. Visioning has become a familiar technique in sports. High-jumpers, for instance, regularly take the time to imagine themselves going through the steps of jumping higher than they have ever jumped before. Hitters in baseball, while in the on-deck circle, imagine a vision of hitting a line drive. Citizens can use visioning to create images that can help to guide change in the city or solutions to problems.

In a typical visioning exercise a facilitator asks participants to close their eyes and imagine they are walking through their neighborhood as it should be 10-15 years into the future. What do they see? What do the buildings look like? Where do people gather? How do they make decisions? What are they eating? Where are they working? How are they traveling? What are the demographics like? What is happening on the street? Where is the center of the neighborhood? How does greenspace and water fit into the picture? What do they see when they walk around after dark?

People record their visions in written or pictorial form—in diagrams, sketches, models, photographic montages, and written briefs. Groups then share their visions in an attempt to reach some form of shared vision, a consensus on the vision.

References

The Livable Tucson Vision Program, www.ci.tucson.az.us/livable.html.

This program lays the groundwork for a new vision and the development of specific strategies and indicators that will guide the city's budget process in balancing the economic, social and environmental concerns of their communities and improving the quality of life.

Livable Communities Initiative, www.livablecommunities.gov (URL no longer available).

This initiative, developed by the Clinton-Gore administration, seeks to provide communities with the tools, information, and resources they can use to enhance their quality of life, ensure their economic competitiveness, and build a stronger sense of community. The website offers information, tools and resources, and links to federal agency initiatives.

Center for Livable Communities, www.lgc.org/center/index.html (URL no longer available).

The Center, a national initiative of the Local Government Commission, helps local governments and community leaders be proactive in their land use and transportation planning and adopt programs and policies that lead to more livable and resource-efficient land use patterns.

National Civic League. The Community Visioning and Strategic Handbook. (1996). This 53-page handbook explains the community visioning process, both the rationale behind it and how to do it. To obtain this resource contact the National Civic League, 1445 Market Street, Suite 300, Denver, CO 80202; Tel: 800.223.6004.

The Citizen's Handbook, www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook

Community Toolbox, http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/tools/EN/tools_toc.htm