Vision to Reality

How many of us were not moved the first time we heard Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech, or whilst watching Kennedy's Rice Stadium address about putting man on the moon. Both men were able to develop a theme containing powerful visual and emotional imagery. The themes were so tangible and relevant to their audiences, that in both cases they were able to inspire a Nation and indeed the World. By focusing the real activities of many people, they were able to create resonance across a wide group and leverage their respective visions to make them into reality.

The power of a well-developed vision has been thoroughly documented and many consulting models and processes have been developed over the years. In tandem with any vision, there is a tangible reality, and it is important to ensure that Vision and Reality remain aligned in order to retain coherence of action. In today's business environment vision is as important as it ever was and perhaps more so. The increase in tele and virtual team working has meant a blurring of conventional roles and in some cases the complete fragmentation of pre-existing teams. New structures and ways of working can result in decentralisation and a corresponding loss of alignment within the organisation.

People are extremely adaptive and reactive, and in rapidly changing environments, it is all too common to find that it is day-to-day events and not the original vision or strategy that are driving activity. Where the vision or business direction is not clear to those in the operation, the response to daily reality may overwhelm the plan and in some environments, vision and reality have become separated beyond the point of recognition. Because of its potential impact on business results, the Vision-Reality Gap is worth examining in some detail.

Some authors believe that vision is the single most important guiding force: "It's more important to know who you are than where you are going, for where you are going will change as the world around you changes. Leaders die, … markets change, but vision in a great company endures as a source of guidance and inspiration"[1]. Collins and Porras argue that for long-term success, it is more important for companies to be true to their vision than to pursue profitable opportunities that don't fit the vision.

A vision must be clear enough and broad enough to remain meaningful across an entire organisation, but most importantly it must be relevant to the business environment and the employees who are to live it.

In practice of course, the reality of life may bear little resemblance to any high and lofty visions expressed by "head office". The sort of vision that comes down from on high laminated into a glossy corporate pamphlet doesn't usually carry much weight with the worker at the bench. So what does a good vision look like, and how can we use vision to achieve coherent activity within our own organisations? In reviewing a Vision, three rules can be applied usefully:

Is it grounded in reality?

Vision must be a living thing, accessible and meaningful to everyone in the team. It must touch a chord at an emotional level, but it must appear reachable by those who are to participate in it. Ideally the vision will evolve from the thoughts and dreams of many people.

A good vision comprises three key components[1], Core Values, Core Purpose and Envisioned Future. Core Values and Purpose together make up Core Ideology. Core Values are the three or four guiding principles or values which do not change over time. Core purpose embodies the organisation's fundamental reason for being. Core Purpose can be anything from Nike's competitive "To experience the emotion of Competition, winning and crushing competitors" to 3M's creative;"To solve unsolved problems innovatively" to Merck's worthy; "To preserve and improve human life" or Disney's simple "To make people happy".

Envisioned Future is made up of a set of distant and audacious Goals together with a feeling of what it will be like to have achieved them. These Goals are capable of accelerating an entire organisation towards a future that might not exist until 10-30 years' time. In the 1950s, Sony's goal was to "become the company most known for changing the worldwide poor-quality image of Japanese products". Just as importantly the company expressed how that would feel. "Fifty years from now, our brand name will be as well-known as any in the world… and will signify innovation and quality".

Does it inspire people to be part of a bigger picture?

Perhaps it is lofty to aim to eradicate disease. However we know that it has been done and can be done. Above all, a good vision must allow for people to operate outside themselves; meaning that it must enable them to touch something as part of a team, something which they couldn't otherwise achieve on their own, to be one with something so large that they couldn't conceive it on their own.

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Buzz Aldrin, one of the first Apollo astronauts to walk on the moon, understood his part in the vision. 'This is reality… this is such a big thing, I frankly don't see how you can do it…We are all in this together as a team effort and we're going to make it work… I don't know how to do most of this mission, but I do know that my piece of it is going to work and it won't fail because of me.'

On the same project, a visitor to the Kennedy Space Centre asked a janitor what his job was. His reply, 'I'm putting a man on the moon.'

In both cases, these individuals were swept up in the vision and didn't need to question the overall programme to understand their own role in the strategy. The power of an overwhelmingly large objective in which everyone can play their part cannot be underestimated, but the goal has to be desirable and feel real to the individual.

Will it bring meaningful business results?

The key to the entire exercise is that unless the vision is capable of enhancing organisational performance, and enabling the achievement of business-oriented goals, it is not useful and may even be a distraction. A good vision should enable the organisation to develop significant competitive advantage. It must therefore be a strategic vision, grounded in the business environment that generates activity that takes advantage of opportunity and minimises threat.

An organisation is a complex society. It contains many individuals, common interest groups, and agendas, both common and otherwise. People go to work for many different reasons, not all of them immediately apparent. To harness the power of all or most individuals requires a vision that can touch enough of them in one sweep. For this reason, a goal such as "Achieve 58% market share by 2003" is not truly a vision. It may be audacious, but it must also be coupled with a sense of how it would feel to be in that position. (See insert)

Within the organisation, Vision must dovetail comfortably with strategic thinking, and for this reason some authors favour the term Strategic Intent[2]. This concept of strategy allows an organisation to establish a stable direction, which provides consistency to short-term action but retains the flexibility for re-interpretation as new opportunities emerge. A good example is Coca Cola's intent to "put a Coke within arm's reach of every consumer in the world". The concept of Strategic Intent allows the formulation of realistic medium-term Strategic Objectives that can be grounded in reality.

In practice, the objective is to close the Vision-Reality Gap that can develop in organisations by examining the Vision, the Reality and each stage of the organisational communication chain that lies between the two. An organisation that has aligned its Vision and Operational reality through its people has achieved a major step and can look forward to success and fulfilment.

Vision can be applied at many levels within an organisation from the corporate level described here, to the product level. The power of a tangible Envisioned Future for a product or therapy area is considerable in the hands of a skilled Marketer.

However your organisation measures Reality against Vision, it is worth giving some thought to the Vision-Reality Gap and the energy that can be unleashed by a timely inspiration expressed in a simple vision.

By Jonathan Dancer: This article was first published in 2003. For further information please contact Jonathan Dancer at redbow consulting group

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1. Collins and Porras, HBR September-October 1996.
2. Hamel and Prahalad, HBR May-June 1989