

Ignite Newsletter November 2007(b) Keeping a Vision Strong through All Levels of Your Organization

In most organizations, when executives create a vision for the entire company, they believe it provides clarity, focus and direction. And it is true that it does, at least for those at the top of the organization. Unfortunately, it gradually loses strength as it works its way to the front lines. In fact, research by The Gallup Organization indicates that senior executives are more than twice as likely to feel that an organization's mission and purpose inspire them to higher levels of performance as frontline workers.¹

That's a shame considering that customers are much more likely to come in contact with frontline employees than they are with senior executives in an organization's corporate headquarters.

Why the disconnect? Why might senior leaders resonate with an organizational vision while the rest of the company does not relate to it? There are many possible answers, but according to Dr. Jesse Stoner and Dr. Drea Zigarmi, a good place to start is by looking at one or more of the following factors: **how the vision is created, how it is communicated, and how it is lived or modeled in the organization.**²

Common Problems with Creating a Vision

While the ultimate responsibility for ensuring an organizational vision rests with the top management, the organization needs to put in place mechanisms to allow other people to have an opportunity to help shape the vision—to put their thumbprint on it. Otherwise, only the senior leaders who created the vision will truly be engaged by it.

Organizations that do not allow other people within the organization to have a hand in influencing their company's vision statement are missing out on an important opportunity to engage their people. When people have a voice in creating the vision, they develop a deeper understanding of what the vision is really about. It becomes more than just words on a piece of paper, and they see how they can make a contribution, giving purpose to their work. While many successful companies began as the result of the early vision of their leaders—Walt Disney, Bill Gates, and Herb Kelleher, for example—"these pioneers would not have been able to realize their dreams had they not shared those dreams with the people around them."³ Sharing dreams means helping people see how their own dreams can be incorporated into the vision articulated by the leader so that they want to sign up to bring the dream to reality.

In their recent book, *Leading at a Higher Level*—written together with some of their colleagues at The Ken Blanchard Companies—coauthors Ken Blanchard, Jesse Stoner, and Drea Zigarmi argue that the process of creating the vision is as important as what the vision says. Instead of simply taking the top management to a retreat to put the vision together and then announcing it to others, they recommend that senior leaders encourage dialogue about the vision by asking people these questions: **"Would you like to work for an organization that has this vision? Can you see where you fit in the vision? Does it help you set priorities? Does it provide guidelines for making decisions? Is it exciting and motivating? Have we left anything out? Should we delete anything?"** They explain that involving people will deepen their understanding and commitment and create a better vision.

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Common Problems with Communicating the Vision

Visioning is an ongoing process; you need to talk about it constantly to keep it alive. Too often leadership will introduce a new direction by sending out a letter, creating an announcement, and hosting an event to share the vision with the rest of the company. Then they move on to other things, believing that everyone is on the same page. This is a great way to start but it is not enough to create the kind of ongoing dialogue that needs to occur to bring a vision to life.

Max Depree, the legendary former chairman of Herman Miller and author of *Leadership Is an Art*, said that in his visionary role, he had to be like a third grade teacher. He had to keep on saying it over and over and over until people got it right, right, right! He understood that his role was to continually to remind people about the vision and to help them understand and remember its importance.

Common Problems with Living the Vision

Creating a vision—for your organization or department, for your work, and for your life—is a journey, not a one-time activity. In some organizations, a vision statement may be found framed on the wall, but it provides no guidance or, worse, has nothing to do with the reality of how things actually are. This turns people off. Ken Blanchard and Jesse Stoner explain in their book *Full Steam Ahead! Unleash the Power of Vision in Your Company and Your Life*, “It is important that all leaders in the company hold themselves and each other accountable for behaving consistently with the stated vision and values. As others see leadership living the vision, they will trust that leaders are serious and will be motivated to join.”

Blanchard and Stoner recommend two strategies that will support your efforts to live your organization’s vision:

- Always focus on your vision—Your vision should be the foundation for your organization. If an obstacle or unforeseen event throws you off course, you may have to change your short-term goals, but your vision should be long lasting. Change is bound to happen. Unforeseen events are bound to occur. When that happens, take stock of where you are, refocus on your vision, and reset your path.
- Show the courage of commitment—True commitment begins when you take action. There will be fears; feel them and move ahead. It takes courage to create a vision, and it takes courage to act on it. Get everyone

moving together, trusting each other in committing to the vision. In the words of Goethe, “Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”

To help your organization remain focused and committed to its vision, Blanchard and Stoner suggest that you periodically ask yourself these questions:

- Are our goals aligned with our vision?
- How are we progressing toward these goals?
- Has there been a major shift in our business environment that requires a shift in our focus?
- Are we on target, or do we need to readjust?

As Dr. Stoner points out, the launch of the first mission to the moon required thousands of mid-course corrections in addition to great up-front planning and aiming. If the engineers in charge of the project had just pointed and launched without making these corrections, the astronauts would have ended up in the middle of outer space instead of landing successfully on the moon. Setting a clear direction is important. Checking to make sure that you are still on course is just as critical.

A Compelling Vision is the Hallmark of a High Performing Organization

When everyone supports an organizational vision it creates a deliberate, highly focused culture that drives the desired business results. In these organizations, people are energized by, excited about, and dedicated to making the vision a reality. They can describe the vision, are deeply committed to it, and clearly see what their role is in supporting it. They have a noble sense of purpose that creates and focuses energy. The result is an organization where values are aligned and everyone is in the same boat together moving full steam ahead.

Endnotes:

1. Wagner, R. & Harter, J. (2006). 12: The Elements of Great Managing. Gallup Press, Washington, DC. p.118.
2. Stoner, J. & Zigarmi, D. (2003). From Vision to Reality. The Ken Blanchard Companies, San Diego p. 17.
3. Bruce, A. & Pepitone, J. (1999). Motivating Employees. McGraw-Hill, New York. p. 86.

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