

Professional Communication in Organizations: The Realism of Creating and Communicating a Compelling Vision

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“If you want to build a ship, then don't drum up men to gather wood, give orders, and divide the work. Rather, teach them to yearn for the far and endless sea.”
— **Antoine de Saint-Exupery**

ABSTRACT: *Identifying and communicating a clear vision is one of the most important functions a business leader can perform. All business leaders should understand the basic elements of visioning and how to communicate a clear vision. A strong and clear vision requires a recognition and understanding of core values that the business holds. Once the business manager identifies the core values of the business, he or she needs to effectively articulate and communicate the purpose and envisioned future of the business. This paper explores the definition of leadership and then goes on to discuss why creating and communicating a clear vision is one of the most important things a leader can do for his or her organization. Further, the leader's ability to identify and articulate core values is an essential part of visioning that helps produce successful organizational change.*

Creating a clear and effective vision delivers many benefits to the business. Not only does a clear, shared vision help define the values of the company and its employees; it also sets the tone for achieving successful organizational change. It is imperative that change is aligned with a clear vision and business strategy and that subsequent activities and interventions are coordinated and consistent (Palmer et al, 2006). For example, Henry Ford dreamed of a car for every family and Steven Jobs dreamed of a computer in every classroom. At the time, skeptics thought their dreams were impossible. In the face of adversity, their persistence changed the world. This paper explores the art of visioning in order to help business managers successfully lead their own organizations through change. The student will define leadership and how it impacts the creation and communication of vision. Lastly, the student will identify the core values of the business and look at approaches toward articulating and communicating vision in order to realize all the benefits that can be gained by creating a strong sense of vision for your organization.

What is Leadership?

According to Kotter (1988), leadership “is the process of creating a vision for others and having the power to translate it into a reality and sustain it”. Furthermore, effective leadership creates a common vision and leaders are those who do the right thing to accomplish their visions. Effective leaders place an emphasis on helping others do the things they know need to be done to achieve the common vision. Within the context of business, leaders hold the vision of the company and encourage teamwork among all employees and stakeholders in order to align them with that vision. Leaders seem to instill a sense of significance in the workforce by giving employees the power of their vision and values. Leaders also need to instill a sense of ownership in employees, allowing them to “keep score” of how the company is doing and by building confidence and recognizing good work. Lastly, great leaders have vision, honesty, passion, authenticity, great communication skills, and competencies. True leaders seek leadership because they want to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

What is Vision?

A vision is an idealized picture of the future organization and it expresses the organization's reason for existence. The vision of a business defines who and what the business is, why it exists, and where it is going in the grand scheme of things. A vision whether at the corporate or department level ignites group spirit, gives meaning to people’s work, mobilizes them to action, and helps them decide what and what not to do in the course of their work.

A vision is simply an aspiration or a description of a desirable world that exists within the imagination and an expression of the way things could be. That should not be confused with a mission, which is a team’s reason for being. For example, Mother Teresa’s vision was “to have the poor live happy, productive lives,” yet her mission was “to care for the poor and help them be better off.” The two are closely related but not interchangeable (Collins, 1996).

A great example of vision is expressed at the student’s employer, Sears – “Sears Holdings is committed to improving the lives of our customers by providing quality services, products and solutions that earn their trust and build lifetime relationships.” Sears supports its vision with a mission and core values. Furthermore, according to Senge (1994), an effective vision strikes a chord in people, motivates them by tapping their competitive drive, arouses desire for greatness or interest in doing the right thing, tantalizes them with personal gain, or appeals to their need to make a difference in the world. Visions grab people and then bring them into the fold. When a leader's vision is effective and strong, employees and stakeholders get caught up in what they are doing, absorb the vision, and commit themselves to the goals and the values of the leaders.

Purpose of Vision

The purpose of vision is to inspire: vision provides motivation through inspiration. An effective statement of vision provides an inspiring portrait of what it will look like and feel like to achieve the organization's mission and goals. It crystallizes an emotional connection between employees and the business. Critically, a formal statement of vision is not an end in itself. It is both the product of and a symbol of a process of generating shared understanding and shared commitment among employees (Watkins, 2008). Visioning is the first step in strategic planning. A vision shared by all the members of a business can help all members set goals to advance the organization. A vision can also motivate and empower employees. Visioning skills are used by leaders to pull people toward themselves and their ideas through the creation and communication of a vision. Without a strong vision, strategic plans cannot be properly delineated since there is no guiding principle or ideal to plan (Dolak, 2001).

Characteristics of a good vision

Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that only the leader of an organization holds the vision. In actuality visionaries are everywhere from the board room to the boiler room. A vision can be as focused as seeing all your

files in perfect order or as broad as Coca-Cola's vision that everyone in the world taste Coke. A good vision: identifies direction and purpose, builds loyalty through involvement, sets standards of excellence that reflect high ideals and a sense of integrity, is persuasive and credible, inspires enthusiasm and encourages commitment, and is well articulated and easily understood. It is also ambitious and calls for a shared commitment, challenges and inspires people to align their energies in a common direction, fits with the business' unique culture and values, results in efficiency and productivity and reflects the company's unique strengths (Dolak, 2001). How then does the successful leader create and communicate a vision? The following steps will help all business leaders identify and communicate their vision effectively so they can gain all the benefits listed above.

Creating and Communicating Vision

Most businesses are actually founded on a vision. Most leaders have a clear picture of what they see their group becoming or doing in the future. It is this vision that often defines the organization's reason for existing. Establishing a carefully planned and documented vision with direct reports defines goals for the group and creates a personal ownership for every individual. Including the staff in a collaborative process cultivates buy-in and general acceptance. While not all employees will enthusiastically support the end results, involving others gives far greater success than if you attempt to impose your will and force others to adopt a new guideline (Harris, 2008). Yet the more people involved in shaping the vision, the more help you can get to carry it through. Involvement leads to commitment and a willingness to help implement the plan. An effective vision can act as a catalyst for other people to expand their goals.

The vision for many businesses starts with a set of strong personal core values of the founder who then drives those values throughout the organization. The leaders then create mechanisms that bring those principles to life and translate them into action. Perhaps one of the finest illustrations of a vision that was wonderfully crafted and perfectly executed was the vision articulated by Lee Iacocca when he was chairman of Chrysler Corporation. Iacocca's vision was: "Quality, hard work, and commitment- The stuff America is made of. Our goal is to be the best. What else is there? If you can find a better car, buy it." In this simple to understand statement, Iacocca set out a clear vision for his business and provided an ideal all employees could strive to reach. He built loyalty, set a high standard of excellence, and gave his floundering organization a strong sense of purpose and direction. His vision was in great part responsible for the historic turnaround of the Chrysler Corporation (Iacocca, 1984).

Finally, in order to create a vision, business leaders provide a meaningful plan to succeed and define their purpose and core values in a way that is meaningful, easy to remember, and transparent --without any hidden agendas. A memorable, powerful, yet motivational guiding statement is most assuredly a wonderful thing for a leader to create and communicate for any business. So how should leaders go about creating and communicating a clear vision? The answer lies in understanding and identifying the business's core values, understanding the core purpose or envisioned future of the business, and clearly articulating and communicating the vision to the organization.

Core Values

Shaping a vision is more a matter of discovery than invention. Organizational values cannot be "set", they can only be discovered. Core values cannot be forced on individuals. Core values are those things that people already are predisposed to holding and it is the businesses challenge to find, attract, and retain the people as employees (Collins, 1996). When setting out to understand the core values of the company, the business leader embarks on a journey of discovery rather than a mission of invention or creation. The first step is to identify the core values that already exist in the business. Core values are values that are intrinsic to the organization. Core values define the business and what it stands for, and core values endure even if the same core values at some point no longer are advantageous for competitive reasons. Core values are fixed throughout time and cannot be changed. They are the essential and enduring tenets of an organization (Collins and Porras, 1996).

For example, at Sears the student is responsible for ensuring that all of his associates are exposed to the core values. Sears calls it "*Living Our Values*" which is comprised of four 1-hour sessions covering a deeper dive into selected organizational values. Introduced in 2007 to continue to build and sustain the culture after the 2005 merger with Kmart, these focused sessions reinforce how critical it is that all associates "walk the talk" and live the values daily. The materials for the sessions focus on the five selected values --- Accountability, Teamwork, Integrity, Focus on the Customer, and Positive Energy. Additionally, the Walt Disney Company has core values of imagination and wholesomeness. Nordstrom has core values that include the desire to deliver outstanding customer service and strive for high individual productivity. Philip Morris holds core values that include belief in the drive to win a fair fight and that people have a right to free choice. These core values are intrinsic to their businesses and organizations are not going to change because of shifting popular opinion, competitive forces,

or changes in corporate strategy. Great companies do not necessarily have to have likeable or humanistic values, although many do (Collins and Porras, 1996).

Core Purpose/Envisioned Future

Once you have identified the core values of your business, it is time to define and understand your core purpose and define the future you envision for the business. The core purpose is the organization's reason for being and it reflects the idealistic motivations for doing the company's work. It is a long-term purpose for the business that is never achieved. Whereas you might achieve a goal or complete a strategy, you cannot fulfill a purpose. Some examples of core purposes are 3M's "To solve unsolved problems innovatively" and Sony's "To experience the joy of advancing and applying technology for the benefit of the public (Dolak, 2001)." Additionally, in 1992 the student joined a textile company named American & Efird and the company had just begun the TQM journey. Their core purpose was "to be the preferred supplier of sewing thread and related products by providing world-class quality products and services to the customers."

Collins and Porras (1996) further suggest creative ways to define purpose. They describe a "five why" approach in which you start with a descriptive statement about your company and then ask "why is that important?" They believe that after asking a few "why's," you are likely to get down to the fundamental purpose of the business. Moreover, core purpose should not be inwardly focused on creating profits or increasing shareholder value. Your core purpose should be to satisfy some important customer need or fill a void in the market that otherwise would leave people lacking an important product, service, or solution. Lastly, the envisioned future of your organization is a statement of the long-term goal of the business. It is a clear image of how you will satisfy important customer needs well into the future. At American & Efird the long-term goal was to achieve worldwide, preferred supplier status in each product line by: supplying superior quality products, practicing TQM and being recognized as a leader by its Customers, Employees, Suppliers and Community in its contributions to society and the environment.

Effective Articulation and Communication

Once a vision is created, communicating it becomes an important final step. It must be communicated and articulated effectively so that it becomes the shared vision of everyone in the organization. James O'Toole (1999) says, "the task of leadership is to communicate clearly and repeatedly the organization's vision...all with the intent of helping every person involved understand what work needs to be done and why, and what part the

individual plays in the overall effort." Moreover, it is not always easy to spread a vision through the business so the key part of creating shared vision is in articulating it and communicating it in an enduring fashion. In short, once this shared vision is created, it will become a driving force that "compels people to do something, change something, and become something." That's what having vision is all about.

Communicating a vision is one of the most frustrating areas of leading an organization. To be effective a leader's vision must take root deep within the organization, inspiring the hearts and minds of the people. The student experienced this frustration in 2005 after joining a metal roofing manufacturer as General Manager. The vision was to implement Lean manufacturing so that the company could improve its on-time deliveries. The employees were enthused but the vision stalled when upper management failed to embrace the change. However, a well crafted and communicated vision enables employees and managers at all levels to work toward the same strategic objective without being overly rigid about how they do so. Examples of well articulated visions are America Online's "Consumer connectivity first-anytime, anywhere," Ford's "Quality is Job #1", and Wal-Mart's "Low prices, every day." These vision statements are concise and easy to remember and are the keys to a clearly articulated vision (Gadiesh and Gilbert, 2001).

Furthermore, strong alignment to a vision can be seen when a visitor to a business drops in and infers the vision without having to read it on paper, based solely on the actions and behaviors they observe (Collins, 1996). Effectively communicating vision is more than placing a vision statement on the wall in the corporate lobby. Effectively communicating the vision means the business lives the vision it has become attached to; that the business means what it says and it practices what it preaches. Corporate executives must "walk the talk" rather than just "talk the talk." The business leader must also insist that all managers model behaviors that are consistent with the organization's vision. It is through such action that all members of the business will believe in and live a meaningful purpose of the vision (Dolak, 2001).

Other ways to communicate the vision are to: 1) Paint a mental picture. Analogies, metaphors, and examples can help people grasp the idea (2) Keep it simple. A full-blown vision may be several paragraphs long, but at its best, even a lengthy vision can be summarized in a phrase that everyone can remember and echo. (3) Have courage. Bold visions will be challenged, so leaders must be prepared to hold their ground. (4) There is nothing wrong to be perceived as a broken record because the more people hear the vision statement, the more comfortable they will become with it. Repetition breeds awareness,

acceptance, and understanding (Dolak, 2001). In short, when the vision of the future is well communicated, people are able to search for and discover new opportunities.

Once the vision is understood, it is likely to be accepted by everyone in the business and there will be a strong desire to live it. Once all participants in the business share and live the vision, they will create an environment of true alignment with the vision and collectively drive the business toward its goals. The sense of shared vision will guide behavior and also be self-reinforcing and self-motivating. Once the leader establishes a sense of shared vision within his or her business, not only will the business benefit but all the members of the business team will benefit also (Dolak, 2001).

A strong vision for a business can create energy and drive needed to push and pull teams and organizations forward. A strong and effectively communicated vision will be infectious, stimulating, and attractive to others and it will motivate them to achieve business goals and aspirations. People rally around leaders with a compelling vision and a clear sense of purpose. Creating a strong vision is one of the most important functions a business leader can perform. A vision statement compels people to do something, change something, and become something. It is this drive that can transform a business into a strong, vibrant, rewarding opportunity for everyone who comes into contact with it. Business leaders can reap the benefits of a strong vision by defining the core values of their companies, defining their purpose, describing what they see for the business in the future, and then clearly articulating, communicating, and living the vision at every opportunity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, creating and communicating a vision is one of the most important activities a business leader can perform and all business leaders should understand the processes for crafting and communicating a clear vision. A great vision requires great communication, communication that inspires and paints a vivid picture of the future. Once business leaders have created a sense of shared vision within their organization, they will be able to successfully lead their organizations through change. This paper explored the art of visioning in order to help business managers successfully lead their own organizations through change. The paper defined leadership and how it impacts the creation and communication of vision. Also, the core values of businesses was identified, and the basic approaches for articulating and communicating vision in order to realize all the benefits that can be gained by creating a strong sense of vision for your organization.

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"Your people can only deliver good strategic results if you ensure that they align their actions closely with the [company's] course and direction"

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