

# ***The Vision Thing***

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*As we look around the corporate landscape today, both in Pakistan and elsewhere, we often find examples where well-intentioned campaigns on implementing vision, mission and values are left on the back burner. Appearances are kept up. Lack of meaning and sincerity behind platitudes soon become apparent and 'traditional' management styles return to haunt us.*

A challenging phenomenon being experienced by leaders like you is the call for a larger than life, long-term vision for their organizations so that people are inspired by a higher purpose and perform their tasks with a greater sense of ownership and commitment. At the same time, you have the responsibility of producing results in the current accounting period. These competing demands must be managed!

What is happening because of short-term pressures and long-term needs? A burst of activity on vision and mission statements for a few months involving hours upon hours of meetings where the top management

literally drives down "original" concepts of a bold new future for the organization to stunned employees. This is followed by a period of silence and listlessness when the employees are left wondering what happened after the lightning struck. Finally, as the budget deadlines approach, management style reverts to the 'carrot and stick' approach coaxing employees to perform. This inconsistency leads to cynicism and mistrust through the rank and file. Appearances are kept up. Lack of meaning and sincerity behind platitudes soon become apparent and 'traditional' management styles return to haunt us.

Why do vision and mission statements end up framed and hung on walls meaninglessly? Is it that the employees fail to identify with the organizational vision because of the language used or the way in which it may have been communicated? Could it be that employees quietly resent not having a say in the vision and mission of the organization?

Do organizations need a long-term vision at all? There is a strong case for it. You would have to make a fundamental shift in your personal understanding of visioning and its value to your organization before measuring its impact on overall performance. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, in their best-selling book, "Leaders" state that, "a vision articulates a view of a realistic, credible and attractive future for the organization – a condition that is better in some important ways than what now exists".

The assumption behind any visioning process is that it provides a sense of direction to the entire enterprise and allows individuals to define their own roles in this

larger framework. Vision empowers people as they begin to see the fit between what they do and how it contributes to the larger whole.

Vision is not a new idea. We learn from the Bible that people without vision perish. Somehow, old ideas are presented as new ones through new vocabulary, which serves as garments to describe fundamental management concepts that have served us well for decades. For example, Human Resources replacing Personnel Management; Learning replacing Training; Leaders replacing Managers. New terminologies have entered the battleground to own traditional ideas. In this debacle the word “vision” has been on the centre stage over several decades.

As stated earlier, many organizations take the time to develop vision statements and share them with their people. Leaders end up congratulating themselves on having accomplished a difficult and time-consuming effort and move on to the next task. When this happens, the message and meaning of the vision are soon forgotten.

What is needed is for you to establish, reinforce and achieve the desired future direction for your organization through formal and informal communications. You may prepare and distribute written statements of vision – but this is never enough. You need to seize the opportunity to articulate your views more informally through casual and frequent discussions down the line. Although formal and informal communications are the most common vehicles that you use to reinforce vision, these quickly become empty slogans unless they are demonstrated through other

means, for example, business decisions you take relating to acquisitions, equipment purchases, hiring, closing of facilities, etc., to bring your vision closer to reality. These decisions need to be explained on a timely basis. At times, alternative options may be more attractive over the short term, but the longer-range view needs to be the critical determinant.

There are times when circumstances may force you to make decisions that work against the vision and/or other longer-term goals. When this happens, it’s important to acknowledge that the decision or action is inconsistent with the vision. Being open about mistakes builds credibility in the change process. Your challenge is to find ways to overcome obstacles and get back on track.

Your day-to-day leadership behaviors communicate seriousness and commitment to vision most effectively. You are on stage 24/7. Those around you gain a clearer understanding of the vision and are inspired into action. A leader with a vision of creating a customer-focused organization, for example, can make or break this vision by how he or she talks about difficult customers or by the amount of time that he or she devotes to customers and front-line people.

Of course, it is difficult to be consistent with the vision daily. But effective leaders realize the impact of what they do and say every day has on people throughout the organization. You need to make a concerted effort to bring your behavior into line with your vision.

Vision statement will only invite

commitment and sustained effort when it is communicated to enroll the spirit, mind and body of every person. Unfortunately, vision statements have turned into high sounding language. The meaning of communication is the response you get. If people are not responding, it's a failure in your communication. Thus, the language in which vision is communicated must be simple and should enable people to relate to it directly and meaningfully. The more relevant people find it to their personal lives and values, the more attraction it will hold for them.

In this context, for vision to have a strategic impact on profitability, it needs to be clear and compelling. It must have an element of stretch to motivate talent towards creative action. Vision not supported by an army of goals and sub-goals and objectives with assigned tasks and responsibilities for achievement throughout the organization is wishful thinking. Vision that is not translated into clearly defined tasks and activities will remain allusive. This represents the underlying challenge to the new generation of younger, bolder and more forward looking leaders now taking the stewardship of commerce and industry in Pakistan; in fact, the world over. A dynamic vision, communicated in a compelling manner will galvanize the pool of human energy in the organization.

Realizing the vision in terms of the bottom-line impact, however, is dependent on attention to details like efficient information systems, timely two-way feedback, regular monitoring and fine-tuning, intense cross functional and vertical communication, systematic and consistent structural realignments to changing internal and external realities. In other words, managing

the vision means managing the macro and micro processes simultaneously and effectively. The single largest cause of organizational failure is attempting the unrealistic i.e., to change at a rate where the capability present in the organization simply does not match the capability required to manage all the processes needed to bring the vision to fruition. Here, you only need to study inertia when change in individual behavior is examined, what to say of divisional or organizational change.

There is no doubt that change is an organizational reality. While it is necessary to be in tune with change, change must follow a particular syntax. It needs to be paced to conform to the known and expected capability of the organization – the most critical component of which is the capability of its people.

Vision is all about change. Its impact must have depth, both in the organizational structure and in the heart of its people. You need an acute awareness of the role perceptions play in organizational life. This must be kept in mind when designing communication strategies that will have maximum positive effect.

Long term goals, transmitted through a compelling vision, can capture and hold the attention of individuals and teams only when you are intimately aware of the perceptions of the people you lead as well as the values that govern their perceptions.

The journey from vision to bottom line is therefore a journey through change. For you this means first changing your own attitude, belief systems and behaviors. What you need to do next is to transmit this change to

members of the organization through effective communication of your vision and demonstrating it in your personal behavior and actions. Finally, you need to provide a supportive structure and an environment that facilitates realization of the vision in a consistent and systematic manner.

Vision is no longer an option. Managing change is not an option. Organizational life is about doing or dying. Tomorrow's bottom line is intimately linked to your vision.

The shift necessary in your thinking is not about whether vision and bottom line are related. It is about HOW you engage the soul, hearts and minds of your people.

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