

CHAPTER 1

Vivid Vision

A COMPELLING VISION OF WHAT YOU ARE
TRYING TO ACHIEVE THAT IS EXCEPTIONALLY WELL
COMMUNICATED TO EVERYONE INVOLVED

Having a clear, vivid, and compelling vision, the first principle of business success, is without question an essential component in building a successful company. In fact, most organizations fall down not in creating the vision but in what they do with it. Before I get into that, I want to clarify some terminology and then delve into the fundamentals of how to create a vision and why having one is so important.

Basic Terminology

Vision, mission, purpose, core values, and guiding principles. What do these all mean?

I get asked this question a lot, and for good reason, because different people use completely different terms to talk about the same basic information. If you went to the Internet and pulled up the vision statements of a dozen

companies, you'd quickly realize that what one company says is its vision, another one calls its mission and the third one its guiding principles. Although I have worked with hundreds of organizations in establishing mission, vision, and values statements, I try not to get too hung up on the precise definitions of these words. Nevertheless, some common definitions make these terms clear.

A *mission statement* describes what an organization is all about: its purpose and primary objectives. It answers three key questions:

- Whom do we serve?
- What is the benefit to our stakeholders, community, and the world?
- Why does this organization exist?

It should resonate with all members of the organization and help them feel proud and excited to be a part of something bigger than themselves. For example, Medtronic's mission statement is ennobling and inspiring: "To contribute to human welfare by application of biomedical engineering in the research, design, manufacture, and sale of instruments or appliances that alleviate pain, restore health, and extend life."

A *vision statement* is what the organization wants to become. It is a picture of the desired future, where leaders see the business twenty years from now.

A *values statement* outlines the core beliefs, behaviors, and commitments of an organization. Values are not created; they are discovered. They are codified from the value systems and behaviors of the leaders and employees in the organization.

To sum up, a mission statement gives the overall purpose of the organization, the vision statement describes how the future will look if the organization achieves its mission, and the values statement is a code of conduct. Here is an example of what the vision, mission, and values statement might look like for a hospital:

Our Mission

To provide exceptional patient care in a compassionate and nurturing environment supported by dedicated health care professionals who strive to advance the care and treatment of the sick through advanced medical research and discoveries

Our Vision

World-class patient care through clinical excellence

Our Core Values

Compassion

Safety

Professional excellence

Embracing diversity

Complete honesty and integrity

Innovation through knowledge sharing and teamwork

I have seen a lot of time and money wasted watching companies debate the definitions of these words. And many try to craft their mission/vision/values statements so perfectly, so all-inclusively, that they never get written. This is not a contest to see who gets an A+ from the teacher for writing a great haiku. If you have the skills to create a truly elegant vision and corporate values statement, fantastic. I applaud you. But if you just put a few simple words down on a piece of paper, and they are powerful and create strong meaning and

motivation for you and your people, that's fine too. The point is that the clarity of meaning and direction throughout the organization is driven by the clarity of the mission/vision/values statement. In far too many companies, these statements are ambiguous, uninspiring, and literally without meaning. The ultimate test of any statement of vision, mission, values, guiding principles, core beliefs, organizational credo—whatever you want to call it—is its effectiveness in mobilizing people to an inspiring purpose and shared direction.

The Fundamentals of Creating a Vision

A true vision is an exciting, focused, realistic, and inspiring picture of what you and everyone else in your organization are trying to accomplish together. It's the reason you come to work every day, the impact you want to make on the world, the kind of company and products you aspire to build, the major strategies that make up the core focus of your business. Your vision does not have to be a Pulitzer Prize-winning literary masterpiece; it simply needs to be something that everyone can clearly understand and that people are honestly excited about pursuing.

I do not belong to the camp that says a vision must be specific, detailed, and measurable. I love visions that are highly detailed; they work well, and they give people a valuable idea of where they are going. But I have also seen some really successful businesses (often in high technology, in which the velocity of change is overwhelming) whose vision statements are more about how they do business and what is most important to drive success than they are about revenues or market share. I really like the way well-known business

guru Guy Kawasaki approaches the idea of vision. He says that rather than creating a long and convoluted statement that nobody understands or can remember, a good vision should be like a mantra: a few words, a simple phrase that can be repeated over and over again to keep people focused on the goal. I have one client whose vision is focused on building a superior *team* that delivers real value through elegant *solutions* for its customers and looks for appropriate *growth* opportunities. These three ideas—team, solutions, and growth—have taken this firm from \$50 million to \$250 million in just a few years. That’s a successful vision.

So the goal is to create a vision statement that is straightforward and easy to remember. As the leader, you might sit down and, after long hours of thought and scribbling, develop the vision statement for your organization (whether it is a small team or multinational company) completely on your own. Or you might consider involving a number of your key people, maybe even your entire organization, in order to get as much buy-in and support for the vision as possible. But at the end of the day, the only thing that matters is that you have a vision that people believe and are committed to, a statement that keeps your employees focused and energized to move the company forward toward a destination they are all excited about reaching.

A vision is vital to giving people a sense of security and direction. With the flattening of organizations, it’s important that empowered people have a guiding destination to help them frame their decisions. Your people want to know what is most important. The vision says, in effect, *Don’t worry. We know what we’re doing, and we know where we’re going. If we all go in this direction together, everything will turn out just fine.* In organizations

that do not have a clear vision or the vision is not well communicated, there is an overwhelming sense of anxiety because people are unsure of their future. Sure, employees come to work every day, but they're not confident in exactly what they're trying to accomplish with regard to the big picture. There is unease and tension because they have no common direction, no common purpose. If that's not bad enough, lack of the well-communicated vision typically leads to a massive waste of time, money, talent, and motivation, a sure way to run any company into the ground.

Creating a vivid and compelling vision of the future is one of the most important ways for you to help your team work together toward a common goal. Another valuable tool is the creation of a set of corporate values: a list of the fundamental beliefs of your organization. They establish the rules of conduct: what is acceptable and what is not acceptable behavior within your company. If the vision is about why your organization is in business, the values are about how you will all do business together. Having a set of clear corporate values gives everyone in your organization a sense of dignity, a shared credo that reflects how they feel about themselves as professionals, about the organization they work for, and how they will interact with your stakeholders, your community, and the world.

Several years ago, I was invited to give a talk on vision and values to one of the leading financial service firms in the world. For two hours, I stood before the thirteen directors of this multibillion-dollar company and shared with them my thoughts on the importance of setting a clear direction for the firm that was solidly grounded in their corporate values, which revolved around professionalism, teamwork, respect, service, and client focus. At the end of my presentation, when

I opened the floor for questions, an interesting debate ensued. One of the directors raised the issue of what to do about a top employee: he was a multimillion-dollar producer but treated other employees aggressively and rudely in his quest to deliver his stellar numbers. I turned and pointed to the wall where there was a huge brass plaque with the values of the organization written in foot-tall letters and said, "If this employee is not living your value of respect, if he is running roughshod over the rest of his team and causing significant internal strife, then regardless of how much money he generates for the firm, he either has to change his behavior or be terminated." As those last few words came out of my mouth, one of the directors literally jumped out of his chair as if someone had hit him with a cattle prod. "You have got to be kidding me," he said. "There is no way in the world I'm going to fire somebody who brings in \$30 million a year." I replied, "That's fine, as long as you chisel *respect* off the values statement. But if this group of directors tells the employees that these are the values that the firm believes in yet allows people to violate them openly as long as they generate massive amounts of cash, then people will know that making money is much more important than living the values."

Given the meltdown we've seen at companies like Enron, WorldCom, and across a broad swath of financial institutions in America, it is disappointing to realize that many of these companies met their demise because they said they valued one thing and did the opposite. Therefore, if you do create a set of organizational values, integrity to those values is paramount. The first time any employee sees you or someone else from the organization violate the values without negative ramifications, all trust is destroyed. As I've personally heard

Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, say, “Make an honest mistake, screw up a project, lose a million dollars on a risky business bet . . . no problem, we can fix that. But violate the values, and you’re gone immediately.”

The vision tells people where you want to go. The values tell them how to behave along the way. It is essential to have a clear vision and compelling values in order to run a successful organization. Now let’s turn to where even companies that have a great vision and solid values often make a huge mistake.

Communicating the Vision

For a number of years, I’ve been doing work for an organization that brings together CEOs, presidents, and key employees at noncompetitive companies for a monthly roundtable meeting to help each other with their businesses. For the first few hours, a guest speaker addresses some critical area of business. In the afternoon, these high-level executives—most running companies between \$2 million and \$50 million—discuss how they will hold each other accountable for implementing the ideas they have learned. Through this work, I’ve had the great pleasure of presenting classes on strategic thinking and business excellence to almost nine hundred senior executives. At the end of each session, I always ask the group the same question: “What are the four biggest issues that you are dealing with right now in your company?” As they share their answers, I am always amazed because just about all of them say they are struggling with the same four basic issues. Here is the list, with an example of how they describe them to me. See if these sound familiar to you:

1. *Communicating vision.* “I have a clear vision of where I’m trying to take my organization. I think about it all the time and it’s always on my mind, but I bet if you went two levels down in my company and asked people what the vision of our organization is . . . they would not be able to tell you. I realize now that even though I focus on the vision and our key strategies constantly, I have not done a good enough job of clearly communicating them throughout my entire organization.”
2. *Openly addressing challenges.* “I realize now that we’re not having the tough conversations we need to have in our organization. There are issues, challenges, and problems that everyone knows about but no one wants to talk about. It’s the elephant in the middle of the room in every meeting. People sit and stare at each other but are unwilling to broach the subject, put it on the table, and talk about these major issues that need to be addressed. As a leader, I now understand that I’m going to have to be much more courageous in my communication and accept that it is my role to engage everyone in discussing the undiscussable.”
3. *Enabling mediocrity.* “I have a few mediocre people in key places in my organization. And I understand that every day I allow them to come to work and do a poor job, turn things in late, mess up projects, and miss deadlines is another day that I am telling all of the rest of the people in my organization that I was just kidding about excellence. That if Tom or Sue or Mary is clearly incompetent, but they get the same pay, benefits, and vacation as everyone else, then that level of

mediocre performance is completely acceptable in our organization.”

4. *Following through on plans.* “We have a serious problem with lack of execution. We have innovative ideas, good plans. We understand how to differentiate ourselves in the marketplace, but at the end of every year, I look back and realize that we accomplished only a fraction of what we set out to do. We have goals and objectives, but we lack the discipline to follow through and ensure that our good intentions become focused action.”

I address the last three items in other chapters in this book, but let’s tackle number one here: communicating the vision.

I once had a president of the company ask me, “When do you know that you have communicated the vision enough?” My answer to him was, “When you are so sick and tired of talking about the vision that you feel like you might become nauseous if you have to discuss it one more time. Then you have just started. Because at that point, the lowest-level person in your organization just heard the vision for the very first time.” I cannot state this strongly enough: overcommunication of the vision and values is critical. In board meetings, through e-mail, at off-site meetings, in phone conversations, in the company newsletter, as screen savers, in one-on-one meetings, at all-hands meetings: in every conceivable communications channel, you must relentlessly communicate a clear and consistent message about the vision and future direction of your organization and the values that can never be violated. Let me give you a great

example of how two of my clients in the health care industry powerfully communicate their mission, vision, and values to people across their organizations.

If you were to drive onto the San Francisco campus of the biotech company Genentech, the first thing you would notice are the massive (two- and three-story tall) pictures of real patients who have benefited from the drugs Genentech has developed. Everywhere you look are giant smiling faces reminding everyone at Genentech exactly why they come to work every day, that what they do is very important, and that their mission is about saving lives and taking care of people. At Abbott Labs, the kick-off of almost every major meeting starts with a video of a patient or doctor talking about how the work of the people at Abbott has affected his or her life. Often these events include a speech from a patient, eyes filled with tears as he or she looks out over the audience of Abbott employees and personally thanks them for saving his or her life or the life of his or her child. At the end of these stories there is not a dry eye in the room. And there is also absolutely no question why the organization exists, whom they serve, or if the work they do is important.

Finding and sharing stories like these is perhaps the best way to communicate the vision, mission, and values of your organization too. I understand that it is a bit easier for a drug company or hospital to communicate a powerfully touching life-or-death story, but every business can find a unique way to share a meaningful story with employees about how what they do every day makes a difference in the lives of their customers and community. The communication does not

have to be complex or highly emotional. It simply needs to be real, sincere, and honest.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- A clear, vivid, compelling vision of the future of your organization (team, department, region, branch, division) is critical to keeping everyone focused on success.
- A *mission* says why the company exists, the *vision* says where we want to go, and *values* declare how we will act and behave along the way.
- The biggest problem in most organizations is not that they lack vision, but that the vision is poorly communicated throughout the organization.
- A great vision statement is like a mantra—a few key words that inspire and direct your people.
- The four biggest issues for many business leaders are a lack of well-communicated vision, lack of courageous communication, toleration of mediocrity, and poor execution of key plans and ideas.

EFFECTIVENESS AUDIT

This brief audit will help you determine how well your organization is doing on the key items outlined in this chapter. It is essential that you be completely honest in scoring the questions. This is not an exercise to get the highest score; it is a diagnostic tool to discover areas that need focus and improvement. Score the following statements on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree.

1. We have a clear, vivid, and compelling vision that is extremely well communicated throughout our entire organization. _____
2. Our organization has a deeply held set of guiding principles and core values that drives every aspect of how we do business. _____

3. We do not allow anyone to consistently violate the values and remain employed in this organization. _____
4. There is a strong and focused shared sense of direction throughout the entire organization. _____
5. Everyone in this company understands exactly why this organization exists and what we are trying to accomplish. _____
6. People throughout the organization are inspired by our mission and vision. _____

EFFECTIVENESS AUDIT SCORING KEY

- A score of 9 or 10 indicates strength in your organization.
- A score of 7 or 8 is a good score but has room for improvement.
- A score of 5 or 6 is an area of concern. This score needs to be brought up because if it heads in the other direction, it could lead to serious issues.
- A score of 3 or 4 is in the danger zone and requires attention and resources to get it moving up the scale quickly.
- A score of 1 or 2 is an emergency and should be dealt with immediately.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS

It is important to take time and give the following questions some serious thought. Be honest with yourself, and think your answers through in detail. You might also find it valuable to gather several people from your organization to discuss these questions as a group, exploring how each of you might answer the same questions differently. These opposing points of view and alternative ideas are critical to developing quality answers.

1. What is the mission of our organization? Why do we exist? What is the noble purpose we are fulfilling?

2. Who in society would suffer, other than our employees, if our organization went out of business?
3. What is the vision for our organization? What are we trying to build? Where would we like to see this company five, ten, and twenty years into the future?
4. What are the core values of our organization? What are our most deeply held beliefs about the way we want to behave?
5. What are our spoken and unspoken rules about excellence, teamwork, quality, customer focus, professionalism, communication, accountability, corporate culture, and corporate responsibility?
6. How do we want our organization to be viewed from the outside? What words would we like our customers to use when describing our company? What feelings and emotions would we like our various stakeholders to have about our company?
7. What sort of a legacy do we want to leave in the communities where we work?

TURNING IDEAS INTO ACTION

Here are several suggestions on how you can take some of the main ideas of this chapter and begin to implement them immediately. Some of them might work perfectly for you; others will need some adjustment and customization. Read them carefully, and start thinking about how you can make them work in your organization.

1. If you do not already have them, create mission, vision, and values statements. This can be done independently by the leader of the organization or a committee of key people who are enthusiastic about working on this project, or you can solicit feedback from the entire organization. Typically it is best to get as much feedback as possible from various stakeholders and then have two or three key people create a draft document that can be circulated for comments. It is important to let people have a voice in the process so that they feel that they have some

ownership in the final document and will therefore be much more committed to the mission, vision, and values.

2. If you do have mission, vision, and values statements in place, survey your employees to see if they know and understand the statements and if they consider them relevant to and resonant with the organization. The only way these statements can be effective is if people honestly believe in them and strive every day to live them.
3. Survey your customers to gather their feelings and attitudes about your mission, vision, and values. Do they resonate with your customers as the kind of business they want to support and believe that you are? In your customers' eyes, is your organization living your stated mission, vision, and values?
4. Develop a specific, measurable, and comprehensive communications plan for ensuring that the mission, vision, and values are effectively communicated throughout all levels of the organization and to key stakeholders. Measure the success of this program through surveys and one-on-one meetings at least twice a year.
5. Create a formal reward and recognition program for employees who live the values and support the mission and vision. These can be things like employee of the month award, employee of the year award, a special parking space, a day off, a cash bonus, a small gift certificate, flex-time, a donation to the employee's favorite charity, a plaque or award, a handwritten note from the CEO thanking the employee for his or her dedication and commitment to the mission, vision, and values—the options are endless. The idea is to reward employees with something they value, and do so publicly and sincerely.
6. Find innovative ways to tie your mission, vision, and values with community outreach, charitable support, and sustainable business practices.
7. Refuse to tolerate any violation of the values. Make it clear that prudent risk taking or failing at something new or challenging is absolutely acceptable; it is even rewarded. But violating one of the core values will result in immediate termination.

If you are finding it challenging to come up with a mission, vision, or values statement, here are two excellent examples to help get your gears turning. The first is a traditionally written mission, vision, and values statement from the City of Oklahoma City. This document clearly articulates exactly what the city leaders are trying to achieve for their community. The second example is from one of my favorite restaurants in the world, the Dragonfly Sushi and Sake Company, in my home town of Gainesville, Florida. This award-winning establishment is a shining example of the power of a vivid and compelling vision and mission that is woven into every element of the business and throughout the culture of the entire organization.

The City of Oklahoma City Mission, Vision, and Values Statements

Mission Statement

The City of Oklahoma City's mission is to provide the leadership, commitment and resources to achieve our vision by:

Offering a clean, safe and affordable City.

Providing well-managed and maintained infrastructure through proactive and reactive services, excellent stewardship of public assets and a variety of cultural, recreational and entertainment opportunities that enhance the quality of life.

Creating and maintaining effective partnerships to promote employment opportunities and individual and business success.

Advancing a model of professionalism that ensures the delivery of high-quality products and services, continuously improves efficiency and removes barriers for future development.

Vision Statement

Oklahoma City is a safe, clean, affordable City. We are a family-friendly community of strong moral character, solid values and a caring spirit. We strive to provide the right balance of cosmopolitan and rural areas by offering a well-planned and growing community that focuses on a wide variety of business, educational, cultural, entertainment and recreational opportunities. We are a diverse, friendly City that encourages individuality and excellence.

Mission, Vision, and Values Statements

We are The City of Oklahoma City.

Public Service is our purpose. It is why we are here. We commit to provide competent, dependable and efficient service to all by knowing our jobs and our City.

We value dependability and accountability in our relationships.

We value tactful, useful, informative and honest communication among ourselves and with our community. Listening to the needs of others is a critical part of our communication process.

We honor diversity by respecting our customers and fellow employees.

We commit to continuous improvement and growth through visionary, proactive leadership and technology.

We set these standards of quality service by upholding our core values.

We are The City of Oklahoma City.

Dragonfly Sushi & Sake Company Mission Statement

We strive to be excellent through exceeding our guests' expectations by providing a dining experience that is Sensual, Spiritual and Savory.

Vision

To be the restaurant of choice for Japanese cuisine in the Gainesville area.

The Credo

Always strive to be excellent by exemplifying the Bushido and treating all team members and guests with care, understanding, respect and fairness.

Culture Statement

Our corporate culture is about passionate people who are focused and committed to Absolute Hospitality so we may become the very best in our industry. Absolute Hospitality means taking care of each other first, then our guests, then our vendors, and lastly our shareholders. We believe through Absolute Hospitality, we can continue to achieve professional success as well as personal success.

For more resources on creating mission, vision, and values statements, go to www.awesomelysimple.com.

The mission, vision, and values (M/V/V) can be communicated in a number of ways—for example:

- Create posters, plaques, and banners.
- Create T-shirts, hats, pens, key chains, screen savers, mouse pads, and buttons with the M/V/V statements.
- Develop a company newsletter or blog.
- Have senior executives, managers, or customers present a speech or write an article.
- Circulate stories about how employees live the M/V/V.
- Print the M/V/V on agendas, and open meetings with a discussion of them.
- Make sure the M/V/V are included as part of all strategic, operational, and tactical plans.
- Spend time talking about the M/V/V and key strategies at all-hands and town hall meetings.
- Use the M/V/V as themes for national meetings, sales meetings, and management meetings.
- Create formal and informal recognition programs to reward people who exemplify living the M/V/V.
- From time to time, leave a message about the M/V/V to all employees on their voice mail or through e-mail.
- Create a committee that surveys employees and keeps the M/V/V fresh and relevant.

- Bring in customers once or twice a year to talk to employees about how the company's M/V/V have touched them and made their lives better.

Always remember that all of this is useless if you do not actually live the mission, vision, and values throughout the entire organization. The truth is, if you've created a noble mission, a compelling vision, and a set of deeply held values, you should be excited to tell everyone about them. Communicating the vision should never feel like a chore; it should be motivating and inspiring to share your feelings and excitement about the future of the company. Plaques, speeches, and banners are nice, but passion is what brings people together and makes things happen.

One Last Word on Communicating the Vision

I've supplied a list of possibilities, but the most important part of communicating the vision is doing it authentically. As a leader, it is vital to let people know, in whatever way you find most comfortable, that you are truly passionate about the mission, vision, and values of your organization. Different leaders do this in different ways. Some use what is called symbol management, looking for little ways to send a clear message about what they are focused on in the business and what values they hold most deeply. An example is the manager of a large hotel who stops to pick up trash in the parking lot on the way into the lobby, or a customer service manager who answers her own phone by the second ring to demonstrate that responsiveness is critical. These small acts send big messages. Some leaders give inspiring speeches to rally the

troops, while others prefer a more personal approach. For example, I think best by writing things down, so whenever I have something important to say, I write a memo about the ideas I want folks to focus on. Typically these memos are five or six pages long, and I e-mail them to everyone on my team and then invite them to visit me in my office at their convenience to sit down and discuss the memo and answer any questions they might have. I do this only once or twice a year, but I try as hard as I can to speak from my heart and really tell the people who work with me what I feel are the most essential things for us to focus on in order to enjoy the level of success we all want to achieve together. The memos are personal and honest and have been extremely effective. (If you would like to read an example of one of my memos, go to: www.awesomelysimple.com.)