

Seeing Your Way

Why Leaders Must Communicate Their Visions

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A vision has to be shared in order to do what it is meant to do: inspire, clarify, and focus the work of the organization. One part of a leader's job is to create commitment to the organization's vision. To do this, leaders must communicate the vision effectively in ways that will help others understand it, remember it, and share it.

— — — — — **L**eaders in today's organizations face issues of growth, change, customization, globalization, and technology that force them to create new pathways toward success and sustainability. But a newly blazed strategic trail cannot itself create the focus, the underlying tactics, and the foresight necessary for long-term growth and deep impact. Many organizations that falter have failed to effectively communicate their strategies. As a result, employees do not understand their role in implementing the organization's mission and strategy.

Originally published as "Seeing Your Way: Why Leaders Must Communicate Their Visions," *Leadership in Action* (pp. 15–24). (July/August, 2007).

Leaders can adopt many tactics for coordinating messages and creating alignment among employees, whether at the unit, team, or organizational level. One effective tactic is to transmit strategic intent through a vision—an imagined or discerned future state that clearly captures the organization's direction and defines its destination.

What is a vision? It describes some achievement or future state that the organization will accomplish or realize. It inspires, clarifies, and focuses the work of an organization for a specific time. A vision differs from goals, which express the steps of a plan for accomplishing an objective. A vision differs from a mission statement, which explains an organization's reasons for existence or for seeking its objectives.

Whatever your organization's vision may be, communicating it is a unique challenge. Employees may disagree about organizational values or may be unwilling to change or to be influenced in a particular direction. They may misunderstand the leader's intent or have trouble imagining the future state expressed in the vision. Effective communication of the vision is vital.

Although there are distinctions to be made between vision, mission, and goals, the same strategies and techniques for communication are applicable to all three. One part of a leader's job is to create commitment to and alignment with the organization's picture of future success. Communicating this vision throughout the organization is essential to moving the organization forward.

To inspire commitment to a vision, a leader needs to have an effective way to communicate it. Presumably, the leader supports the vision and can draw on his or her personal passion and professional commitment to be dynamic in presenting it to others. Leaders who are perceived to be dynamic have a passion about something and speak about it often. Leaders should be this dynamic about the vision. Many people attribute their organization's vision to the people in leadership roles. If leaders stop talking about the vision, it becomes more difficult to see.

Leaders can never communicate too much. They should treat every communication effort as though it is their most important attempt at getting the message out. People may not hear the message the first time around, so when they finally do hear it, they are likely to think that's the first time the leader has said anything about it. This is especially true when a leader introduces a new vision. People need time and multiple opportunities to hear the message and to separate it from the noise of change. It takes more than one memo or

speech to capture attention and build support. Intersperse the vision throughout regular conversations, be dynamic, and communicate continuously.

STORY TIME

Stories give life to a vision and help people see and remember it. They give integrity to the vision by grounding it in common values and truths. Telling stories creates trust and captures the hearts and minds of the audience. Stories establish common ground between the teller (the leader with a vision, in this case) and the audience (managers, employees, stakeholders, customers, other leaders, and anyone else associated with the organization). A story is a powerful tool for disseminating a vision; people share the story with others, creating a ripple effect.

Stories galvanize people around a cause and give them confidence as they move forward in the face of uncertainty. Stories are powerful, dynamic, and necessary for communicating a vision. Leaders do not always have the time or opportunity to tell them as often as they might like or need to, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't try to communicate the vision briefly, clearly, and with conviction at every opportunity.

Leaders have many informal opportunities to communicate their visions: a few minutes at the water cooler or in line at the cafeteria, a quick visit to the mailroom or customer service department, a company celebration, even a walk through the parking lot at the end of the workday. The message may be short, but the impact over time and through repetition can be powerful.

CONSTANT REMINDERS

In an instant-access, always-on world of cell phones and personal digital assistants, tried-and-true communication channels and tactics such as posters and business card reminders may sound quaint. But the more channels you open, the better your chances of communicating.

Put pithy reminders wherever you can—coffee mugs, T-shirts, letterheads, computer screen savers, luggage tags, pencils, file cabinet magnets, suggestion box prizes, notepads—anywhere that will keep the message first and foremost in the minds of your employees,

stakeholders, and customers. You can even embed the vision in your organization's performance and leadership development activities so that employees can associate their personal goals with the organization's future success.

To use all these media effectively, state the vision briefly. People remember small phrases. Communicating a vision is like making a sales pitch. You want people in the organization to believe in the vision and pass it on to others. You want it to be infectious.

Some leaders feel embarrassed or uneasy about the selling required to communicate a vision. Even when it comes to their personal visions for success, some leaders feel uncomfortable promoting ideas because they are uncomfortable promoting themselves. But as a leader representing a vision, you are at the front of the curve. You are an early adopter. You already support the vision, but others may not know enough about it even to see it, much less support it. It is part of the leader's job to inform and persuade.

PERSONAL TOUCH

Another effective strategy for communicating your vision is to make it personal, to engage others in one-on-one conversations. Personal connections are extraordinarily effective conduits for communication. They give leaders opportunities to transmit information, receive feedback, build support, and create energy around the vision. Developing these relationships requires skill at communicating a compelling and clear vision of the future. When individuals gain a personal understanding of where the organization is and where it wants to go, they are more apt to join in on the journey and champion the cause.

Leaders can inspire themselves and others by tapping into their personal visions. For example, someone with a personal vision of leadership that includes serving others so that more caring and appreciation can be brought into the world can inject the core of that vision into conversations about conflict, influence, power, strategy, empowerment, and many other leadership topics. Just a mention in the context of personal relationships can inform others and inspire them to think of the purpose and vision for their own leadership. It can keep them inspired, inviting their rededication to their own vision.

OTHER WAYS

Here are some other suggestions for continuously and dynamically painting a picture of the future:

Draw a crowd. Identify key players, communicators, stakeholders, and supporters throughout the organization who will motivate others to listen to, reflect on, and be engaged with the vision.

Map your ground. Create a formal communication strategy, and give a team the power and resources to implement it. Put a team in place to educate new staff members about the vision.

Stay on the sunny side. Remain positive about the vision. Pass along positive gossip; correct misinterpretations. People are going to talk; you have to decide what you want them to talk about.

Be everywhere your message can be. Visit different locations in your organization, whether that means a trip to the mailroom or a flight to the other side of the world. Make your presence known on your organization's intranet. Create a blog. Be the visible ambassador of your organization's vision—the champion of its success.

Make it meaningful. Sponsor contests and celebrations that encourage employees to own a part of the vision. Help them create the future, not wait for it.

Make memories. Create metaphors, figures of speech, and slogans, and find creative ways to use them. Write a theme song or a memorable motto.

Mind the gap. Explicitly and quickly address vision inconsistencies. Resistance to change may not be the issue—it may be that people have not heard the message or have misunderstood it. Be patient, move forward, and bring them along.

Notice the good deed. Reward behavior and actions that demonstrate and reflect the vision. Create curiosity and reward involvement.

See how the other half lives. Imagine that your employees are customers. Give them the message you want them to hear. Help them see the vision so they can join in the journey.

Open a joint account. Connect the vision to real business outcomes if you lead a commercial enterprise or to tangible results and impact if you lead a nonprofit.

Keep to the FAQs. Employ technology, such as a knowledge base accessible through the web or your organization's intranet, to answer questions from employees, customers, and stakeholders. Assign responsibility for responding.

Talk it up. Communicate, communicate, communicate. You cannot put your message out too often.

Back it up. If the message is out there, make sure people can see that it reflects real change. If they see one thing and hear another, your credibility is shot and your vision is dead.

FOLLOW THE LEAD

Effective leaders learn from example and experience. The following instances provide lessons and ideas for action:

Keep the vision simple and easy to remember. When Nike coined the phrase "just do it," these three words motivated the company's own staff even as they challenged the world to engage.

Tie the vision to specific and obvious organizational values. In 1939, Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard started a business in a garage. Over time they created a way of doing business that came to be called the HP Way. It was an ideology of respect for the individual, affordable quality and reliability, and commitment to community responsibility.

One of the most important things any communicator ever learns is to design a message for the intended audience.

Build meaning by giving individuals a personal connection to the vision. Mary Kay saw a way to enrich the lives of women not just through offering women cosmetic products but also by making it possible for them to become entrepreneurs themselves.

Customize the benefits of the vision to each stakeholder group. Acknowledge the differences between groups while making connections that show how all the pieces of the organization allow the vision to become reality. The U.S. Army's former slogan,

“Army of One,” appealed to the individual soldier’s needs and desires, highlighting individual strengths while connecting the soldier to the larger army organization.

Make the vision attractive and motivating. Consider Google’s mission of organizing the world’s information and making it universally accessible and useful.

Walk the talk. CEO Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines took on the role of baggage carrier, flight attendant, and customer service agent a few times each year to stay abreast of the challenges his employees faced.

Make certain you demonstrate your belief in the vision. When former Chrysler chairman Lee Iacocca approached the U.S. government seeking loans for a bailout, Congress was not impressed. But Iacocca had done his homework, and he argued that Chrysler’s collapse would cost the country \$2.75 billion in unemployment benefits alone. His speech persuaded Congress to lend the money. Iacocca cut his own salary to \$1 a year as a testament to his vision that Chrysler could turn around.

OPPOSING FORCES

In your efforts to communicate a vision, you may encounter resistance from your audience. Such circumstances increase the difficulty of your task, but there are positive ways to work through them.

One of the most important things any communicator ever learns is to design a message for the intended audience. It’s natural to wish that your audience would be supportive, but if it is not, there’s no point in pretending that it is. You must prepare your message for the audience you have. When listeners are resistant, it is often because there is a competing priority. Consider the following example:

In response to a written survey a college’s faculty members overwhelmingly said that they would be willing to give up their reserved parking places next to the building in order to be more egalitarian and less elitist. The idea was to give the best spaces to the students, in an effort to be student-centered. When faculty members continued using these spaces, the college president was frustrated. Even when he gave up his own parking space, the faculty continued to resist. Finally, after conducting some additional informal surveys on the golf

course and in the cafeteria, the president realized that taking away the parking spaces would be taking away the only visible symbol the faculty members had of their importance and value to the college.

A person who is leading a change must over-communicate—that is, communicate patiently again and again, on different levels, using different media. It is difficult and time consuming to lead people out of their resistance. The vision is distant and indistinct. The resistance is here and now. Over-communication is one of the answers. It takes a stalwart leader to demonstrate the continuing patience needed to deal with resistance, and it takes a dynamic leader to engender the enthusiasm needed to lead people into the new vision. At the same time that the leader is patiently over-communicating, he or she must start building the concrete part of the vision that the resistant audience can finally claim as its own.

The college president put numbered spaces at the far end of the parking lot and put up signs forbidding anyone except the owner of a space from parking there before 9:00 a.m. He had the “reserved” label on the spaces near the building painted over, and he sent out a list of space assignments in the distant lot, based on seniority. The number one space (also the farthest from the building) was for the person who had been with the college the longest. Deans and directors got no additional consideration.

A dynamic leader is one who has a passion and talks about it frequently. In communicating a vision, this means not only talking about the intended result but also speaking passionately about the process of getting there. It may be a long time before some of the audience members get to the vision, but if they can buy into the process in the meantime, that will help move them along.

The college president and his executive staff came up with a mission statement about students being the top priority, the maintenance team put up banners with the mission statement on them, and the student government started a nomination program to honor people who had gone “above and beyond.” The president didn’t talk about the parking issue any more. He got the newspaper to run a big ad about the new mission, and the paper followed up with a feature article. People continued to joke about the parking, and some faculty members

continued to come to work at 7:00 a.m. so they could get a space next to the building, but slowly the problem diminished. And as it did, the enthusiasm for and pride in the new mission and vision increased.

Resistance shows up in unexpected ways. It's important to remember that it usually represents a competing priority and to figure out a way to address that priority. It's critical to keep communicating in as many ways as possible and to be patient. Some people won't buy in until you've said your message over and over, and when they finally do buy in, as far as they're concerned, that's the first time you've said it. So keep talking, patiently and passionately.

LIGHTING THE WAY

Having a vision but not communicating it isn't much of an improvement over not having a vision at all. A vision has to be shared in order to do the things it is meant to do: inspire, clarify, and focus the work of your organization. Remember that as a leader you're in the role of an early adopter. Your job is to communicate the vision to others in ways that will help them understand it, remember it, and then go on to share it themselves. In this way the vision can become a bright lantern leading your organization toward its future.



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