

VISION: THE ROLE OF LEADERS IN IMAGINING A BETTER FUTURE

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“**W**hat’s the problem we’re solving for?” is often the opening question for leaders seeking to make improvements. Similarly, most problem-solving approaches begin with the edict to “define the problem.” From there, the process moves on to explore the root causes, strategies, goals, metrics, and so on. Very methodical. Very operational. What is missing, however, is the first and most fundamental step: Setting the Vision. Problems are merely barriers that obstruct progress toward a vision. The role of leaders is to imagine a better future—to envision what is possible, create the strategic path, engage with stakeholders and partners, and provide support for its achievement. This is leadership.

Consider Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s iconic 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech. Dr. King paints the bleak picture of the present and a vision of a better future for all. In 1962, President John F. Kennedy invokes a dream of landing a person on the Moon and the value of this achievement for humanity. Eleanor Roosevelt envisioned a world with respect for human rights. She played a leading role in designing the text and gaining

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international support for the Universal Declaration for Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948.

By imagining and depicting what is possible, these leaders inspired millions of people and even future generations worldwide to pursue new paths of opportunity—for freedom and justice for all in the case of Dr. King, for science and exploration in the case of President Kennedy, and for universalizing human rights across the world in the case of Eleanor Roosevelt.

Companies and Nonprofits Envisioning a Better Future

Promoting a meaningful vision often involves engaging with partners. Nonprofit and governmental organizations provide vital services in education, healthcare, economic development, and human rights,

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as well as climate change resilience and mitigation. Their success is often buoyed by collaborating with companies that recognize mutual interests and synergies. Nonprofits bring expertise, as well as credibility and relationships with communities that are often marginalized, while companies bring valuable resources, including people, technology, and funding.

A company's vision will often address issues that are relevant to its stakeholders. Since companies depend on the productivity and loyalty of their employees to provide competitive goods and services, businesses are keen to engage and motivate their workforces. Increasingly, companies see that employees are alert to existential threats facing our world, and desire to work for businesses that improve the human condition. Consumers, as well as employees, want to play a role in building a world where they and future generations can thrive. Finally, some investors seek to invest in companies that advance the human condition.

Certain considerations are essential in developing a corporate or nonprofit vision. To do so, leaders in all sectors need to

- First, understand the way people live and make their livelihoods, and threats facing them and their families.
- Second, imagine what a better future might look like.
- Third, consider paths to achieve a better future.
- Make a plan for results.

In the 21st century, this requires a deep appreciation of the universal impact of climate change and its effects, education and the opportunities it affords, healthcare and the quality of life it can provide, and the economic and workforce conditions that are necessary for people to thrive.

Creating a Better Future for People in Kibera, Kenya

Kennedy Odede epitomizes a leader with a vision that is based on a deep understanding of his community. Odede was born into the squalid slums of Kibera in

Kenya. In the face of extreme poverty, violence, and adversity, Odede nevertheless imagined a better future for himself and the people of Kibera. As a young teen, Kennedy Odede, named in fact for President Kennedy, started a small youth group, first playing soccer, and then performing street theater to discourage domestic violence. Eventually, with support and encouragement from an American student, Jessica Posner, Odede had the opportunity to go to the U.S. where he gained a scholarship to Wesleyan University. Upon graduating, he quickly returned, together with Posner, to transform his grassroots initiative into schools for girls, the most vulnerable members of the community.

Today, at the age of 40, Odede leads Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO) in serving 2.4 million people across forty counties, educating girls and boys in tuition-free schools, and placing hundreds of young people in jobs and internships, in addition to distributing 2.5 million liters of water, providing health care in clinics, and promoting wealth accumulation through savings and loan organizations. Evolving a clear vision of the community's greater potential has been fundamental to its success. On its website, SHOFCO describes itself as a “grassroots movement that catalyzes large-scale transformation in urban slums by providing critical services for all, community advocacy platforms, and education and leadership development for women and girls.” Undaunted by the scope of a multitude of challenges, Odede was driven by imagining a better future for his community.

Funding from nearly sixty multinational corporations and foundations made it possible for SHOFCO to achieve so much. They were drawn to the vision of the greater potential of an entire community. The first was Safaricom, which Odede identifies as the game-changer. Safaricom is the largest telecommunications company in Kenya. In 2015, CEO Robert Collymore recognized what was possible when he walked through Kibera and visited the schools with Odede. Collymore understood the value to the community, as well as the importance to Kenyan-based companies to invest in girls' education, clean water, and other vital services.

Based on his experience building SHOFCO, Odede speaks to the fundamental role of local and indigenous leaders in co-designing solutions. Low- and middle-income countries are home to a multitude of local, community-based organizations that are driving innovative and cost-effective improvements in their communities. Odede advocates for investments in local organizations that are nimble and can move quickly, which is crucial.

SHOFCO's work advances a better future by addressing the education crisis. The challenge of providing education to young people cannot be overstated. According to UNICEF, seventy percent of ten-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read or understand a simple text. Referred to as the learning poverty rate, COVID further exacerbated the rate, increasing it from fifty-three percent pre-pandemic. COVID reduced educational achievement in the United States as well. Average reading scores for nine-year-olds declined five points during the pandemic, the largest drop in three decades. Mathematics scores fell by seven points, the largest drop in the five decades since scores were tracked, according to the Nation's Report Card.

Racial and gender inequities heighten learning loss. Girls, children from disadvantaged backgrounds, children in rural areas, children living with disabilities, and children from ethnic minorities have been most severely disadvantaged by school closings during COVID, according to UNICEF. The rise in migration has limited access to education for children and

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families who are fleeing human rights abuses, violence and conflicts, climate-related disasters, and untenable economic and political conditions. According to the UN, there are 114 million displaced people worldwide. Nearly half of all refugee children are unable to attend school.

In the United States, during COVID, historically underserved racial communities fell the furthest behind, according to the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. The pandemic has inflicted the greatest toll on students for these groups who lack access to computers and laptops, a quiet place to work, and teacher support.

The lack of a decent education is a human tragedy for these children, denying them a bright future that meets their aspirations and allows them to be autonomous, productive, and contributing citizens. Society's role is to provide all its children with an education to lead fulfilling lives. This is also in the interests of companies that depend on educated workforces. It is the role of leaders to envision the greater potential of our nation's and the world's children and invest in models for success.

Promoting Inclusion to Build a Better Future

A future that only benefits some segments of society will never be peaceful, sustainable, or prosperous. A vision of a future that is exclusive will fail to capture the rich potential that all people have to offer; it will also be rife with conflict and suffering. Only by including all people in contributing to the world's greater potential will we achieve all that is possible, for individuals, society, and the enterprise.

Companies grow value for shareholders by building rich human capital throughout the organization, finding innovative solutions to social, economic, and environmental challenges, and expanding their reach to new markets. Unfortunately, most companies limit their access to the very employees who would bring fresh perspectives and much-needed capabilities to develop, produce, and market the most competitive

products and services. In fact, the world's largest multinational corporations, the majority of which are US-based, have concentrated on workforces and markets comprised of white men.

This focus has excluded people of color, women, refugees and immigrants, people who identify as LGBTQ+, and people with disabilities, among others. Yet, for companies, economies, and society, including marginalized people presents valuable opportunities. By expanding their reach to people with a wider variety of skill sets, qualities, experiences, and backgrounds, inclusive employment will make companies more innovative, competitive, and profitable in a highly diverse marketplace.

Furthermore, by building more inclusive workforces, companies will promote wealth in new segments of society, thereby increasing the pool of consumers of products and services. Racism and discrimination degrade humanity, society, and economies worldwide. Expanding employment to include people from diverse backgrounds is a moral imperative and also presents a powerful opportunity to unleash the economic potential of vast human resources.

Unfortunately, various political, legal, and ideological challenges threaten progress in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This interference is delaying or even halting some DEI initiatives. The full extent and duration of the damage is yet to be seen.

Nonetheless, nonprofits and companies that envision an inclusive workforce and consumer base will continue to drive success in business and society. Below are several examples of corporate-nonprofit partnerships to engage people from marginalized communities in order to advance communities and economies.

Women continue to experience gender wage gaps worldwide due to differences in educational opportunity and attainment, gender segregation in jobs, discrimination, bias, lack of pay transparency, and caregiving responsibilities that fall disproportionately on women. Yet, according to Moody's Analytics, closing the gender gap in OECD countries can raise global economic activity by approximately \$7 trillion. Furthermore, according to Nielsen, women are the

world's most powerful consumer demographic. By 2028, women will control seventy-five percent of discretionary spending.

Various organizations, companies, and partnerships center inclusion in their vision of the 21st century workforce. Girls Who Code (GWC) is a global nonprofit that works with over one hundred multinational corporations to build the world's largest pipeline of future female engineers. Together, the organization and its business partners envision a future where women are provided with access to some of the world's most lucrative career opportunities. Technovation is a global tech education NGO that works with scores of companies to involve girls in finding innovative solutions to challenges such as domestic violence, the opioid epidemic, e-waste, climate change, and accessibility.

Racial Equity could also boost economic growth and innovation. In fact, economic equity would lead to \$25.6 trillion in gross domestic product gains over thirty years, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Additionally, since white people will become a minority demographic in the United States by 2044, companies that favor a labor pool of white people will limit their access to the rich human capital of the majority of Americans. To advance a more inclusive workforce, Per Scholas, a US nonprofit, prepares women and men of color for tech careers and connects them with more than 850 employers nationwide.

LGBTQ+ employees also face discrimination and hostility in the workplace. Yet, companies with LGBTQ+-supportive policies beat MSCI benchmarks, according to Credit Suisse and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). Furthermore, people who identify as LGBTQ+ represent 560–800 million people worldwide and \$4 trillion to \$5 trillion in purchasing power. LGBTQ+-inclusion also strengthens regional economies by attracting more skilled workers, greater numbers of tourists, and foreign direct investment at an average of 4.5 times higher than countries that fail in acceptance. Clearly, a workforce that includes people who identify as LGBTQ+ will grow its potential in the global marketplace. This is why over a hundred

companies partner with the nonprofit Coqual to advance LGBTQ+ inclusion.

People with disabilities constitute yet another worldwide demographic that faces stigma and discrimination. One billion people (15% of the world's population) experience some form of disability. Disability can increase the risk of poverty, through lack of employment and education opportunities, lower wages, and increased cost of living. Yet, companies that lead in disability inclusion generate more revenue, net income, and profit, according to Accenture.

Microsoft, the American-based multinational technology company, has distinguished itself in its leadership in promoting inclusive hiring for people with disabilities. The company describes hiring people with disabilities as a skills play. A talent play. Microsoft also recognizes the market advantage of inclusive technology design. The company engages with members of the disability community worldwide for product testing and feedback, in addition to collaborating with nonprofit partners and subject matter experts. The company recognizes that by including people with disabilities as employees and consumers, Microsoft will advance its own greater potential and that of society.

Global migrants and refugees also face discrimination. More than one hundred million people worldwide were forced to flee their homes in 2022. This is more than double the 42.7 million who remained forcibly displaced a decade ago. Disasters due to climate change and geopolitical conflicts will further drive migration. The United States has been the main destination for international migrants since 1970. While migration

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of large numbers of people can cause disruptions, it also represents a valuable opportunity, particularly for countries with declining demographics.

Furthermore, myriad studies show that migrants generate wealth and that global freedom of movement would increase the gross world product by 50%–150%. McKinsey reports that migrants contribute almost ten percent of global GDP and that developed nations are the primary beneficiaries. Given these numbers, it is clear that employing refugees in their new home countries will benefit businesses and society. Once again, an inclusive vision promises greater prosperity.

Tent Partnership for Refugees is a global NGO that mobilizes more than 300 companies worldwide to improve the lives and livelihoods of over thirty-six million refugees forcibly displaced from their home countries. One of these corporations is Sodexo, a French food services and facilities management company, with over 400,000 employees, operating in fifty-five countries, and serving over 100 million customers daily. The company feeds employees and customers in a vast array of venues and businesses, from public entertainment sites, museums, and zoos, to faculty and students in cafeterias at companies and universities worldwide. Sodexo reports that among the many benefits of hiring refugees, one is that customers appreciate seeing Sodexo's food service employees from their own countries.

These are just a few examples of companies and nonprofits that lead the way in building more inclusive workforces to promote prosperity. Together, they have a vision of the greater potential in a world that engages with people from all backgrounds.

Steps in Creating a Vision

There is a preliminary step for leaders to envision a better future that will benefit society and their companies: they must get proximate to issues that matter. Proximity to the issues is particularly apt in the case of SHOFCO in Kibera, where Kennedy Odede grew up in the communities that his organization serves, and the in case of Tent Partnership for

Refugees, founded by Hamdi Ulukaya, Owner, Founder, and Chairman of Chobani. Ulukaya himself immigrated to the United States from a small village in eastern Turkey. Another way for business leaders to get proximate to issues that matter is to serve on nonprofit boards. I make the case for this approach in “Developing Visionary Leaders,” an article published in this journal in 2005 (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ltl.177>).

While every organization and company is different and requires certain bespoke elements, there are basic steps that leaders can take to create a compelling vision. The process for leaders to imagine the greater potential is to

- Assess the most vital challenges facing communities where the organization's employees, constituents, clients, and customers, live and work. Consider issues such as education, housing, healthcare, and workforce development.
- Determine the company's or the nonprofit's most relevant and unique areas of expertise and capability.
- Consider how the organization can leverage its particular strengths to have the greatest impact.
- Create the vision, and a plan to achieve success.

Trane Technologies is an example of a company with a vision, to which it aligns its business plan and corporate culture. Recognizing the existential threat of climate change to companies and communities worldwide, Trane boldly announces its vision on the front of its website: “A better world for everyone.” Trane proclaims that as a world leader in creating comfortable, sustainable, and efficient environments, it puts the planet first. The vision speaks to the company's central work in decarbonizing buildings and cities, while also committing to brighter futures for all: “We're uplifting our culture and communities through an inclusive approach and focus on education and career development.”

Recognizing that people are their greatest asset, Trane connects their commitment to the long-term well-being of its employees and communities. Furthermore, the company presents itself as a unique

opportunity for investors, by describing its long-term approach to growth for the company and the planet. With a plan that is aligned to the company's vision, Trane Technologies is appealing to its most essential stakeholders: customers that are commercial enterprises, as well as civic and public institutions, employees, communities, and investors.

Importantly, Trane's corporate vision is set by its leadership, including its board of directors. In fact, every board committee has a facet of responsibility related to the company's vision of a sustainable future.

The Duty of Imagination

Determining the company's or nonprofit's vision is a central aspect of leadership. The 2005 article mentioned above, "Developing Visionary Leaders," proposes the "Duty of Imagination," as an additional responsibility for corporate and nonprofit leaders. Oversight alone is not sufficient. The role of leadership is to envision the enterprise's greater potential in the global sphere, and to then ensure that there is an effective plan for success. This is the duty of imagination. This is vision. This is leadership.

The information about SHOFCO, Trane, Microsoft, Sodexo, Tent Partnerships, Per Scholas, and Girls Who Code, and some of the data points about marginalized communities are adapted from my book, *A Better World, Inc.: Corporate Governance for an Inclusive, Sustainable, and Prosperous Future* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).



Alice Korngold and her team provide strategy advisory services and facilitate leadership strategy retreats for executives of multinational companies and board members of global, national, and regional nonprofits. Their expertise is in board governance; sustainability and ESG; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and measurement and ratings. Korngold is the author of three books. She addresses conferences and corporate audiences worldwide.