

THE DISCIPLINE OF VISIONING FOR LEADERS

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Visioning is the ability to imagine potential futures that are ambitious and achievable and then mobilize your organization to realize them. The discipline of visioning is about building bridges between possible futures and current realities. It's not enough to envision a desirable future; you must communicate and energize people around the vision. That's where what I call "powerful simplification" connects with visioning—you must articulate your vision (and the strategies that will achieve it) clearly and compellingly.

What is vision?

For business leaders, vision is a compelling mental picture of how the organization will look and feel when the strategy is fully realized. A good vision defines a future that is meaningful and attractive. A vision should answer the question: Given what this organization has to do (the mission), given its priorities (the core objectives), and given how it will move forward (the strategy), what will it look like and how will people act when its vision is fulfilled?

It is important to note that the concepts in this article, adapted from my recent book, *The Six Disciplines of*

Strategic Thinking: Leading Your Organization into the Future, apply to leaders in various societal sectors.

It's essential to distinguish vision from related concepts such as mission, core objectives, and strategy. To do so requires understanding what a vision is *not*:

- A vision is not a mission, which is what the organization's leaders want the organization to do and be known for doing.
- A vision is not a set of core objectives, which are the priorities that define the targets for the mission.
- A vision is not a strategy, which lays out a general path by which the mission and core objectives will be realized.

Of course, your organization's vision must be consistent with its mission, core objectives, and strategy. Something that causes substantial and positive change rarely happens without a purpose and vision that are connected and cohesive.

It's essential to distinguish vision from purpose, another critical element of organizational alignment. Purpose is about defining why your organization

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exists. Vision is about identifying an inspiring future destination or achievement. As Peter M. Senge writes about NASA's quest to go to the moon in his seminal book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*, "Purpose is 'advancing man's capability to explore the heavens.' Vision is 'a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s.'"

Why is visioning important?

Visioning is an essential discipline of strategic thinking. A compelling vision generates *directed passion*. You might develop the best strategy in the world, but if your people don't understand *why* action is necessary, *where* you will go, *what* needs to be accomplished, and *how* it will be achieved, your strategy is useless. Visioning provides a clear picture of the "why" and the "where" through communication that distills, informs, and inspires.

Visioning is an essential discipline of strategic thinking.

In business, visionary leaders energize their organizations. A compelling vision helps employees understand how their work contributes to the enterprise's success and furthers its mission and purpose. This can yield enormous benefits. It's even better when the vision aligns with employees' values. Research published in the *Harvard Business Review* in 2018 established that employees are willing to sacrifice future earnings for work they feel is meaningful.

How do you develop a vision?

One type of visioning involves looking forward and then reasoning backward, a process called "backcasting." You look forward in time, visualize a desirable future state, and then work back to define what it will take to get there. Alternatively, you can take stock and imagine the possibilities. You do this by taking an inventory of your available resources and envisioning what you can achieve with them—a process termed "effectuation" in research about entrepreneurship. What have we got today, and what do we already do well that we can build upon?

Regardless of whether you work backward or forward, the goal is to imagine potential futures that are ambitious but also achievable. Ambition is essential because realizing the vision needs to be a stretch for your team and organization. But your vision can't be seen as "pie in the sky," or it's unlikely to be realized.

From personal vision to shared vision

To create a shared vision, you should first develop a personal vision. Can you imagine a clear, desirable future state to which you want to lead your business? In addition to being an achievable goal, it must be consistent with your leadership style and situational context. Often, it's valuable to test your personal vision with people you trust.

It can help to link your vision to your core objectives. This makes it more action-orientated and tangible than if it's based solely on the firm's core values. Those core values, such as loyalty, commitment, dignity, and

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integrity, give your vision its meaning and sense of purpose and can help to deepen its impact.

It also helps to base your vision on some well-recognized motivators. According to the late Harvard University psychologist David McClelland, people are driven by the needs for achievement (the desire to compete, perform better or win), affiliation (to identify with a social group or be part of a team), and power (the search for status or control). A vision can articulate how a strategy will meet some of these needs, motivating your team more effectively. Additional examples of motivational drivers that well-crafted visions can evoke are shown in Figure 1.

Once you have a rough draft, test and refine your ideas by discussing them with a broad range of stakeholders who can subject your vision to scrutiny, searching for gaps or flaws. As your vision progresses through clarification, testing, and refinement, it will eventually evolve into a shared narrative for success. In some cases, it makes sense to involve others—such as your leadership team or the broader organization—in co-creating the vision.



FIGURE 1. MOTIVATIONAL DRIVERS

You do it when it makes sense, and sometimes it doesn't. Specifically, you should only do so when you can develop a vision that truly inspires your organization. This may not be the case if your business is making redundancies. Also important is whether people's involvement in creating the vision will increase their commitment to achieving it. If so, the benefits may outweigh the potential costs of compromising on elements of your vision.

The importance of powerful simplification

To galvanize people behind the vision, you must seek to achieve *powerful simplification* by communicating your organization's future direction in straightforward, evocative terms. The need to get people on board with your vision may seem self-evident, but knowing it and doing it are different things. Many leaders struggle with visioning as they move to more senior roles.

It often helps to create stories and develop metaphors to support your vision. Stories and metaphors are potent ways to communicate the threats and opportunities on the horizon and the strategies you will use to manage them. Consider this vision statement for an eyecare business: *Vision for life*. It evokes how eyesight develops and changes over a lifetime and helps connect the organization more closely to the experience of its patients.

Telling stories is one impactful way that leaders influence and inspire. Stories help create a sense of connection and build familiarity and trust in ways that data points cannot. Stories also stick in our minds. We can recall information in stories more accurately and for far longer than information gleaned from facts and figures. Research confirms that well-crafted stories are highly effective vehicles for influence.

The best stories distill core lessons—mistakes make for good narrative fodder—and provide models for the behavior you want to encourage. Vision stories should also resonate with the older mythology of the company, drawing on the best elements of what was and combining them with what the organization

might become. This process is beneficial not just for communicating the vision but for framing strategy and other essential elements that establish the overall direction of the business.

Repetition can also make for persuasive communication, based on social psychology findings showing how repeated exposure to a stimulus enhances positive feelings towards it. This is known as the *exposure effect*. Research also shows that it can help to express your vision in different modalities—in a speech, a letter, or a video—to help the message sink in.

Another vital element is the vision's evocative descriptors—statements that graphically embody the core values. Rather than merely articulating a desire or target, evocative descriptors help form a picture in the mind of the person hearing or seeing them. The fast food group McDonald's vision statement uses several evocative descriptors: *To move with velocity to drive profitable growth and become an even better McDonald's serving more customers delicious food each day around the world.*

When articulating vision descriptors, remember how the statement will be organized (structure, information flow) and how it will feel (the behavior called for and the needs to be met). Judging by many corporations' bland vision statements, leaders often struggle to produce descriptions with enough detail. A powerful vision should form a gripping image in one's mind.

To be sure, leaders cannot communicate directly with each person in their organization. This means they must learn to persuade from a distance. And by enlisting people who believe in what they're doing, they can cultivate buy-in and enthusiasm.

For this, leaders need to send the right signals through the company and personally live up to the change they're asking others to create. This goes beyond modeling behavior; it means making day-to-day decisions that support the vision. A big part of this comes from putting enough resources behind the idea, not just in terms of capital investment, but allocating the right people to work on the vision and setting measurable targets to benchmark progress.

In addition, written strategies, compensation plans, measurement systems, and annual budgets are powerful levers for influencing behavior. They “push” people in the right direction by setting expectations and defining rewards and advancement. It therefore follows that the success of these tools relies upon authority, loyalty, and the expectation of reward and progression. The tools will be especially useful when realizing a vision requires improving company performance or reshaping its culture.

But leaders must also “pull” employees by defining an attractive future state so that individuals want to change for themselves. This will only happen if employees believe the new operating methods will better meet their needs than existing approaches—for example, by promising to create less frustration, reduce wasted energy, or boost the likelihood of advancement. “Pulling” takes different forms. At the lowest level, it requires active listening and the ability to give individual feedback in a way that strengthens relationships. At the team level, it means defining and sharing a personal vision to inspire a critical mass of people.

Push and pull approaches are complementary. Neither method will be enough to alter embedded habits or working practices to bring about change. Most leaders tend to be adept at one or the other. To improve your capability to do both, you should strive to understand employee preferences and find ways to develop skills. You must also surround yourself with people who can supplement your communication abilities.

Involving the broader organization in your plans is important because you will otherwise invite unhelpful speculation. Company grapevines fill information voids, powering the rumor mill and distorting your message. Leaders must take control of the narrative before it gets away from them. It could be as simple as creating an in-house newsletter or writing a column in a corporate magazine to communicate the vision. Some leaders use vision boards to represent their goals visually. Typically, these are poster-sized and contain images and text that embody what you're trying to accomplish.

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Developing your visioning capabilities

You can become better at visioning—through intentional observation, imaginative visualization, and clarification. One technique for developing visioning ability is the *architect's exercise*. Every time you enter a new home or office, take a few minutes to think about how you would change the space to make it a more attractive place to live or work. As you do this, write down observations and insights as the basis for reflection. Keeping a journal of thoughts can help capture insights and spark ideas for other concepts. By exercising the visualization “muscle” in this and other ways, you will build your capacity for envisioning potential futures for your organization.

Another helpful process is organizing a “visioning workshop,” where you and your team meet off-site to envision the enterprise’s future collectively. You do this by separating participants into small groups where each person describes the scene in their mind’s eye. Each team member collates these images and presents them to the whole workshop. The process helps individual leaders clarify their thinking and provides a sense of what degree of change the top team might accept. This can help leaders shape a commonly held vision of the future while staying more in control of the visioning process. The downside is that visioning workshops involving just top leaders may not engage subordinates. Engaging others early on can help build organizational commitment, though some leaders may not wish to share a vision until it is fully formed.

Conclusion

Visioning is the process of creating a compelling vision for the future and using that vision to guide and motivate others to realize it. A vision is an inspiring picture of what the organization could become. It provides a sense of direction and purpose for the organization and its members. Visioning in leadership involves developing and communicating the vision through powerful simplification and storytelling that align the organization’s strategies, policies, and actions with the vision.

This article is adapted from the book *The Six Disciplines of Strategic Thinking: Leading Your Organization into the Future*, by Michael D. Watkins (Harper Business, 2024).

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Michael D. Watkins is a professor of leadership at the IMD Business School and a cofounder of Genesis Advisers. In 2023, he was inducted into the Thinkers50 Hall of Fame in recognition of his decades of contributions to management and leadership. Michael's international bestseller, The First 90 Days, has been called “the onboarding bible” by The Economist and is the classic reference for leaders in transition. In addition to his research and writing, Michael coaches C-level executives taking new roles, supports executive team development, and consults extensively on organizational transformation.