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## How to Build a Better Vision Statement

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## [How to Build a Better Vision Statement](#)

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It is a fact-of-life that an organization must have a formal vision statement. Like any leadership tool, it is only effective if it is done right. Research has demonstrated time and again that a vision statement can improve organizational performance as well as individual follower performance, but only if the vision contains certain characteristics (Baum, Locke, & Kirkpatrick, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Kirkpatrick, Wofford, & Baum, 2002). These characteristics have been identified as follows:

- Brevity
- Clarity
- Abstract and challenging
- States the organization's purpose
- Future focused
- Sets a desirable goal
- Matches the organization's success measures

Despite the potential for positive impact, little practical guidance exists to tell leaders exactly what these characteristics are. And, the lack of specific examples can make it difficult for leaders to know when they have created a truly powerful vision statement.

In this article, I provide concrete guidance for leaders who are faced with creating an inspiring vision. I rely on actual vision statements to illustrate the characteristics of effective vision statements. Although some of these examples come from large organizations, no doubt with the resources to hold off-site retreats focusing on vision development, a majority of the examples are taken from small- and medium-size organizations that likely rely on a single leader or small executive team to develop a vision statement. Also, the examples presented are drawn from both for-profit companies as well as government organizations. Extraordinary vision statements should not be rare occurrences!

### **Brevity**

A good vision statement is succinct, which makes it easy for managers and leaders to communicate and employees to remember. Vision statements are less effective when they are too short (such as a one-sentence vision statement) or too long (such as a two or three page vision statement). But exactly

how long should it be? The average vision statement is about 35 words, or two to three sentences. This length seems to be about right for effectively communicating the vision statement to employees. It is long enough to clearly describe the vision but not so long as to be difficult to remember. An example of a vision statement of typical length is the following:

We strive to bring pleasure to our customers by providing superior architectural woodwork at affordable prices. We want to make it possible for others to enjoy the beauty of high quality wood products. Toward that end, we build long-term relationships with suppliers, employ and reward skilled employees, maintain modern machinery and production methods, and minimize waste.

In just three sentences, this vision statement conveys a desirable goal of allowing others to enjoy the beauty of its wood products and describes how it will go about working toward that vision. In addition to brevity, a good vision statement should clearly convey the desired message, which is discussed next.

## **Clarity**

An unclear vision statement can result in varying levels of understanding. Because a wide variety of jobs and individuals (each with their own values, interests, personalities, skills, and so forth) exist within most organizations, it is easy for employees to obtain widely varying messages that are incongruent and unintended. The challenge is to create a vision that applies to the entire organization and its different jobs/employees while at the same time unites the organization and provides a stable, transcendent goal. Avoiding jargon and buzz words and using understandable terminology is one way to ensure clarity. Writing concise sentences is another way of obtaining a clear vision statement.

Clarity and brevity are often tradeoffs. It is difficult to clearly communicate the vision in a statement that is too short (e.g., a phrase or a single sentence). Many organizations have had success with vision statements that are longer than average. Some organizations (e.g., Ford Motor Company and Johnson & Johnson) with lengthy vision statements have given cue, or index, cards to employees to refer to when needed.

Other organizations have vision statements that contain multiple components. They use the different components to structure the message and clearly communicate a congruent set of ideas. An example of a vision statement that is longer than average but that clearly communicates the vision is the following:

[The company] is committed to maintaining and enhancing a position as a leading supplier of building products in the [County] area. [The company] recognizes that excellence in customer service and putting customers first can be a primary tool in achieving that goal. The management of the company also realizes that this can be achieved only with dedicated employees and a working environment that supports this dedication.

With this commitment, we are able to offer our customers better service than they can receive at any other building supply dealer. We must be extremely prompt with all services offered. We must do the job right the first time as to make as little work for our customers as well as fellow employees. Our customers will want to do business with [the company] because we make the task of building or remodeling as easy as possible.

This vision statement contains an overall goal and describes what management and employees are expected to do in order to achieve this goal. The length allows for a more detailed description. But, it is unlikely that employees will be able to repeat this statement from memory, so leaders will need to ensure that the vision doesn't get mis-communicated when paraphrased by employees.

## **Abstract and Challenging**

Vision statements are long-term in nature but not in the same way as a long-term goal. Whereas goals are meant to be highly specific and concrete, vision statements are meant to provide an abstract picture of the organization's desired future. Abstractness means that a vision can never be fully reached. However, in practice, it is possible to act in accordance with the vision statement. Thus, one can say that "the vision is being carried out" or that "the organization has moved closer to achieving the vision." But, it should not be possible to state that the vision statement has been attained once and for all and that it is time to move on to the next vision statement.

This is not to say that a vision statement should never be revised or updated. When revision is necessary, it should not be because the vision has been completed but because the organization's ideal goal has changed.

An effective vision statement sets an abstract and challenging goal. The goal should not be stated concretely (e.g., "to build a new building") but rather at a higher level of abstraction (e.g., "to create beautiful living spaces"). This allows it to be relevant to all employees, thus permitting it to guide their daily actions and decisions. Abstractness also provides for flexibility. An effective vision statement provides guidance to employees when they encounter novel or unforeseen situations. This characteristic may be increasingly important in virtual and international work environments in which employees must independently make decisions with little input from upper management. It also should not be too easy or too hard to carry out on a daily basis, but rather should challenge employees to live up to the vision. The following vision statement does a good job at communicating an abstract, challenging goal in a manner that is both clear and succinct:

[The company's] business vision is to make interior environments more beautiful through the valuable, careful, and efficient production of architectural millwork, thereby providing an enriched quality of life to all who view and use our work.

## **States the Organization's Purpose**

At the heart of the vision statement is a statement of purpose. Yet, many organizations fail to include even a general idea of why they are in business, including overly general statements such as to "develop new markets," "to be the best," or "to make money." These types of vision statements will not provide effective guidance to employees who are responsible for developing ideas for new products/services or addressing new competitors.

An effective vision statement should describe what the organization intends to achieve. It also draws a line between what the organization is and is not willing to do to succeed. The statement of purpose can include the organization's current or desired products or services, its markets (industry, sub-industries, geographic locations, or customers) in which it intends to offer those products and services, and the impact that its products and services are intended to have. Examples of vision statements that illustrate

the organization's purpose are as follows:

[Our business] is committed to being the major supplier of custom millwork for Philadelphia. Through continuous improvement of our knowledge and skill and continuous innovation in our production methods, we will maintain our reputation for unparalleled product and service. We will continue to be the employer of choice for the city's best wood craftsmen.

[The Company] is a manufacturer of high quality architectural millwork products for mostly commercial and institutional environments throughout the Northeastern United States. The company's products are utilized in the creation of interiors which improve the quality, efficiency, safety and appearance of working environments.

[T]o remain a small custom millwork shop providing quality and service to customers within a 100-mile radius.

## **Focuses on the Future**

Focus on the future may be one of the most misunderstood aspects of the vision statement. Effective vision statements do not describe the current state of events. Nor do they describe short-term desired states, such as what the organization intends to achieve this year or the following year.

Instead, good vision statements are long-term. They describe the organization's desired end-state well into the future. Effective vision statements often describe on-going actions in which the organization will engage. Examples of future-oriented vision statements are the following:

To provide, renovate, and maintain monumental woodwork that are, by virtue to design and craftsmanship, able to survive longer than their creator...

[Our company] will be known for building long-lasting monumental woodwork. We have a reputation for good prices and fast service, but we will be known for longevity of the product.

In addition to a long-term focus, effective vision statements are stable. Frequently changing the vision statement would lead to significant confusion. However, infrequent updating of the vision statement may be required. For example, Johnson & Johnson updates its Credo, and although key ideas in its Credo rarely change, minor adaptations are made periodically. The following vision statement conveys the idea that the vision and its values will remain constant:

...to achieve 100% customer satisfaction for every product that we sell. We will be relentless in the pursuit of that goal and will never vary from the principles of customer satisfaction: Quality, Value, Company Image.

### **Sets a Desirable Goal**

A good vision statement inspires followers by setting a desirable goal. It emphasizes fundamental values, a collective identity, the organization's uniqueness, and employees' worth and efficacy, each of which is described in more detail below.

Clarifies Values

The vision statement is a persuasive statement that attempts to align employees' values with those of the organization and leader, thus enhancing employees' self-concept. Every individual possesses certain values, which are what an individual deems important and works to acquire or retain. In some cases, employees may already possess in their personal lives the same values that are expressed in the vision. In such cases, employees may be more likely to "buy into" the vision statement. In other cases, the vision statement may persuade employees to change their value hierarchy so that their personal values correspond to the organization's values. The following vision statement effectively communicates values through a series of behavioral statements that describe how the values are relevant to employees:

To profit by being the respected leader in providing quality architectural woodwork and services to our customers through our commitment to excellence, continuous innovation, and the development of long-term relationships.

To provide an environment that respects the individual, creates opportunities for personal growth, promotes teamwork, expects professionalism, and demands quality.

To promote long-term partnerships with employees, customers, and suppliers built on consideration, trust, open communications, integrity, and professionalism.

To prosper from our respect of the environment, our responsibility to the communities we serve and live in, and the concern for the personal fulfillment of our people.

As illustrated in the above vision statement, it is possible to avoid long lists of values and yet incorporate shared values into the vision statement in ways that are meaningful to employees. The following statement avoids a list format and yet still effectively refers to at least six different values that are incorporated into the vision statement:

To continue to be a leader in the woodworking industry using creative and innovative ideas. To provide a high-quality product at a fair price backed with dependable service. To create an atmosphere in which all employees can develop to their greatest potential and where willingness to accept change will ensure continuous improvement.

Desired values also can be presented in the vision statement by emphasizing the impact that the organization wants to have on people's lives. An excellent example is the following:

...[T]o improve the lives of our customers, employees, and suppliers by making fine woodwork for interior spaces.

A related technique is to describe values as they relate to employees' self-concepts. A self-concept is an individual's unique identity. The following vision statements refer to employees' self-concepts as a means of presenting values:

We will be known for the striking beauty of the veneered cabinets that we will sell to the nation's most famous tenants.

The above vision statement is likely to arouse employees' values of beauty and tap into their self-concepts of being highly skilled woodworkers who don't just create cabinets but works of art.

### *Emphasizes Working Together*

A second technique for setting a desirable goal through the vision statement is to emphasize collective identities and to state the potential impact of the organization. These types of vision statements tend to describe a common future that can only be obtained by employees working together. Through organizational synergy, more can be accomplished by working together than apart.

References to collective identities make people feel that they belong to an organization that makes a difference. Vision statements emphasizing collective identity use terms such as we, our, together, united, partner, participation, organizational culture, community, team, and teamwork. References to the organization's collective purpose, values, and impacts are ways of emphasizing collective identities. The following aspects of vision statements stress working with customers, teamwork, and partnerships:

[The company is] a collective, cooperative, open and creative working relationship between individuals that reflects their commitment to themselves and their desire to participate in offering quality [work] to the customer.

To be the professional team of choice, providing quality engineering and technical services focused on customer satisfaction. We strive to provide a quality product, on time and within budget, which will exceed our customers' expectations.

Some organizations balance individual versus collective identity components by describing how the individual's identity contributes to the collective identity. For example, the following vision statement effectively balances these two components by designating that individuals' dignity and worth is important to the organization as a whole:

We believe that great companies are built by people who take pride in their work. They are proud of their ability to continually improve, proud of the people with whom they work and proud of the difference their products makes in the lives of others. We are determined to become a great company built by people who take pride in their accomplishments and their future potential.

In contrast, vision statements containing less desirable goals tend to be leader-focused, do not emphasize a single organization but instead present separate vision statements for each business unit, and lack references to employee cooperation and common tasks and goals. These types of vision statements often include references by the manager or leader to my vision and I, and to individual responsibility, individual decision-making, and individual-based rewards. Although the leader plays an important role in formulating the vision statement, the vision statement can only be effective if others are motivated by it.

### Highlights the Organization's Uniqueness

A third technique is to reference the organization's uniqueness, such as its products/services, organizational history, market(s), customers, or geographic location. An organization that describes its unique ability can differentiate itself from its competitors and make employees feel that they are part of something special. This enhances the organization's collective identity. Such references are likely to contain specific, vivid images that are easily remembered. Also, these types of statements are unlikely

to change significantly over time. An example of a woodworking firm that emphasizes the organization's unique geographic location and impact on the local economy is the following:

This company is located in the heart of some of the best hardwood in the world. Most logs are shipped out of the area. My vision is to process the logs right here and create jobs.

Another example acknowledges the company's unique clients, as follows:

We will be known for the striking beauty of the veneered cabinets that we will sell to the nation's most famous tenants.

Effective vision statements typically avoid the generic vision statement of The vision of [our organization] is to be the best in [our industry]. A notable exception to this advice is General Electric's (GE) well-known vision statement to be number 1 or number 2 in each of the markets in which we compete. Although it could be argued that this statement is more of an organizational goal than a vision, this statement is not only preached but also practiced at GE. Employees know that their business unit is one of the top two leaders in their markets, thus enhancing collective identity and improving self-confidence and self-esteem. An example of this type of vision statement is illustrated below:

To be one of the top 5 premium grade architectural woodwork companies in the United States for overall performance, price and quality.

It is not known whether this type of vision statement has yielded the same success as it has for General Electric. Certainly, it sets a high standard to be reached even though it may not be a highly unique type of vision statement.

### *Expresses Employees' Capabilities*

A fourth way to create a desirable goal is to refer to employees' capabilities. The vision statement is a means through which leaders can express their confidence in employees' ability to achieve the vision. The vision statement is effective when the leader finds ways of stating that employees are valuable assets who should be confident of their abilities.

Expressions of confidence in employees are highly motivating and set expectations for high performance. Examples of expressions of employee worth include references to dignity, rights, opportunities for individual contributions, and employee health and safety, while confidence in employees' efficacy or capabilities stress capabilities, skills, achievement, a past record of high performance, behaving as professionals. As part of their larger visions, the following vision statements include expressions of confidence:

We are achievers – intelligent and efficient – in the way we spend our business resources of time, talent, and dollars, to bring about a successful, planned, and expected business result or profitability...

...If we are to ensure that our company becomes what it has the potential to become, all of us must participate and cooperate by listening, acting, and following up in a supportive manner. In doing so, each of us



contributes our unique skills to this exciting and challenging enterprise.

...[We are] a unified group of individuals striving to offer their customers the opportunity to participate in a partnership of learning and achievement...

Furthermore, by espousing challenging visions, organizations can build confidence by implying that employees are up to the challenge. By referencing employees' self-concept, self-esteem, and self-worth, alignment can exist between individual and organizational values. This alignment is likely to motivate employees to reach goals and thus achieve the vision.

#### Matches the Organization's Success Measures

Although the vision statement should be challenging, a wide range of performance measures exist against which progress can be appraised. Even a vision statement that meets other criteria may not be compatible with the types of success measures needed. Therefore, another important consideration is whether the vision statement matches, or fits, measures that are used to gauge success. Success measures will differ by organization and across industries. The vision statement should provide a challenge as it pertains to the relevant success measures.

Research on David McClelland's long-standing theory of individual and group motives –achievement, affiliation, and power motives – has shown that statements reflecting these motives are related to individual and organizational performance (McClelland, 1975; McClelland, 1961; McClelland, 1985). More specifically, vision statements containing two of these motives are related organizational performance depending on the type of organization (Kirkpatrick et al., 2002). Vision statements mentioning achievement and power work best for entrepreneurial organizations, while visions mentioning affiliation (or relationships among people) work best for service-oriented organizations.

#### *Achievement Images*

Images of achievement that are found in vision statements include competing against a standard of excellence, accomplishing a unique goal, and positively evaluating the organization's performance. Achievement images are related to organizational performance for entrepreneurial organizations.

The below examples are taken from entrepreneurial organizations; the achievement images are underlined for emphasis.

[The firm] takes a unique approach to the construction business...[the firm] gives to the general contractor a 'one-stop shopping' for construction projects...

[Our company] is dedicated to excellence in all phases of custom woodworking...

...[To] keep production as efficient as possible while keeping our commitment to quality...

To build the technological part of this company up to where it cannot be duplicated...

...[T]o own the finest millwork company in [the area]...

Other organizations that may benefit from including achievement images in their vision statements include technical and scientific organizations, manufacturing organizations, pharmaceutical

organizations, and other research organizations. In these organizations, providing high quality products, consistently meeting high standards (for example, for quality, production quantity, and so on), finding creative solutions, inventing innovative technologies, and discovering new breakthroughs will determine the extent to which the organization succeeds.

## **Affiliation Images**

The affiliation motive is a concern for establishing, maintaining, and restoring close personal, emotional relationships with others. Affiliation images are those which express positive or friendly feelings toward others and express sadness about being separated from others or having relationships disrupted. They also include engaging in nurturing acts.

Affiliation imagery is related to success in service-oriented organizations. Service-oriented organizations must establish and maintain relationships with a variety of stakeholders, including customers, employees, unions, suppliers, government and regulatory agencies, lawmakers, and the general public. Illustrative examples of vision statements emphasizing affiliation images include the following (with the images underlined):

We are here to provide a quality service to visitors to our lake. We must also ensure that our natural resources and facilities are provided ample protection....We must be concerned about each other...

...[W]e must be courteous in dealing with our neighbors and public visitors since we are public servants...

...[W]e are a customer oriented organization. We must keep not only the Government's best interest in mind but also our customer's best interest.

Additional organizations for which affiliation images may be important include organizations that depend on one or more stakeholders. Examples include organizations that are highly dependent on unions (e.g., auto manufacturers, airlines), the public (e.g., charitable or nonprofit organizations), and legislative or regulatory agencies (e.g., utilities, healthcare organizations, and some government agencies). Of course, all organizations depend on customers, suppliers, and employees. However, for certain organizations, success will depend heavily on having high customer satisfaction, effective relationships with suppliers, and high morale among employees.

## **Power Images**

The power motive is a concern with strong, vigorous action that affects others, actions that have an emotional impact on others, and actions that are meant to build one's reputation and status. Power images reflect strong, forceful actions that impact or attempt to impact on other people or the world at large. Images of control and regulation are considered to be power images. Giving help or support that is not explicitly requested is also considered to be a power image because the intent is not to provide assistance but rather to influence.

The power motive is especially important for entrepreneurial organizations. Entrepreneurs must convince others of the viability of their ideas. They must influence customers' perceptions to develop an image or reputation. Illustrative examples of vision statements emphasizing power imagery include the following, with power images shown underlined>:

...[T]o be a major player in the middle market or architectural woodwork.

To be known as the pre-eminent supplier...

To become the authority on architectural woodwork...

We will be recommended by architects in our region over our competitors.

Other organizations for which power images may be important include law firms, public relations firms, and marketing firms. Whereas a manufacturing organization or a research and development firm can emphasize product quality or describe a scientific breakthrough, service-oriented organizations must develop their reputation with customers. Power images in the vision statement also may be important for firms in highly competitive environments in which firms engage in a series of strategic actions and reactions (e.g., airlines and on-line retailers) or where firms are racing each other for medical or technological breakthroughs (e.g., the human genome project; the race to wire major cities with fiber optic cable).

### Multiple Images

Some organizations emphasize more than one type of motive because there are multiple success measures that exist. The achievement and power images often appear together in vision statements, as illustrated by the following:

*To be recognized [power imagery] as the best [achievement imagery], in all respects...*

To manufacture products that meet the economic and quality demands of our select market while providing exceptional service [achievement imagery] to customers, contractors, and design professionals. We want contractors, architects and customers to automatically think of [the company][power imagery]...

To be recognized [power imagery] by our customers as the most responsive [achievement imagery] supplier within our industry.

To profit by being the respected [power imagery] leader in providing quality [achievement imagery] architectural woodwork and services to our customers...

We will be known [power imagery] by builders and users for entry features and wood stairs that are made to the highest standards [achievement imagery] and delivered on time.

### THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

So, given all of these characteristics, how does a manager or leader put it all together to create a terrific vision statement? To be honest, there is no proven path that formula exactly which specific combinations of characteristics are required for any given organization. Furthermore, it is easy to think of successful organizations with vision statements that break one or two of the "rules" or guidelines. Some of the illustrative vision statements presented here even break some of the guidelines. An exceptional vision statement will not automatically contain every characteristic described here but will

tend to display many of the characteristics.

The challenge for the manager or leader is to blend art with science by attempting to follow prescribed, proven rules yet having the insight and creativity to know when to break those “rules.” All organizations, whether large or small, established or new, private or public sector, should be able to develop a great vision statement. The reward is an organization of inspired employees who have a common picture or idea of where the organization is heading which allows them to work together to carry out the vision.

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