

The Power of Organizational Visioning

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I've helped leaders build organizational visions for over twenty years. A powerful coalescing occurs when committed individuals come together after months or years of successful operation and articulate the future state they've had in mind since they "signed on."

Most people have experience with visioning, even if they've not used that term to describe it. If you've thought about buying a car, marrying and having a family, or obtaining a driver's license, you've created a vision for yourself. "Visioning" is the creation of a mental image that represents the dream or ideal future you are committed to achieve.

Articulating an organizational vision is much more difficult than generating a personal vision. A personal vision requires only the imagination of a single individual. Each of us does it all the time, often not even committing the thoughts to writing. When two or more individuals collaborate on formulating a shared vision, however, they not only have to agree on their ideas. They also have the demanding challenge of wordsmithing!

Words are symbols. Words represent perceptions, and each word holds different meanings for each individual. As I work with groups to generate vision statements, they often are able to agree quickly on the main concepts to be included. The difficult and time-consuming piece comes at the end when the participants have to join the ideas together into an intelligible description.

With persistence, however, most groups are able to craft a picture of a future state that they enthusiastically support. The process itself is invigorating as options are offered and improvements spring forward.

I advocate having as many people in an organization as possible participate in the visioning process. You see, there are actually two objectives in the generation of any organizational vision. The first and obvious objective is the creation of a product—a document that people can reference, perhaps during team planning meetings, perhaps in recruiting new members to the team.

The second, but often the more important objective, is enrolling members of the team in the vision. To accomplish a challenging vision, each member must volunteer his or her commitment and unique skills.

When leaders generate a vision statement in isolation, engaging team members is difficult. The process of enrolling individuals who have not been involved in imagining the desired future state feels a lot like selling. And sometimes team members are unwilling buyers.

I've seen too many well-meaning leaders generate mental images that never caught on with the team members. The vision statements, though carefully crafted, wound up lying dormant in a file drawer.

However, when the team members generate the vision themselves, the very act of creation stimulates the participants. The energy that develops during the process is contagious and sustainable. People often refer back to the experience of generating the vision with fond memories, realizing the privilege of having participated in a historic turning point in the organization's success.

The individuals involved in your organization work every day experiencing only current reality. For many, there is no imagination of "what could be." What they experience today is what they assume they'll experience tomorrow, and the day after that, and the next day, and so on. With no inspiring vision of something better being possible, coming to work every day can be unfulfilling and discouraging.

Whether articulated or not, and whether intentionally generated or not, everyone works with some image of the future in mind. With a little bit of planning, a couple of hours, and a good facilitator, you can bring hope and inspiration to your workplace.

Taking the time to consciously consider options and agree on a desired future destination generates alignment and focus and releases passion and energy.

More than any other obligation as a leader, you are responsible for creating an environment where each individual is inspired to apply his or her unique abilities. Is it appropriate to take a fresh look at your organizational vision—or maybe generate one for the first time?

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