



Vision: The Engine of Change

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WHY VISION?

During a recent meeting of a senior banking team, the discussion turned to the topic of vision. The team was reviewing the outcomes of their employee survey, in which the majority of respondents had indicated that their business unit's vision was "unclear and unengaging." "Maybe we don't need a vision," said one of the team members, "we have clear business goals, and our business is doing well. I think we just need to stay focused on the financial targets. Who needs a vision?" Several of the team agreed with him; the others were silent. The team then moved on to some of the other areas of feedback. Obviously, a lot was going well: their performance expectations were clear, they were strong in execution, cost management and decision making. However, the more they talked, the more they felt that something was missing: inspiration; a clarity of purpose; a shared image of the future. Eventually, in the course of the discussion, the team began to ask these critical questions: *is* vision important?...and, if so, why?

Perhaps the most famous contemporary comment on vision was provided by U.S. President George H.W. Bush who, during the 1988 Presidential campaign, derided "the vision thing" – his term for a leader's ability to articulate inspiring goals. The ensuing controversy over Bush's comments, and his record as "a one-term incrementalist with little taste for big schemes,"¹ serves only to underscore the powerful role that vision has played in human achievement. Certainly, history's great explorers, scientists, military leaders, as well as leaders of social change and business have all been inspired and guided by an image of a desired future. In our daily lives, each of us has also had more than one experience of achieving a vision, whether it was a sports team that took home the trophy, a business that exceeded its goal, or a congregation that came together to meet a community need.

"When a man does not know what harbor he is making for, no wind is the right wind."

Seneca

"In the face of uncertainty and change, people need a meaning system that allows them to connect and move forward in a productive way."

Robert Quinn

¹ Bumiller, E. (January 12, 2004). Bush Gets 'Vision Thing' and Embraces Big Risks. *New York Times*.

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So, why does vision matter? First, vision is important because it inspires and motivates. In her book, *Living Strategy*, Lynda Gratton contends that it is a human attribute to search for meaning, and the purpose of vision is to provide a meaningful context and “focal point for activity which is engaging and inspirational.”² Analytical planning tactics appeal to the mind, but vision captures the imagination and creates a sense of ownership, commitment, and energy among people. Fueled by a vision, people tend to become naturally self-motivated to use their talents and initiative towards achieving the desired future.

Secondly, vision provides direction and a mindset for success. Holocaust survivor, Victor Frankl, illustrated this in his moving account of his experiences as a prisoner at Auschwitz. Frankl observed that survivors of the camp were distinguished by a vision of responsibility for others and their own future which empowered them to press on and survive.³ Within organizations, vision provides a similarly positive force, acting like an internal compass which provides direction, creates positive expectations for success, and reduces fear of failure. Vision promotes innovation and creative thinking, which attracts employees and customers. Because a visionary organization knows what its ideal future looks like, its members can better recognize and seize opportunities which enhance its longer term competitive advantage.

Finally, vision is essential to successful organizational change. Globalization, technology, the need to continually flatten structures, reduce costs, improve processes and develop human capital all contribute to an environment of constant change. In this context, an enduring and compelling vision becomes the glue for the organization over time and visionary leadership becomes more important than management skills. By understanding the desired future state, people closest to the action have the opportunity to make decisions based on a shared image of the organization’s direction. Their aligned actions, based on this understanding, are the ultimate determinant of successful change.

WHAT IS VISION?

The word *vision* comes from the Latin, “to see,” and is defined as “the act or power of imagination,” “mode of seeing or conceiving,” and “unusual discernment or foresight”.⁴ In simple terms, a vision is an expression of an aspiration or desire to achieve something in the future which is greater than the

“It is always important to have something yet to do in life.”

Victor Frankl

“A vision has the impelling voice of a long line of music...a vision releases us from the weight and confusion of local problems and concerns, and allows us to see the long clear line.”

Benjamin Zander

² Gratton, L. (2000). *Living Strategy*. Great Britain: Pearson Education, 99.

³ Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*. New York: Washington Square Press.

⁴ Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary>.

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current reality. We know that vision can occur on multiple levels – personal, family, corporate, even at the level of community and society. It can be a bold global dream, such as eliminating world hunger, or a more personal, but equally daring, quest to climb a tall mountain. In any case, a true vision is an expression of our deepest values about work, organizations, community, achievement and family.

Collins and Porras highlighted Sony as a classic example of an enduring corporate vision in their article, “Building Your Company’s Vision.” In the 1950’s Sony set forth a goal to “become the company most known for changing the worldwide poor-quality image of Japanese products.”⁵ Sony was able to convey a vivid image of the future by adding, “We will create products that become pervasive around the world...We will be the first Japanese company to go into the U.S. market and distribute directly...We will succeed with innovations that U.S. companies have failed at – such as the transistor radio...Fifty years from now, our brand name will be as well known as any in the world...and will signify innovation and quality that rival the most innovative companies anywhere...‘Made in Japan’ will mean something fine, not something shoddy.”⁶ In this way, Sony expressed a daring aspiration for the future, grounded in the values of innovation and individual ability, as well as the larger purpose of transforming the world’s opinion of Japan.⁷ The accuracy of this prediction is now obvious. The question that remains, however, is how individuals, communities and organizations are able to successfully harness the power of vision to achieve outcomes like Sony’s. Some “golden rules” are suggested below, as guidelines to consider in creating and realizing powerful visions.

“Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men’s souls.”

Daniel Burnham, Architect of Union Station, 1908

THE SIX “GOLDEN RULES” OF VISION

1. A vision is purposely and consciously created

It sometimes appears that visioning comes as a natural gift to only a few chosen leaders. There may be some truth to this: we can all point to certain leaders who are particularly gifted at picturing and communicating a clear and compelling future direction. World leaders from Alexander the Great to Winston Churchill, social revolutionaries like Joan of Arc and Gandhi, leaders of industry such as British Petroleum’s Lord Browne and GE’s Jack Welch – all are recognized as articulate and charismatic leaders, and are known for their visionary abilities.

⁵ Collins, J.C. & Porras, J.I. (2000). Building Your Company’s Vision. *HBR OnPoint*, 410X, 76.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

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However, this only obscures the fact that vision is accessible to everyone, whether it comes all at once, like a bolt of lightning, or through a planned and orderly process. The key point is that visioning is a conscious act to which leaders and organizations should dedicate time, resources and creative brainpower.

Leaders should keep in mind two points about vision. First, successful leaders define and use a methodology to establish and share a vision. A recent study by the Corporate Leadership Council documents a wide variety of methodologies utilized across a number of corporations.⁸ Most companies assemble a leadership team to guide the change initiative, which begins with a process of articulating the desired future. Employee focus groups, surveys and other internal data collection methods may be used to test and create buy-in for the vision. Business strategies are developed to define specific actions, focused on execution. Education, human resources and communication strategies are developed to share the vision and align the organization's processes with the change. The next sections will focus more on some of these specific approaches; the point here is that it is the leader's imperative to *define and use* an approach to create a powerful and shared vision.

Secondly, an effective leader knows that a real vision is inspiring and must therefore appeal to the human heart. For many, this is the most difficult part because it requires the development of new skills, quite different from the managerial skills of planning, organizing, control and problem solving.⁹ Human assets are distinct from financial assets, argues Lynda Gratton, and leaders of people must recognize that "we have hopes and fears, we have a soul, and we engage in our dreams..."¹⁰ True visioning requires us to connect at an emotional level. The implication for leaders is that they must purposely develop their own emotional and trust-building capabilities, bringing an authenticity to the process. Gratton uses Hewlett Packard in the late '90's as an example of an organization that was able to successfully speak to the heart of their employees, placing "dignity and respect for the individual employee at its centre."¹¹ By combining this "soft" values set, with "hard" processes such as a rigorous performance management process, HP was able to maximize human potential and achieve superior business results.

Visioning is not a magical process: it requires rigor and forethought. Effective leaders consciously select an effective visioning methodology and provide the

"...developing good business direction... is a tough, sometimes exhausting process... People who articulate such visions aren't magicians but broad-based strategic thinkers who are willing to take risks."

John Kotter

"A vision is an ideal picture of what the company could be if it fulfilled all its potential and all the human potential of its staff."

Charlotte Villiers

⁸ Building Organizational Culture for High Performance. (2003). *Corporate Leadership Council*. Article obtained from <http://www.corporateleadershipcouncil.com>.

⁹ Kotter, J.P. (2001). What Leaders Really Do. *HBR OnPoint*, 3820. 4.

¹⁰ Gratton, *Living Strategy*, 15.

¹¹ Gratton, *Living Strategy*, 7.

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commitment, time and resources to fully develop and share the vision. Leaders committed to their own continual growth and self-awareness, however, are able to bring the process alive by connecting in an inspiring and authentic way with the hopes and dreams of others in the community or organization.

2. A vision is a flexible, dynamic process

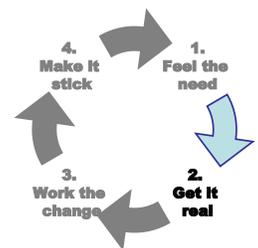
We tend to speak about vision as if it was an event, a written statement or pictorial representation. This is not accurate: it is more correct to talk about *visioning*, which is a process, not an event or a static document. Although visioning often begins with a meeting, such as a leadership team retreat, resulting in a written statement or picture, this is only the beginning. Visioning is in fact a dynamic process in which the desired future is continually reexamined and enhanced through ongoing interaction with others. This is a critical point, and the answer to many frustrated leaders who ask why their organization has failed to embrace their vision. Leaders must recognize that the words on the paper are not the real product of visioning. The desired outcome of visioning is, in fact, the collective commitment to a direction, which is expressed in a shared language, which we call a vision.

It is helpful to place visioning within the context of a larger change process, such as the Change Execution model, which approaches change as a systematic process that occurs over time. Within the context of this model, a typical visioning *process* involves these steps:

- a. **Creating a vision** (“Get it real”): An initial explicit and tangible picture of the desired end state is defined by the leader alone, or together with others. The Corporate Leadership Council finds that “high-performing companies write down their visions in clear, forceful language and demonstrate them with concrete actions.”¹² Consider Microsoft’s stated vision as an example: “One vision drives everything we do. A computer on every desk and in every house using great software as an empowering tool.”¹³ As this statement demonstrates, effective visions provide clear future direction, set high performance expectations, inspire commitment and enthusiasm and reflect the desired culture and values of the organization.¹⁴
- b. **Sharing and communicating the vision** (“Get it real”): In this phase, leaders must both “sell” the idea of the vision and remain open to input

“Articulating a compelling vision and building commitment around it marks the beginning of the journey, not the end.”

Daniel Kim



¹² Building Organizational Culture for High Performance, 6.

¹³ as cited in: Creating a World Class Vision. (2004) Healthy Companies International, 1.

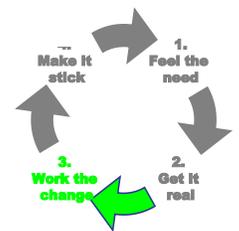
¹⁴ Ibid

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from others. This can best be achieved by encouraging the participation of a broad cross-section of the organization in the ongoing communication, development and realization of the vision. Leaders must use every avenue possible to communicate the vision, including traditional vehicles such as CEO presentations and e-mails, toolkits, brochures, and employee recognition programs which create buy-in for the vision. Some companies go beyond this and develop innovative schemes, such as the consumer products company, Alberto-Culver, who initiated “Individual Economic Values”; short statements that describe how each employee contributes to the company’s goals. These approaches promote a deeper understanding and encourage members of the organization to take appropriate actions within their position.¹⁵

c. **Empowering others to act on the vision** (“Work the change”): Organizations usually encounter two primary obstacles to implementing change: structural barriers and personal resistance.¹⁶ In this phase, leadership behaviors are especially critical and senior leaders must provide a guiding coalition which demonstrates the desired future in concrete actions, consistent with the espoused values. Beyond this, it’s important to remove obstacles and install or change systems which support the vision. Examples of this, from Corporate Leadership Council research, include:¹⁷

- *Compensation*: Marriott redesigned its compensation system in alignment with the goal of cross-brand mobility. The new uniform compensation system rewarded achievement and eliminated the barrier of separate compensation systems for each brand.
- *Encourage risk-taking and non-traditional action*: Shell’s Exploration and Production unit created an internal venture fund which encouraged innovation in new technologies by providing employees with training, time and capital to start new projects.
- *Share best practice*: The Retail company, B&Q, used data from their engagement survey to promote sharing between people and managers who have solved a similar problem.



Regardless of the specific approach, there needs to be a clear and coherent strategy and process for making the vision a reality at multiple levels of the organization. The creation of the initial vision must be seen as only the first step of a dynamic and critical process, which will ultimately involve the whole organization.

¹⁵ Building Organizational Culture for High Performance, 7.

¹⁶ Building Organizational Culture for High Performance, 8-9.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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3. A vision is always about greatness

A vision that inspires and challenges an organization or community and its members is not about incremental change, it is a grand and exciting image that invokes greatness. A vision of greatness focuses on serving, adding value to and empowering others; it goes beyond market share or other financial goals and recognizes that long term success is based on contributing to customers, employees and the organization at large.¹⁸ Great visions use the “hot” language of emotion and metaphor; not the cool language of management and control. Without these qualities, visioning efforts often fail and devolve into uninspired platitudes.

Collins and Porras coined the term “Big Hairy Audacious Goal” (BHAG) to describe this quality of taking a quantum and distinguishing leap from the ordinary. Commitment to a BHAG, they say, is the difference between merely having a goal and “becoming committed to a huge, daunting challenge – such as climbing Mount Everest. A true BHAG is clear and compelling, serves as a unifying focal point of effort, and acts as a catalyst for team spirit...A BHAG engages people – it reaches out and grabs them. It is tangible, energizing, highly focused. People get it right away; it takes little or no explanation.”¹⁹ A classic BHAG is the U.S. space agency’s successful 1960’s mission to land the first man on the moon. In this case, “a committee of wordsmiths” wasn’t necessary as the “goal itself was so easy to grasp...that it could be said a 100 different ways yet be easily understood by everyone.”²⁰ Furthermore, the vision continued to impel people long after President John F. Kennedy’s initial articulation of the vision and subsequent death.

Collins and Porras contend that a BHAG becomes a true vision when it is accompanied by a vivid and engaging description of the desired future. Here, the leaders’ ability to imbue passion, emotion and conviction into the description are essential, as Winston Churchill was able to do in 1940. “Hitler knows he will have to break us on this island or lose the war,” Churchill said. “If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free, and the life of the world may move forward into broad sunlit uplands. But if we fail, the whole world...will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age, made more sinister and perhaps more protracted by the lights of perverted science...Let us therefore...so bear ourselves that if the British Empire

“... if we work in an organization which has a vision ...which we find compelling and exciting, then we are capable of bringing ideas and creativity beyond our wildest imagination.”

Lynda Gratton

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”

Johann Wolfgang van Goethe

¹⁸ Mapes, J.J. (September 1991). Foresight First. *SKY*, 100.

¹⁹ Collins & Porras, 73.

²⁰ Ibid

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and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, “This was their finest hour.”²¹

It is just as important for a corporate vision to aspire to greatness; in fact, Collins and Porras argue that a corporate BHAG should focus 10 to 30 years in the future because it will require a team to be visionary and think in terms of extraordinary outcomes. The pharmaceutical company, Merck, as an example, was built on a 1933 vision which said, in part, “We believe that research work carried on with patience and persistence will bring to industry and commerce new life; and we have faith that in this new laboratory, with the tools we have supplied, science will be advanced, knowledge increased, and human life win ever a greater freedom from suffering and disease...”²²

4. Vision is *both* future focused and grounded in current reality

In *The Dance of Change*, Peter Senge describes the necessity for leaders to embrace the “creative tension, the energy generated when people articulate a vision and tell the truth (to the best of their ability) about current reality.”²³ Martin Luther King inspired action by dramatizing the contrast between his inspirational “dream” and the reality of racism. He expressed these thoughts in his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*: “Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind, so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths...so must we...create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism.”²⁴

In a similar vein, Robert Quinn argues that an effective vision is a “grounded vision” which is built on understanding the real facts, needs and aspirations of an organization or community.²⁵ Leaders who are committed to this understanding will circumvent the normal information filtering process and find ways to gain a first hand knowledge of reality. Quinn illustrates this with a story from Gandhi’s life, which occurred when he returned home to India after several years in South Africa. Following his return, Gandhi took a long journey to listen to people all across India:

“...the phrase **envisioned future** is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, it conveys concreteness...on the other hand, it involves a time not yet realized – with its dreams, hopes, and aspirations.”

Jim Collins and
Jerry Porras,

²¹ Collins & Porras, 73-74.

²² Ibid

²³ Senge, P., et al. (1994). *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations*. New York: Doubleday, 16.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Quinn, R.E. (2004). *Building the Bridge as you Walk on It: A Guide for Leading Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 139[??]

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Shortly after, a political convention was held. The country’s top politicians attended and gave rousing speeches calling for home rule and expulsion of the British...Finally, the unpretentious Gandhi was given a chance to speak...Gandhi began his low-key speech by talking about the ‘real’ India. The issue facing India, he argued, was not about home rule. The citizens of India did not really care who was ruling the country. What they did care about was bread and salt. Unless the politicians understood the issues of bread and salt, which they did not, the voters would simply be replacing British tyrants with Indian tyrants.

As Gandhi continued speaking, people...began to listen because they were hearing something unusual – and something of great importance. This small, assuming man had journeyed through their heartland and captured the essence of India. He was now vocalizing it in a way they could feel and understand. Such articulation is often at the heart of radical, deep change.²⁶

Quinn created the following tool for leaders to assess themselves on how well they are balancing the power of the vision with understanding the “bread and salt” of their organization.²⁷

<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Integrative</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Ungrounded; deluded	Visionary; hopeful	Grounded and visionary	Grounded; factual	Visionless; hopeless
-3 -2 -1	1 2 3	4 5 6	3 2 1	-1 -2 -3

“...reality without vision destroys possibility; vision without reality destroys credibility.”

Robert Quinn

There are many practices that help leaders to achieve this grounded vision. However, it is wise to begin with “listening tours,” informal lunches or any format which allows the leader to gain a deep understanding of the history of the organization or community and the real concerns of the people who are part of it. Following that, the leader can bring the vision to life by contrasting it with illustrative stories he or she has learned about the current organization and by using metaphors that capture the “creative tension” between the present and desired future.

5. A vision does not tell you how to get there.

If you know how to get there, it’s a plan, not a vision. A plan is a blueprint, such as what an architect would draw for a new bridge, complete with measurements and construction information. A vision is more like a full-color video of a visit to a magnificent structure, such as the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. In the vision, you can see the red color, feel the swaying of the bridge as you walk across

²⁶ Quinn, 137-8.

²⁷ Ibid.

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it, touch the huge steel columns, and hear the cars driving across. The power of visioning is that it allows us to first savor the future we've created, and then worry about hiring the architect, buying materials and constructing the bridge.

This is a critical point, as there are few things more deadly to real change than the need to know explicitly how it will happen in advance. Deep change is a process of learning as we go, precisely because we haven't been there before. To extend the bridge metaphor further, in individual and organizational change, there is rarely a clear blueprint at the outset. In fact, it is the mutual commitment to a clearly articulated future that drives us to invent new perspectives and solutions as we move toward the desired end state – a process which cannot be captured in a precise plan at the outset. As Robert Quinn expressed it, “when we commit to a vision to do something that has never been done before, there is no way to know how to get there. We simply have to build the bridge as we walk on it.”²⁸

“Change efforts have to mobilize people around what is not yet known, not yet experienced. They require a leap of imagination...and a leap of faith.”

Rosabeth Moss Kanter

The most critical implication for leaders is the role they must play in building and maintaining trust in the vision as without this trust, people will not dare to embark on the change process. Successful leaders keep these points in mind:

- They are passionate about their vision, are able to communicate about it and use every opportunity to do so.
- They use metaphors and images that provide focus and meaning; they are clear and explicit.
- They link the benefits of the vision to the organizations' goals, mission and values.
- The essence of the vision is not likely to change, but **how** to get there is wide open; leaders are flexible and open to change and modification.

6. A successful vision is shared throughout the organization.

Ultimately, deep change will not occur unless the vision is clear and meaningful to all those involved within an organization. Leaders and human resource professionals often talk about “motivation” as if external incentives actually produce committed actions. On the contrary, true change is driven by intrinsic forces as people are usually more than willing to change when it is self-generated. In fact, “when invited to participate in creating something *they truly care about*,

“People don't resist change, they resist being changed...when it is imposed from the outside.”

Daniel H. Kim

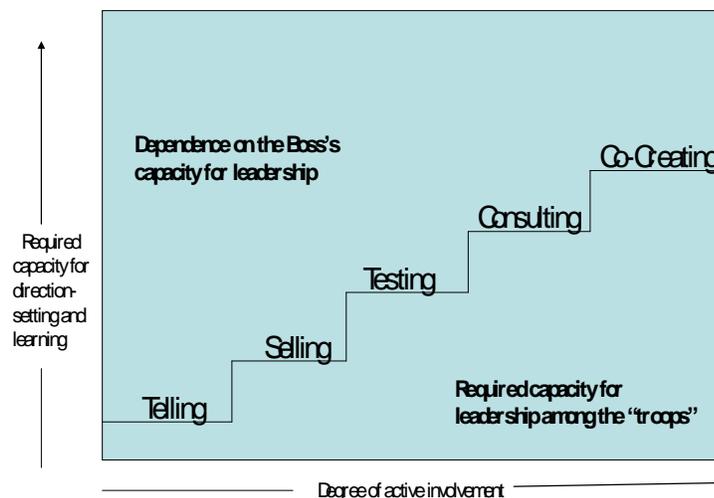
²⁸ Quinn, 9.

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people are ... even impatient with the larger organization's inability to move fast enough toward the goal."²⁹

Any visioning process must be designed around the principle of achieving the participation of the broadest segment possible of the organization. Over time, the act of creating and communicating a vision is a process of empowering and creating ownership throughout the organization. As illustrated below in this model created by Peter Senge, there can be several stages in the process of building a shared vision.³⁰

Building Shared Vision



Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline Field Book*

"A shared vision is not an idea... It is palpable. People begin to see it as if it exists. Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as a powerful as a shared vision."

Peter Senge

As Senge's model implies, many organizations are not experienced with building shared vision, and need to develop new skills and mindsets over time. For this reason, shared vision strategies should be developmental and each stage "should help build both the listening capacity of the top leaders, and the leadership capacities of the rest of the organization, so they can move together to the next stage."³¹ Senge describes the stages in this way³²:

²⁹ Kim, D.H. (1995). Vision Deployment Matrix: A Framework for Large-Scale Change. *The Systems Thinker, Volume 6, Number 1, 2.*

³⁰ Senge, P., et al. (1994). *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations.* New York: Doubleday, 314.

³¹ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 313-314.

³² Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 315-326.

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Stage 1: Telling: “We’ve got to do this. It’s our vision. Be excited about it, or reconsider your vision for your career here.”

Stage 2: Selling: “We have the best answer. Let’s see if we can get you to buy in.”

Stage 3: Testing: “What excites you about this vision? What doesn’t?”

Stage 4: Consulting: “What vision do members recommend that we adopt?”

Stage 5: Co-creating: “Let’s create the future we individually and collectively want.”

There is no “right” stage or preferred way to create shared vision. The role of the leader will be to gauge the current capability of the organization and determine the best approach to build a shared commitment to the vision. The best guideline is not to move too fast to a stage 4 or 5 mode, but to move the organization or community up one stage at a time as both the leader and organization mature.

Summary

Effective leaders know that vision is not a “nice to have” – it is essential to success. The suggested “golden rules of visioning” will enable leaders to define and fully realize his or her vision of the future. Leaders must consciously engage in the process of developing a vision, recognizing that it is a dynamic process, not an event. This requires the courageous act of defining a “big hairy audacious goal”, and balancing the tension between that bold vision of the future and being grounded in the facts and realities of the present. Leaders who follow this path are aware that the exact route cannot be known in advance and create trust that the journey will be worth the final outcome. Finally, a vision is most powerful when it is owned and shared by the greatest possible number of the organization.

“A powerful vision does not ... reflect only the ‘leader’s’ conception of the future. A vision that truly enlists and inspires others wells up from their deep needs and aspirations.”

Robert Quinn

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