Vision is a key part of both the concept and practice of leadership. Many managers successfully create it and present it to employees. However, they are often less good at retaining employees’ long-term commitment to the vision, which results in lost opportunities. This article explores how effectively senior managers build and sustain employee commitment to strategic vision, and how they could improve.

Ford, Xerox, Lucent, Honeywell, Yahoo, Nortel and UAL – all very different companies in different industries – share the fact that they have recently fired their chief executive officers (CEOs) because of disappointing corporate performance. There is speculation about the fate of CEOs at American Express, Hewlett-Packard, Motorola, Conseco and AT&T (Pearlstein 2001). A major reason why boards release CEOs is their inability to execute strategy successfully. The main non-financial measurements that institutional investors factor into investment decisions include strategy execution and management credibility relating to that strategy (Calabro 1996).

Successfully creating and implementing a strategic vision involves many aspects of leadership. This article focuses on management’s ability to relate it to employees and tie them to it over time. Many managers appear to do well at creating and articulating the organization’s vision, but without following through: they do not make certain that employees commit to the vision, and that they stay engaged. Substitute the word “vision” for “foreign policy” when considering Henry Kissinger’s observation: “No foreign policy – no matter how ingenious – has any chance of success if it is born in the minds of a few and carried in the hearts of none” (Kissinger 1973).

Management versus Leadership

Useem (2000) defines leadership as involving strategic vision, a persuasive voice and tangible results. Note the important word, persuasive. Unfortunately, while top management may, indeed, have a strategic vision and even a persuasive voice, that voice falls quiet in later stages of execution. Whether by default, indifference, or distraction, it can unwittingly disengage from a leadership role by lapsing into mere management.

In this context, I use the phrase “mere management”, in contrast to “leadership”, to mean the process of mechanically shoring up vision. Without vision leadership, a great deal of activity creates a sense of momentum while masking the reality that vision has become a static and separate thing removed from daily business activities. Senior managers support adequate time for rollout of the vision to employees, shareholders, and the financial community but then fail to monitor with as much enthusiasm and diligence how well the organization
is sustaining and expressing commitment to this vision. While being very clear about the organization’s stated vision, they are disconnected from the particulars and specifics of their role in expressing and achieving it. A corporate malaise overcomes sustained engagement in the discussion of the organizational vision. At the least, the large initiative of “vision” and “strategy” become mixed up with other initiatives that are vital but that should be subordinated to strategy, yet are not.

Quality initiatives, cost-reduction, value-added activities, internet sales related to supply chains and customers, globalization, and so on are, of course, important activities. But they should all be branches and subsets of the essential and continuous discussion of how we realize vision. In reality, however, the energy and urgency that accompany these sub-initiatives can take on a life of their own. They absorb the focus on vision until the discussion of vision, and how it ties in with all activities throughout the organization, becomes just one more topic in the corporate “chat rooms”.

Jeffrey E. Garten refers to this need for vision to rise above specific transactions such as plans for a merger or a sale of a division (Garten 2000) and Southwest Airlines has successfully created a vision that rises above even major trauma and changes in the industry – the September 11 crisis, for example. While individual employees have chosen to tone down their trademark jokes, the airline essentially is pursuing the same vision and with successful results even in these turbulent times. “They have a very successful business model, and they stick to it fervently,” says David Stempler, president of the Air Travelers’ Association. “They really know what they’re good at, they know what’s their style, they know what works, and they don’t change it based on changing circumstances” (Frey 2001). In doing this, Southwest Airlines is engaging in vision leadership. It is staying committed to that vision. In contrast, in mere management, managers do not sustain the linkage between articulating the vision and organization-wide implementation over time.

What does this distinction mean for different business functions – Communications, Human Resources (HR), Marketing, R&D, Operations Management and Finance? Corporate communication staffers, in conjunction with human resources professionals, may diligently present the overall organization’s vision in employee meetings, news bulletins, intranet messages, company websites, and videos. But they may eventually fail to sustain communications because they do not chronicle progress toward this vision. HR professionals may not adequately raise issues about what types of human resources the organization needs to realize its vision. Conversely, senior management may disenfranchise HR by not adequately addressing its suggestions and recommendations. Marketing executives may present organizational vision statements in expensive brochures and product literature, yet fail to sustain a focus on this vision in pursuit of sales that yield short-term gain but are unrelated to the vision and, therefore, do not build toward long-term sales growth or market presence. R&D may give lip service to the company’s vision but fail to allocate resources to projects that will nurture it. Operations managers may expect capital investment to achieve corporate vision and not receive these assets, or their expectations may be unrealistic to begin with. Finance managers may include vision statements in financial communications without giving adequate thought to how and where this vision is actually reflected in financial projections and objectives. Non-visionary financial pro forma statements may be created on “6%-last-year-6%-next-year” forecasts rather than from forecasting based on modeling related to the vision.

Creating a vision statement can be a helpful step in building a visionary company, but it should be only one of the thousands of steps in a never-ending process (Collins and Porras 1994). Stating a sound vision, continuing to focus on that vision in a way that keeps it at the forefront of employees’ attention, and tying it always to operations are three of the most important steps necessary to create excitement about it.

The Essence of Vision
Vision leadership requires that senior management engage employees in thinking about how their work and performance is related to the corporate vision. “My company reminds us constantly to think like we are our customer, and that ties in to our overall vision for success,” said one of the participants in a survey.
which formed part of the research for this article (see below). “Thinking I’m the customer – what do I need from my function and my organization – is one way I keep plugged in to what we are all about”. Vision *leadership* focuses on this issue of the “plug-in” factor and on making certain the employee knows in what ways she or he is part of the organization’s vision from both a performance and reward perspective.

Of course, successful striving toward a strategic vision requires a broader definition of an organization’s goal than pure monetary reward for shareholders and employees. A more complete definition of a better future for the organization should take note of Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars’ caution that to focus exclusively on trying to maximize profit can lead to disaster. “The problem lies in the reduction of multiple interdependent signs of organizational health to one be-all and end-all” (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 1993).

Related to this, Hamel and Prahalad (1994) tell us that when profit goals are not supplemented with a vision, counterproductive results can develop as employees pursue the quick and expedient, such as in acquisitions that add little real value beyond a short-term boost to sales. “While the quest for growth is intrinsic to almost any strategic intent, the real emotional umph comes when a company can articulate what it is growing toward.”

Burt Manus creates a succinct and useful definition of both vision and “success” when he says, “Quite simply, a vision is a realistic, credible, attractive future for your organization. It is your articulation of a destination toward which your organization should aim, a future that in important ways is better, more successful, or more desirable for your organization than the present” (Manus 1992). Note the important word *articulation*.

**Where are Firms Succeeding and Failing?**

Let us now try to identify the aspects of vision leadership where top management is currently succeeding and those where it is not succeeding – or even failing. To help research this, and to back up the publicly-available empirical evidence from individual firms, I conducted a small qualitative survey of employees across all but the lowest levels of seniority and across all functions in 51 firms in a Midwest City. The unattributed quotations in the rest of this article are from respondents to this survey. The survey focused on the following questions:

- Do managers state the organization’s vision clearly and continuously?
- Do managers ensure that employees believe in the vision?
- Do managers place the vision and associated strategy in a larger context?
- Do managers set achievable goals – and does the challenge lie in setting goals that are achievable or in staying focused on the target?
- Are employees rewarded for accomplishing the objectives of the vision?
- Have managers succeeded in making vision a passion?

**Do managers state the organization’s vision clearly and continuously?**

“We have great resources, and I believe we could execute a mission if we knew what it was!”

Not sharing a clear statement of strategic vision can create a vacuum at the very core of an organization. Marc Benioff, founder of Salesforce.com and a former Oracle executive describes Oracle’s founder and leader, the flamboyant, larger than life Lawrence Ellison, as a leader who is very clear about the organization’s vision. “Larry said that the leader has to always have a vision, tell everyone else where the company is going” (Murphy 2001). However, at one time there was a disconnect between what Ellison may believe about articulating vision and his behavior. Oracle pioneered an approach to retrieving data called structured query language. IBM made the language their standard, thus providing a strong basis for the company’s success. Ellison, a technical star, often worked in isolation, and he was not particularly focused on employee relationships or business fundamentals, such as day-to-day operations. The opportunity to construct a shared vision between his own vision and that of his management and employees was lost. Profits declined until new seasoned managers were hired (Leibovich 2000).
In my survey, one respondent said of her company:

“Management seems to keep vision and strategic information secret until rumors start flying. Then management will call a meeting to clear things up. So employees really aren’t involved in the process until after the fact, so the information provided becomes negative and reactive. It is almost the same as if we had no vision for the future.”

This comment, however, was exceptional. Many companies seem to do pretty well at articulating a vision. Among my respondents, 80% indicated that managers provide easy-to-understand written materials. “We carry the company’s vision and mission statements on our identification badges,” according to one. “Management does a great job traveling to operating sites to participate in meetings about vision,” wrote another. Use of props in these presentations – overheads, films, videos, etc – was also highly rated. “Videotapes are frequently given to field sales representatives unable to make these meetings,” reports a survey participant. “They also have access to conference calls to talk about vision and strategy”. Southwestern Airlines is well-known for its tangible displays related to employees’ efforts to express the airlines vision. The former CEO, Herb Kelleher, each year sent every employee a Valentine’s Day card as a reminder that it is the “Love Airline” (Hartley 2000).

Many executives engage in a variety of structured and thoughtful presentations to employees. Participation can help the leader determine if employees understand the vision. Phil Bligh of Chicago-based Inforte Corporation, involves his employees in the strategic vision by conducting an internal road show to present the company’s strategies as if he were presenting to outside analysts and investors. He then uses internal focus groups with employees to get them to express their concerns (Cirillo and Doyle 2000).

**Do managers ensure that employees believe the vision?**

“We claim to be customer-focused, but everything we do as an organization is internally focused. Management has presented our company’s vision, but operations and their execution are clearly focused on an opposite direction.”

Again, the extreme negativism of this response was unusual in my survey. As with the articulation of a vision, companies were considered fairly successful in achieving credibility with their employees in the vision they shared, with 71% of respondents suggesting that management’s vision would improve the organization. “Management stresses the company’s concepts and follows them, setting an example for employees,” reports another survey respondent.

A vision’s believability does not lie only in the fact it has been presented clearly. It also requires that management win or earn employees’ confidence in the plan of action laid out for the organization to follow for future success. Percy Barnevik, Chairman of Switzerland’s ABB Asea Brown Boveri, says you must have a vision for your company that is believable and that you can communicate to people. Moreover, he believes it is not enough to talk about volume, profit and shareholder value. Rather, to be proud of the company, employees must see some corporate purpose beyond performance figures (Barnevik 1997).

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**From the Red Berets to Intel**

Closely related to the articulation of vision is the use of symbolic representations of vision. Daphne du Maurier, the author, was married to British Major General F.A.M.Browning. She suggested to Browning in 1942 the wearing of the red beret for British airborne troops. She also suggested to her husband the use of the image of the ancient Greek hero Bellerophon riding the winged horse, Pegasus. Together, Bellerophon and Pegasus rode faster than the wind, and this image of them became the airborne’s symbol (Ambrose 1985).

Craig Barrett, Intel president and chief executive officer, when asked during a radio interview about Intel’s core strategy for online services, responded first by referring to the physical presentation of Intel’s blue, white, and orange posters bearing Intel’s vision statement. “If you look at Intel – and you look out there at that blue, white and orange poster – it has our vision statement on it: ‘building blocks of the Internet economy’” (Moltzen 2001).
And of course, there is a difference between a grand vision and a grandiose vision. This difference can profoundly affect employees’ perception of management’s credibility. In its early days, Mentor Graphics’ motto was “Build Something People Will Buy”. When clear competition emerged from Daisy Systems, Mentor’s watchword became “Beat Daisy”. Both of these visions were pragmatic and immediate, giving Mentor a sense of purpose as it gained momentum. Once Daisy was beaten, however, company vision began to self-inflate. The final escalation came when Mentor Graphics decided to “Change the Way the World Designs”. The company had stopped making products and was making poetry. Finally, in 1991, Mentor went back to basics. “We are trying instead to recognize our limitations,” said Gerard H. Langeler, the manager in charge of the organization’s vision. He shared with the employees that they would be returning to a vision that had worked for them in the past; that is, they would pursue the vision of building the things that their customers needed and would buy. They would return to a customer focus. “The applause was immediate and lengthy. It told me that people like getting back to basics and that we’re rebounding from...the sense that we’d lost our way. It told me that pragmatic visions can be inspiring” (Langeler 1992).

Recognizing one’s limitations is essential in realizing vision. Don Quixote was unable to do this and, worse, unable or unwilling to listen to his subordinate’s advice. While a lot of factors contributed to Mentor Graphics’ problems – product transitions and a global recession – leadership came to realize that the sense of vision that initially drove Mentor Graphics forward had evolved, finally, into something that led them down a primrose path of self-infatuation and carried them away from their own best business interests. As a safeguard against the “windmill trap”, in which leaders pursue grandiosity that lacks substance or else fails to recognize realities of the environment, it is important not only that employees have an opportunity to express concerns and their readings of the larger environment, but that leaders develop skills to bear what is being reported. Intel’s Barrett believes that constant and consistent communication with employees served Intel well when it was called upon to change its culture. “If we had any advantage, it’s that we were open with top-level management, solicited their opinions, and then in a very overt way made changes. We had credibility. We could move very rapidly” (Holstein 2000).

**Do managers place the vision and associated strategy in a larger context?**

“Our former CEO was good at discussing industry as a whole and economics on a world scale…but even be fell short of articulating our corporate mission within that framework.”

Peter Drucker tells us that communication can be effective only if it contains both information and meaning. “If somebody whose language I do not speak calls me on the phone, it doesn’t help me at all that the connection is crystal clear. There is no meaning unless I understand the language” (Drucker 1989). It is important in introducing the organization’s vision to employees to place the organization within a larger context. Doing so provides management with an opportunity to educate employees about the larger industry, its problems and opportunities. Employees’ job knowledge often tends to be limited to the experiences of their daily routine. As employees learn of the industry and the firm’s problems and opportunities, they can become more appreciative of management’s problems and what management is trying to accomplish.

The large Canadian oil firm, Petro-Canada, entered a major business process redesign that required engaged participation throughout the organization. Jim Pantelidis, executive vice president, attributed the speed and success of Petro-Canada’s business process redesign to securing employees’ commitment throughout the organization, including unionized staff. This process involved the routine inclusion of union executives in management meetings to help them understand what made the business profitable. “That communication had never existed before in the refineries. Now, when I review company performance with refinery employees, they can understand what is actually driving the business” (Pantelidis and Partridge 1996).

Characterizations and data about the level of competition, projected sales growth (or decline), market share, present and projected financials, geographic expansion, etc, are of interest to employees if they can see how these dynamics affect the firm and them personally. As employees broaden their understanding of industry and business issues and...
relate them to their own lives, employees become empowered to initiate positive change. “We have meetings at least once a month with top-level management. We discuss the state of the department and how what we are doing relates to the overall success of the bank within the markets where we do business,” writes a survey respondent.

Managers at BorgWarner in Muncie, Indiana, believe that their culture of commitment to quality and dramatic reduction of rejects and defects is related to direct exposure to the customer and the customer’s requirements. In other words, management puts the organization’s vision into the context of the customer, and this includes not only weekly quality meetings but also periodic bus trips in which groups of 40 or more employees visit a customer’s assembly plant. “We want our people to talk to the assembly operators who receive their products,” says Dan Mills, director of quality and manufacturing engineering (Sheridan 2001).

Do managers set achievable goals?

“Our executive vice president has very little business competence in the opinion of many of us at the company because he provides a vision, but he has no regard for the resources required for the major initiatives that are presented.”

According to my survey, only 60% of managers believe that they have been empowered by their individual organizations to achieve the organization’s vision: “Management is biting off too many projects to handle at one time, and the result is we have a lack of focus on implementation.” On the surface of this complaint, and of the one cited above, in which a company’s executive vice president is perceived as being incompetent in allocating the proper resources, it would appear that implementation is often the problem.

However, in both complaints, we see references made that imply major questions about the vision itself, “…he has no regard for the resources required for the major initiatives that are presented.” And, “Management is biting off too many projects to handle at one time.” Could it be that the empowerment issue and resources problem are not failures in implementation but the inevitable outcomes and logical byproducts of an incompletely developed vision?

“Today many companies seem to be convinced that foresight is the easy part, it’s implementation that’s the killer. We believe that creating industry foresight and achieving operational excellence are equally challenging tasks. Many times, what are described as today’s implementation failures are really yesterday’s foresight failures in disguise.” (Hamel and Prahalad 1994.)

Hamel and Prahalad call for convergence and focus to avoid having either too many competing goals or no clear aspirational goal.

“Middle managers are regularly blamed for failing to diligently translate top management initiatives into action. On the other hand, middle management often finds itself attempting to compensate for top management’s failure to sort out operational improvement priorities.”

They are referring here more to failure on the part of senior management to stay true to their foresight or to create adequately compelling foresight than to a lack of ability to execute, which includes the proper allocation of resources to employees.

When management gets it right and eliminates too many competing goals, then employees have a better sense of how operating objectives relate to the vision and that the corporate vision is attainable. As one of my survey respondents indicated:

“When management presented vision and goals, they allowed us to connect the vision to the work of each group. For example, we may have 10 to 15 groups who hear the same presentation, but the message is specifically tailored to each group. We are told what we should be doing and given help to do it.”

Of course, organizations today are under pressures unlike any that companies have experienced before, and this complexity complicates an organization’s ability to convey one overriding and clear focus. These pressures include the greater speed of transactions that technology permits; the nature of a global business
environment in which competition and customers are far more sophisticated than even a decade ago; and an increasing rotation of top management teams as the financial community and shareholders become less and less tolerant of what they perceive to be delays in getting results.

In the recent past, there have been times when either vision or execution, but not both, were of extreme importance. But now, vision needs to be powerful and credible, and execution needs to be nearly flawless. “For years to come we will demand CEOs with bold visions and CEOs who can execute with great skill. Few will be able to fulfill our expectations of both” (Garten 2001).

An example of inability to create either a bold vision or to execute with great skill lies in the experiences of Jacques Nasser, former chief executive officer of Ford. One of Mr Nasser’s problems seems to have been focusing and staying true to strategy. Indeed, Ford chairman, William Clay Ford Jr., in his first public comments about the changes in leadership at Ford, referred to the need for the company to return to a sharp and clear focus (Ford 2001).

Relative to execution of strategy, Mr Nasser was criticized for a frenetic management style. “Nasser is easily distracted,” says one former colleague. “He’d rather make deals than cars or trucks.” And, “We’ve been trying to improve content and reduce cost at the same time, and it is starting to fracture people psychologically,” says one company insider. “We need to get back to continuous improvement rather than trying to invent the wheel with every new program” (Taylor 2001).

It would appear from these complaints that Mr Nasser committed the unpardonable in failing to create a vision that he stayed true to and, because of this lapse in strategic adherence, failed to make the proper decisions with regard to the use of employee time, and skill and resources in general.

Are employees rewarded for accomplishing the objectives of the vision?

“They tell us that employees are the driving force to our strategic success, however, whenever there is a problem, the first cuts are made to things that affect employees such as benefits and perks.”

The subject of compensation and reward is a vast one. For the purposes of this discussion, the focus is that it should be tied to operating objectives, which, in turn, are tied to the strategic vision, and that rewards should take additional forms other than periodic percentage increases in compensation. As Herb Kelleher, former CEO of Southwest Airlines puts it, “I think there is less and less personal and emotional satisfaction in America. … People are looking as much for psychic satisfaction from their jobs as for monetary rewards” (Taylor 2001).

A big majority (71%) of my survey respondents indicated that they believe that hard work, greater risk-taking and greater productivity will result in personal reward. Almost as many felt that “employee rewards are related to the goals and objectives defined by the company’s vision”. But whether this means that employees are making the linkages between performance, vision, and reward is not entirely clear. As one respondent wrote:

“I have not really figured out what connections there are between what we do on a daily basis, our operational activity, and the vision that has been stated. Rewards are based on sales and not for improving the company long-term.”

It is very important to tie the strategic process to tangible signposts that mark the way and measure progress. The linkages connecting management’s vision should be clear and concise statements of measurable objectives and should answer the question, “What are the specifics of how the vision is going to be implemented?” According to Sibson & Co, educating and focusing teams on the factors that are most critical to the business are the most important factors for success (PR Newswire 1995). Assuming that the connections between performance and vision have been clearly established, then the next part of the discussion most properly focuses on the nature of the rewards. Many respondents to the Sibson survey considered a high-performance work culture and the pursuit of excellence to be even more important than monetary rewards when it comes to motivating and driving team performance.
Meg Whitman, CEO of eBay, alludes to this with respect to retaining employees even though a depressed stock price has affected employee compensation:

“There is no question that people are disappointed that a lot of their initial stock grants are underwater, but we tried to hire people because they believed in what the company was doing. We are looking for what we call missionaries, as opposed to mercenaries. In Silicon Valley, a lot of companies were founded by mercenaries, and they were not built to last. They were built to flip. We have, from the beginning, tried to build eBay into a company that is made to last” (Shepard 2001).

Or, as Frank Wright, a Southwest captain who worked for the airline for many years said, “Working here you become something bigger than yourself. You have your family, and you have your Southwest family” (Butler 1993).

GE’s Jack Welch is described as having invested a great deal of personal time on the subject of people, their development, and the rewarding of them. The ultimate goal was to evaluate executives according to their adherence to GE’s shared values (Tichy and Sherman 1993).

Have managers succeeded in making vision a passion?

“Passion about anything is not allowed by my management because it threatens their position and vision. And, anyhow, the vision is too vague for me to get passionate.”

To repeat Burt Manus’s definition, a vision is a realistic, credible, attractive future for your organization. It is an articulation of a destination toward which your organization should aim. John Stopford enlarges on this definition when he says strategy can no longer focus single-mindedly on the fit between companies and their markets. It has to take stock of individuals and teams. Strategy today is nothing without passion and vision from the people creating and implementing it. Indeed, dreams need to be at front and center of the strategy-making process (Stopford 2000-2001). How, then, does an effective leader successfully engage employees in vision and keep the vision statement from becoming merely a “Dead See Scroll”?

Even amongst the respondents to my survey, this is an area where senior management is clearly not hitting the mark. Only 44% of managers report that senior management’s vision presentations are inspiring, and 66% say that company vision statements are soon forgotten. PowerPoint presentations, used by many managers, may be momentarily interesting but certainly do not constitute a sustained program for creating passion.

Managers who do succeed in creating sustained passion about a vision tend to find ways to engage employees in a sense of “higher purpose”. John Chambers, chief executive of Cisco Systems, believes that three elements attract and keep good people. A particular company is the right place to be because other good players are there – the team is strong; there exists a “cult” of leaders that people like; and people work for a higher purpose than a paycheck. Motivated people want to think they are part of something that changes the way the world works, lives and plays (Byrne 2000).

Sometimes, just the simple matter of how one discusses vision conveys – or destroys – this idea of a higher purpose. The tone of vision discussions must reinforce the very nature of what it means to own a dream for a company’s destiny. Leaders may create positive corporate stories, or company legends, or share achievement-stories. Great leaders throughout history, within many different organizations, have learned the value of storytelling to motivate and clarify.

Again, consider Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines. He liked to tell stories on himself and his airline. His leadership was infectious. He told stories about the airline’s successes, failures, the simplicity of operation, the power of their strategy, the commitment of their people (Hartley 2000). He understood that this commitment to sustaining a sense of greater purpose is an essential “cost” of doing business. About the Valentine cards he sent to each employee, he said, “Somebody can come along from a business school and say, ‘I can cut your expenses by $10,000 by not sending Valentine’s Day cards’. Well, I knew that…I could walk around Southwest Airlines and cut a couple of million dollars in expenses. I don’t, because they
make our people happy and dedicated to Southwest Airlines” (Butler 1993).

Arthur Martinex, CEO of Sears, developed an effective method for acquiring Sears’ stories and legends. As part of the planning process, he asked his top officers to write stories about their business so as to provide the plan with a more textured view of the customer’s world (Lieber 1997). Stories are a way of transmitting values, and they can make situations real. As we tell stories to others, they come to know us. Stories shape out attitudes, actions and reactions. Stories we tell ourselves become the story we live (Tichy and Sherman 1993.) Think of the stories you tell about members of your family; things your son or daughter did, the achievements, the fun times, the tough times. Those stores live. People identify with stories. People will identify with stories about management, about the firm.

Another aspect of making a vision a passion is to be real with employees. Employee meetings are a popular method of presenting the vision for the organization and that vision’s associated strategy. However, when management holds a meeting to present vision, it often involves too many participants, and the speaker is overly formal and distant. Also, the amount of time allotted for questions is restrictive. Employees today prefer meetings to be relaxed and informal in tone. To accomplish this, the audience should be relatively small, and the speaker relaxed, with adequate time for questions and detailed answers.

Jack Welch excelled at this. Welch went to the company’s executive development center every two weeks for 15 years to teach leadership through open, confrontational discussions. Believing in teaching as a leader’s responsibility, Welch consistently met with junior executives in small groups to discuss, explore, teach and learn (Tichy and Sherman 1993). He even was aware that using a lecture “pit,” in which he or the main speaker stood at a level lower than the participants, resulted in their looking down at the speaker, and that even something such as this physical logistic of a meeting could open up questioning (Tichy and Sherman 1993).

In addition to being real and stimulating in presenting and discussing vision, leaders need to find ways to engage employees in creative tension through a healthy exchange of views – including listening to their viewpoints. According to one of my respondents:

“Our meetings are nothing more than a lecture on what the strategic vision is. We typically don’t interject our thoughts regarding it or about any problems associated with reaching our objectives.”

When senior managers really listen and really hear what employees have to say about the company’s progress in attaining vision, this exchange is an opportunity to obtain a more accurate picture of reality and an improved picture of the future. Both leader and subordinate will build a shared vision leading to integrated and systems thinking (Senge 1990). By encouraging candor from employees, management will obtain information about employee concerns, implementation problems and issues not previously considered. Sub-components of the firm become aligned with management’s comprehensive vision and strategies, lending support to the firm’s central theme.

Summary

Sometimes, a manager incorrectly believes that his or her employees share the organization’s sharply focused view, and assumes that his or her abstract vision can easily be linked to operational action. In reality, everything must be explained in meaningful detail to each organizational layer of employees. A conscious and planned effort must be made to ensure that managers see the connections between vision and goals, goals and operational performance, and performance and reward. Successfully articulating a vision requires managers to involve employees in discussing progress and needs in working toward the strategic vision, place the vision and associated strategy into a larger context, and that they ascertain that employees believe in the vision. In summary:

- Articulate the organization’s vision clearly and repetitively.
- Make certain the employees accept and believe the vision.
- Place the vision and associated strategy into a larger industry and business context.
- Set achievable goals that keep the organization focused on the target.
- Tie each sub-group and employee to the vision by relating operations to the vision.
Make certain that employees are rewarded for activities that move the firm toward realizing the vision.

Make the vision a passion. Be passionate about the vision.

Mere management of vision engages in mechanical activities only. These undertakings suggest momentum, but, eventually, they lead to stagnation—or worse, disengagement from the idea of vision. Leadership involves a focused continuity of effort in making vision a living, breathing part of operations and organizational persona.

Consider Warren Buffet’s opening to the letter that is to be mailed to shareholders the day after he dies. “Yesterday I died. That is unquestionably bad news for me, but it is not bad news for our businesses (Spurgeon 2000). Mr Buffet, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, was referring to the concern on the part of shareholders that his demise will mark the end of his company’s successful performance. But this outcome should be negated, according to Mr. Buffet, because a succession plan for the company should provide the continuation of a sound strategy. Surely, this sort of commitment to vision can best be described as a passion of sorts. Clearly, Mr Buffet’s assurance of his company’s continuing strategic success echoes Burt Manus’s recommendation that the organization’s vision should provide a realistic, credible, attractive future. Mr Buffet was articulating an organizational destination—one that will exceed his own—that in important ways continues or surpasses the existing state of the organization.

Leaders such as Warren Buffet, Meg Whitman, Jack Welch, and Herb Kelleher know an important open secret—the secret of how to lead an organization successfully toward a vision of a better future. That is, they ensure that vision evolves from being a cerebral, intellectual, analytical, beginning exercise to a determination impressed upon and carried in the hearts of people throughout the organization. In other words, with passion.

Selected References*


*For the full list, please see BSR website, www.london.edu/bsr, and click on references.