What CEOs Get Wrong About Vision and How to Get It Right

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When a leader must implement a new strategy, especially one that requires new systems, processes, and perhaps people, it is the start of a new era. Success requires more than the right combination of capital and technology; it also requires a critical mass of employees to adopt new behaviors and ways of thinking. But too often, CEOs and

boards in these situations think through the capital and technology issues much more carefully than those involving behavior and attitudes. That imbalance is a primary reason new strategies fail. And, in addition to disrupting a company, failure can derail a promising executive career — especially if a CEO took over to guide the company in a new direction.

When new behavior and new ways of thinking are required, an essential step is for the CEO, the board, and key managers to have an image in their minds of what the organization will look and act like after achieving its strategic goals. Just as great athletes are guided by a mental picture of the perfect jump shot or golf swing, key players in the organization need a consistent picture in their minds of what success will look like. That's where a vision comes in.

The term "vision" is used often in business; companies frequently talk about "our mission, vision, and values." The trouble is that most of the time, the word "vision" is used incorrectly. When CEOs say they've defined their company's vision, I ask them to explain it to me. Many

respond with something like, "Our vision is to be the most innovative, agile company in our industry." To which I reply, "That's a mission, not a vision."

In cases like these, the so-called vision merely repeats what is already in the strategy, and, worse, does nothing to emotionally engage the people who are being asked to implement it. A leader's vision — particularly if that leader needs to bring about significant change in the organization — should start as a vivid, credible image of an ideal future state. The clearer a CEO is about what people should do differently to achieve new, challenging objectives, the greater his or her chances of achieving the changes necessary for success. New behavior doesn't come from missions, however aspirational, but from deep, emotional commitment to doing things differently.

In reality, leaders who need their organizations to change don't have many options to gain emotional commitment to the new path. One way is through a logical argument. Lay out the rationale for why change is necessary, describe the sequence of steps that need to be taken, and show how other companies in similar situations have improved their performance. A second way is to describe a "burning platform" that highlights the dangers of not changing. The message is that if performance doesn't improve, the fire will spread, and many jobs will be lost.

While both approaches will help a CEO make some progress, they won't be enough to change behavior and attitudes. Logical arguments are forms of education that fill gaps in knowledge; but, more than knowledge, new behavior requires passion to build something new and the determination to stick with it. The thought of a burning platform does cause people to behave differently, but only

as long as the threat exists. Once the fire goes out, most will return to comfortable habits.

Both approaches involve telling people what to do and only asking them to listen patiently. But to be successful, the leader needs to do more than that: She must enlist the organization's most influential managers so they roll up their sleeves and become committed enough to new ways of operating to cause changes both in their behavior and that of the people they influence.

The most effective way to engage these key executives is to communicate a vision — a vivid, detailed, and inspiring description of what will be seen, heard, and felt when the company has implemented the needed changes. Anything that doesn't meet this standard is not a vision. The most influential managers must agree on a shared, common picture of behaviors, systems, and processes needed to make the new strategy successful — in other words, a picture of the way the organization will operate when at its best.

This vision must start with the leader's personal mental image. Once a draft of that picture is clear enough in his mind, he must communicate it in a way that not only excites the most influential managers about the possibilities, but also enables them to form their own consistent mental picture of what they will do and cause to happen when the company is at its best. Also, CEOs must ensure that they bring their boards along as the vision becomes clearer.

Clarifying Your Vision

The following five principles will help guide a leader with a new strategy to make sure that the key people who are necessary to successfully implement it are operating from

the same idea of what success will look like. The upshot should be a common vision of what will be seen, heard, and felt when necessary improvements are in place.

1. Find your own unique way. There is no simple, generic way to craft a real vision, one that is a powerful asset for change. It must be tailored to the character of the company, must be described in the leader's own words, and must reflect the leader's personality. No one should question whether it represents the CEO's true and thoughtful ideas for the organization's future.

I remember one leader, a former journalist, whose board asked for a written description of the sort of place he wanted his company to become. The lead director complimented the CEO by saying, "It was so clear that I could taste it. I can't wait for that place. Everyone in the company should understand this." But, because this CEO disliked giving speeches to large groups, his way of getting employees behind his vision was adapting that white paper for the board into a series of "editorials." He sent them out monthly to every manager, who then passed them down within their organizations.

Another leader introduced his vision at a January meeting of his top 200 managers. Before the holidays, he had a short story written about a hero (his company) battling an unscrupulous villain (the industry leader) and then shared the story with his managers. For the meeting in January, the CEO hired an actor to play the part of the hero. About halfway through the actor's speech, the managers began to recognize their connection to the story, and a ripple of awareness turned into waves of laughter. Through this creative method, the leader proved that a vision can be fun — and, more important, got the attention of every manager.

While not quite as elaborate, each example I have seen of successfully formulating and communicating a vision was unique to the personality of the leader as well as to the organization's culture. For this reason, when the task of communicating a vision is delegated to a marketing department or PR organization, the only outcomes are a sterile statement and lost credibility for the leader.

2. Appeal to emotions often and vividly. As important as anything else, a description of the optimal organization must paint a picture that people are drawn to because it strikes them as more satisfying than today's environment — in particular, as a place where their needs for achievement, affiliation, and control can be met.

The best vision is vivid enough that people understand how the organization would operate and how problems that currently frustrate them would be solved. As the vision is put forward often and in various forums, a picture takes shape in the minds of followers of a place in which they can envision themselves being more satisfied. The result is that they personalize the vision, tailor it to their own needs, and, as they experiment with new behavior, become more comfortable with it.

To achieve this, the leader's vision must not only be vividly clear, but it must also appeal to emotions as well as logic. It can't just be a vision of success in financial terms; financial objectives won't create the needed emotional attachment.

3. Describe changes that can be imagined. For the leader seeking to implement a new strategy, a carefully crafted vision is the best way to acknowledge the extent of the changes that will be necessary, particularly when those changes affect popular, long-standing practices. No one is happy to give up habits and ways of operating that have

worked for them and that feel comfortable. Usually, people will accept the need to change behaviors gradually, after being involved to some degree in determining the specifics of new practices. The leader's vision can help get to that point by walking a fine line. While the vision must honestly communicate a different reality, its descriptions should not be so radically different from employees' current concept of the organization that they are not able to imagine what the organization will look and feel like once the vision is achieved.

4. Describe valued behavior, not values. In describing the vision, the leader should distinguish between core humanistic values and the behavior that will be valued in order for the organization to successfully change.

Most companies state what they call their "values" alongside their missions. Usually, there are three problems with this. First, most of the items on these lists are not values but rather broad areas where operational improvement must be made (common ones are "innovation," "customer focus," and "teamwork"). Second, while humanistic values such as telling the truth or valuing others' opinions are important standards to live by, they don't make it clear what people must do differently to meet new, challenging objectives. Third, a culture's values are durable and don't change just because of revised strategic or operational priorities, or because a leader calls for new ones. Values only change gradually after broad cultural forces combine to initiate new behavior, which over time alters core attitudes — a process that takes years.

Instead of focusing on values, the CEO's vision should describe the behavior that in the optimal culture will be valued because it will lead to the right results. Examples

can be found in the strategy, since it lays out where investments will be made and how resources will be allocated. Leaders should also identify current practices that are successful and that match the requirements of the new strategy and the vision.

5. Be both firm and flexible. A leader who is formulating a vision must be firm about core elements of what should be in it but can and should be flexible on others. Key managers must be included in the process of refining the vision and made an integral part of finalizing and honing it. They must understand what the leader believes is not negotiable, where there is some room for negotiation, and where he is not certain what is best and wants to discuss ideas.

The best vision will come from a disciplined, iterative approach that enables the leader to control how the picture is crafted, while also ensuring that others who need to be aligned feel some ownership. As the CEO brings these influential managers along, every refined version of the vision will sit atop the one that precedes it, like tiles on a well-built roof that overlap for strength. The result should be that instead of following the leader's vision, managers are attracted to a common vision that they have helped to shape. Once the rest of the organization sees senior managers describing the same sort of future state, it becomes much easier to get a critical mass of employees to commit to the hard work of change.

Following these five principles can ensure a common vision that is clear enough that employees can understand what will be required of them, attractive enough that they will begin to imagine themselves in that future

organization, and interesting enough that they will consider what they must do differently.

About the Author

Dan Ciampa, a former CEO, is an adviser to boards and chief executives, especially during high-level transitions, and the author of five books, including *Transitions at the Top: What Organizations Must Do to Make Sure New Leaders Succeed* (with David L. Dotlich, John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

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