

CHAPTER 1

BEGIN WITH VISION



In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice says to the Cheshire Cat:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don't much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn't matter which way you go,” said the Cat.¹

Alice discovered that having a larger goal—a broad vision—is all-important. Any leader who says “I don't much care” when asked where he or she wants to go is never going to get anywhere. Leaders need a mission that guides them and their followers.

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And it should shape everything a leader communicates. To speak like a leader you must have a clear sense of your larger goal. Begin with vision.

Why a Vision Is Important

A vision tells everyone in your organization, your department, or your area what's important. It shapes, or should shape, all your communications, from major speeches to the way you conduct meetings. It aligns your remarks with the overall goals of your organization. Without a vision, even e-mails can become unproductive. Recently The Humphrey Group worked with a tech company where a group of five engineers sent a total of 17 e-mails back and forth about the specifications of a screen display for a smartphone. A supplier had sent them the wrong product. Should they use it or demand a replacement? There was endless debate about the right course of action. What those five engineers had forgotten, or never grasped fully, was the company's broad vision, which states: "We have an unalterable commitment to the highest quality products." Had they kept this vision in mind, decision making (and their e-mails) would have been far more straightforward. They could have decided—after rigorous testing—that the substitute screens met the company standards, or they could have rejected those screens as substandard. The vision would have led them to the right action.

Visions shape everything leaders say and do, whether they are running a meeting or responding to a question. And there are times when it's useful to restate that vision. One individual I coached remarked that he had begun to do so. In his words: "I find it really valuable to say, at some point in the meeting, 'Let me take a minute to

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share my vision with you.” Doing so will rally your audience around your high-level leadership thinking.

Visions Begin at the Enterprise Level

Every organization—as well as groups within an organization—should have a clear vision. These visionary statements should begin at the enterprise level. The vision of other groups must be nested inside that larger vision.

Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google, explained his company’s overarching goal this way: “We take all the world’s information and make it accessible and useful to everyone. That’s our mission, and that’s a pretty important mission.”² Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, has a simple, clear, and powerful statement. He’s even written his company’s vision on the inside of his hoodie: “Making the world more open and connected.”³

It’s not just the largest firms that have vision statements. The Humphrey Group, too, has a clear goal: “The Humphrey Group fosters inspirational leadership.” That mission helps us stand out in the marketplace—and it shapes this book.

So your mandate is to be a visionary.

Develop Your Vision

Before you speak, know the guiding vision for your company, division, or team. This will keep everyone on the same page. If your team or division does not have a vision, it’s useful to formulate one. (These same principles apply if you are creating a vision for the entire enterprise.) Think about where you want your company, department, or team to be

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in five months, five years—maybe even five decades! To ensure your vision is inspiring, develop it with the following principles in mind.

1. Your Vision Must Be Focused

Consider the following vision statement, delivered to a board of directors:

It is time to rethink our business strategy and make some dramatic changes. We must bring more focus and discipline to our business. We have a strong entrepreneurial culture, which must operate with a better mix of discipline and aggression. We must rededicate ourselves to profitable growth, and to the overall success of this firm.

This may be an impassioned statement, but it contains at least three messages. Which one is most important? Which one is going to take priority? Multiple messages confuse, rather than inspire. If, instead, the statement had focused on one of these ideas, the speaker would have been clearer. A one-sentence vision statement is always best. Keep it focused.

2. Your Vision Must Be Positive

Lift up your listeners. Move them from “negatives” to “positives.” One of the great corporate visions is that of Kinross Gold Corporation. It reads: “Our core purpose is to lead the world in generating value through responsible mining.”⁴ This high-ground vision infuses everything with the dignity of creating value by acting responsibly—including having respect for local cultures, for employees, for the land being mined, and for everything in the work environment.

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A similar positive vision should be a source of inspiration for each division or group within an enterprise. In the example above, the vision for the Finance Group might be “To help the company generate value through responsible financial reporting to all stakeholders.”

A manager of a mine in the company might have as her vision “to ensure that the mine generates value by acting responsibly toward employees, suppliers, the local community, and the environment.”

Together these “nested” visions support one common and positive corporate goal. As a leader you must always be guided by a larger goal.

3. Your Vision Must Be Attainable

“Becoming the number-one North American oil and gas producer” may be possible if you’re now number three. But if your total holdings are one non-producing well, you’re probably overreaching. If your vision is not achievable, then the people who work for you will become demoralized. This isn’t to say that you can’t reach for the moon—John F. Kennedy inspired the American people to do just that—but if that’s your vision, be prepared to build rocket ships. Credibility is a well that quickly runs dry when you’re stretching the truth.

4. Your Vision Should Reflect the Scope of Your Mandate

No important areas of your organization should fall outside your vision. Agrium, a global company that produces fertilizers and related chemical products, provides a good example of a broad-based mandate. Their sustainability vision is: “Agrium will make an increasingly positive impact on shareholders while helping to feed the world responsibly.”⁵ Imagine if they had left out the word “increasingly.”

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That would have excluded from this defining statement one crucial goal—the company’s commitment to growing shareholder value by providing increasingly positive returns.

Communicate Your Vision

It is of no use to have a clear and compelling vision if you do not communicate it to *all* your stakeholders. Michael Dell, CEO of Dell Inc., writes in his autobiography, *Direct from Dell*, that “over time, we have developed a laser-focused strategy that we take great pains to communicate consistently and thoroughly throughout the entire global organization.” In fact, “at Dell, what ties us all together is belief in our direct model.”⁶ Whether you head a company, a business unit, or a team, communicating your company’s vision is your responsibility. It must be burned in your mind and the mind of every employee, customer, and stakeholder.

So place yourself in the tradition of leaders who speak with a vision that is focused, positive, attainable, and encompassing, and let that vision shape *everything* you deliver. Commit to it in your speeches, presentations, meetings, and off-the-cuff comments. A vision is a living thing: if you broadcast it continually, in all your interactions, others will believe in it, act on it, and with your leadership turn your vision into a reality.