

Vision, Excerpt from Manuscript

# Leadership

Saving Your Organization From Chaos,  
A Practitioner's Guide to Efficiency, Effectiveness, and Harmony  
(McElroy, 2019)

## Organizational Vision (Looking Into the Future)

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

Robert Frost

Often misinterpreted, Frost isn't actually suggesting that the path taken made all the difference (look closely, he *sighs*... look back to the poem's beginning, both roads were "just as fair"). He is, in old age, after the journey has ended, looking back. He is, if you will, reflecting and wondering "Hmm, I wonder where I would be if I had taken that other road." Short answer: In the same place! Where Frost's traveler is at journey's end is not so much a consequence of the road chosen, but rather the traveler. It is the traveler that confronts obstacles, road blocks, and problems. It is the traveler that has some sense of the destination, which influences decisions along the way. If we know where we want to end up, we can straighten any path to get there.

This was conveyed by Stephen Covey in his classic *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989). He suggests to "begin with the end in mind." This *vision* is all important, as we saw with Frost's traveler, but also for any organization, for any individual. If our decisions along the way are only influenced by the circumstances of the immediate situation and not by a vision of destination and destiny, much like a rudderless ship tossed by the sea, we have no idea upon what shore we will be cast. Vision is all important.

In that we're considering visions for organizations, let's glimpse at what business scholars say of it.

### The Basics of Organization Vision

Textbook's commonly inform business students variously that an organizational vision statement is a brief expression of *what* the company wants to be, *why* the organization exists and *where* the organization is headed. So, aspiring business people are taught of the organization's vision that it is basically, from what, why, to where! (Probably why some in the scholarly community claim that there is no definition of vision statement!) Generally, management and organizational behavior students are not significantly exposed to organizational vision statements. Students of leadership, recognizing that a chief responsibility of leadership is to *have* a vision and to *share* the vision with others, are told that their vision has to be "*ideal* and *unique* image of the future" and that it acts to "*unify* and *inspire*" others. So they learn of vision's substance and results.

Organization change scholars seem to best capture a description of an organization's vision statement:

"Vision defines an organization's overarching purpose and captures the reason for its existence in a way that allows members to feel good about their efforts. Vision reflects the aspirations of a manager's unit. It offers a reason why members of the organization should feel some passion about successfully executing the strategy. Where a good strategy and objectives engage people intellectually, a vision engages people emotionally" (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1997, pp. 48-49).

Turning back to Jack Welch, former GE CEO, Tushman and O'Reilly use his vision statement for GE from over two decades ago as illustration, "GE will be the world's most aggressive, innovative actor in any business sector in which it operates. GE will be the fastest, most simple and self-confident organization in the world" (1997, p. 50). Do you think that GE employees had to look up the vision statement in GE's annual report, refer to the framed plaque hanging in the hall, or to a wallet-size card? No, they *lived* the vision statement!

While the scholarly community claims that vision statement cannot be defined, let's use for our working definition this one:

*Organizational vision statement is a vivid mental picture of a future reality for a targeted group whom have an interested in, concern about or benefit from products or services provided; that acts to change perception of, thinking about and behavior toward production of the product or service.*

That's a mouthful! But, basically you must have a vision for the future of your organization in which all directly or indirectly effected by you organization have a clear picture that they will be a sense of harmony for their vision of the future.

Let's take a look at a simple example.

I grew up watching westerns on TV. Part of many but central to one of these shows was the wagon train. *Wagon Train*, starring Ward Bond, was a TV series from the mid-1950s to mid-1960s. (You can still find it on the Internet... you can find ANYTHING on the Internet!) The theme of this show was a strong and hardened trail-master, Ward, aided by his trusty crew every week led groups of Midwestern farmers "out west". (Okay, sometimes they led hapless Easterners, but that is another story!). They always experienced obstacles along the way. Every week they were confronted by thieves, unscrupulous men from "back East," hard-cases that just wanted a fresh start, and "town folk" that they came across on their journey that were in trouble. But Ward and crew overcame the obstacles (always with some underlying moral message) and led the wagon train on. They had a *vision*.

If you took a break from reading (and *quickly* came back!) to view a couple of Wagon Train episodes you see that Ward instilled not just in his crew but also all those in the wagon train a sense of vision. Notice how many times that someone on the wagon train stares far off into the distance, a dreamlike look coming over their face and explains what it's like "where we're a-goin'." They had a sense of destination. They could mentally see it. They could feel it, hear it. They knew how life would be. They knew what that "good land" would produce. Notice a couple of critical aspects of these exchanges: What they know and how they knew it.

Notice what they knew. If you scurried off to watch another episode of Wagon Train you saw that these wagon train travelers were vivid in their descriptions of destination. They were detailed. There is a palpable sense of emotion in how they recount the description of where they are headed, well beyond merely an intellectual understanding. There is a psychological element to many of these traveler's stories; many closed their eyes and said, "I can sees it, why ... it's *beautiful*!" They could close their eyes and visualize it!

## The Power of Organizational Vision

Visualization!

Risking going too far afield of our exploration, let's briefly consider "visualization" (aka, guided imagery). First, what does this even mean? Fundamentally visualization is the ability to mentally create a three-dimensional object from a one-dimensional source, like a picture. Second, the brain cannot differentiate between real and imagined experiences. I know, strange, isn't it? But, think about it. The brain never stops you and asks, "Hey, where did this info come from? What is the source?" The brain conducts no test. The brain simply takes in stimulus—*regardless of source*—and treats it as valid. (That's why we need to be so careful with the questions we ask ourselves! The brain takes the question as valid, develops an answer, then constructs a life that is congruent with that answer. So, don't ask, "Gee, why am I *soooo sloooooon*?" The brain will tell you!) Third, it can be leveraged for change!

But, what could this possibly do with organizational vision?

The brain and these mental functions have been leveraged for personal change. They can as well for your organization. The old classic *Psycho-cybernetics* (Maltz, 1960) deals extensively with visualization,

what it is, how it works, and how to leverage it for personal change. (If you haven't read it, it is well worth your time.) Maltz goes into a description of early brain research and how it establishes a scientific foundation upon which we can construct a better understanding of how lived experiences act to change one's self-image. Long before there was an understanding of the physics at play in making this happen (Stapp, 1993) and before a solid link to the neurological basis to learning (Changeux & Konishi, 1987) Maltz outlined a key concept: *Repeated focused thinking will cause brain changes and result in observable shifts in physical and intellectual patterns of behavior!* (I researched years ago the notion of changing intellectual behavior. McElroy, 2012) The ability to *think* yourself to change has been harnessed in many fields including golf (Jason Dufner actually attributes his understanding of visualization to Russian weightlifters!), body building (Arnold Schwarzenegger), movies (Jim Carrey and Will Smith), Olympic medal winners (Lyndon Rush, Missy Franklin, Troy Dumais), as well as business leaders (Linda Boff, GE's executive director of global brand marketing, leverages "data visualization"). Jack Welch, (see, especially, Chapter 8 "The Vision Thing" in 2001), one of the top business persons of our lifetime, facilitated visualization with the aid of a picture drawn on a cocktail napkin! This is how *Wagon Train's* travelers exhibited such an intense knowing what their destination was. This is how your organizational members will powerfully embrace your vision for the organization.

Think about how they knew it. Let's start with how they *did not know* the vision! Ward Bond did not sit alone, the kerosene lamp casting long shadows across the roughhewn floor boards of the wagon train's office. We don't see him, repeatedly dipping his pen into the ink well, writing a vague vision of their trip, to then seal with wax and put into the bottom drawer of the well-worn desk at which he sits.

However, this is much of what I've seen of organizational vision statements.

Many vision statements, that "fluffy stuff" that the executives and the HR folks drafted, are filed away in the dark of a bottom desk drawer. Sometimes I'll find them framed and hanging in the reception area (evidently more intended for visitors than employees!). Sometimes I'll find them printed on small laminated wallet-sized cards tucked away with other seldom used cards in overstuffed wallets. However, I most usually find the vision statement gaining prominent position in the annual reports. I can always find vision statements on the organization's web site. But, where is it not? Emblazoned on the hearts of the organization's members!

So, *how did they know?* Where was Bond's vision statement? In his mind and in his heart. How did he convey it? In the stories that he told. Again, too far afield of our exploration here, but leader's stories are a powerful mechanism to deliver a compelling message (Gardner, 1995). We can almost see Bond, sitting by an open campfire, cup of coffee in hand recounting to wide-eyed novice travelers what he's seen, "I can close my eyes and see it! I tell you... it's a wonderful place. Soil's rich, water plentiful. Why, a family could do very well in a place like that!" (Thanks, Ward!)

This is what YOU should do. Bring your organization's vision statement out into the light! Dust it off. Incorporate the substance of it into routine meetings, exchanges, reports (think about regularly reporting progress toward vision!). Make it just part of normal activity, to think about, tell stories about "where we're a-goin'!"

Make your organization's vision statement vivid, compelling, and embraced! Tell stories about it!

### The Source of Organization Vision

Let's take a quick peek back at Stephen Covey's (1989) advice: "begin with the end in mind." Of course, that's where we want to start! But, how do you get that end in mind? From where does it come, does it originate? The vision does not come so much from *what* it is as it does from *why* it is. All important is the fact that the final destination fulfills a fundamental need!

Let's explore this a bit through the help of Bond's wagon train! We know that somehow he coupled the destination (California) with people whom wanted to go there (our travelers!). Okay, much like the chicken or the egg, which came first? We could imagine, for example, that Bond simply knew California. Perhaps he had frequently visited there. We might even find him during one of his visits sitting on the beach at Santa Monica in his swim trunks, barefoot, wearing his sweat-stained cowboy hat. (Sorry, I digress!) If we start with the notion that Bond simply knew about California, then we are left with the proposition that he went back to (let's say) Ohio and convinced people to make the trip back to California with him. He would, then, have the task of convincing people he comes across whom have no idea about California to simply drop everything, leave all they had all that they had worked for and seek a new beginning in a place they knew nothing about. However, none of the TV episodes shows him in the mercantile store, brochures in hand, talking people in to abandoning their farms are taking the harrowing journey with him.

What do we see?

We see people approach Bond, "I hear you're goin' out West. We'd like to bring our wagon alongside, if you don't mind." These people had a *notion*, if you will, that things could be better. They had a *need* to go from where they are to a new place. They had a *dream*. They had a *reason*! So, we might find Bond talking with one of the town folks, taking off his sweat-stained cowboy hat and wiping the sweat from his brow with an old bandana, saying "Well, if you folks have your minds made up I'll take you." Bond was only the vehicle by which they fulfilled their dreams.

So who were these people approaching Bond? Who are those you desire to serve?

### The Recipient of Organization Vision

Stakeholders; someone with an interest in or concern about your organization. You may want to preach *the Word*, but if you have no one sitting in the pews you have no church. You may want to save the whales, but if no one cares about whales you have no cause. You may like making widgets, but if widgets serve no purpose, fulfill no need and no one buys them, then you have no business. Your organization vision has to align with the needs to those that will ultimately benefit from the products and services of your organization.

Remember earlier I said that you must have a vision in which all directly or indirectly effected by you organization have a clear picture that they will be a sense of harmony for their vision of the future. These are your stakeholders, all directly or indirectly effected! Your vision statement paints a compelling picture of how your organization will satisfy their needs. Let's explore this. Let's turn back to the mission statement mentioned earlier:

"GE will be the world's most aggressive, innovative actor in any business sector in which it operates. GE will be the fastest, most simple and self-confident organization in the world."

Let's break this down a bit and examine the *why* behind this key statement. Take a look at *aggressive* and *innovative*. Of all the things that Jack Welch could have envisioned for GE he built his organization on aggressive and innovative. Why? From where did the notion of aggressive and innovative come? Did they just *like* being aggressive and innovative?

While we don't have the benefit of old black-and-white grainy TV episodes to watch much as we did with *Wagon Train* we can imagine the GE conference room during vision statement workshops.

"Where do you think we should go," someone might ask, "Yeah, what do you think we should do?" another adds. "Gosh, I don't know... this whole starting with a blank flip chart is hard!" We can almost see Jack stand up, sleeves rolled up, with three used Styrofoam cups of coffee on the table in front of him and say, "Well, team! How about we start here: What do the people want? What do our customers expect of us?"

Let's reverse-engineer this. We have aggressive and innovative. Why was this designed into the heart and soul of the organization? Why, at the exclusion of so many other things, did aggressive innovative make it to the GE vision statement?

Think back to when Welch took over GE in 1981. What had been happening in the world up to that point? The end of World War II in September 1945 gave rise to a boom from the late 1940s to mid-1960s (thus the "baby boomers" of 1946-1964!). Manufacturing decimated in most of the world—especially the UK, Germany and Japan—America was the world's manufacturer. America could do no wrong! If America made it, they bought it! Life was good.

However, America took its collective eye off the ball. What were industrialized nations doing around the globe? Recovering. And, improving. Too far afield to explore in-depth here, we know that Japan was aggressively rebuilding during that time. But, not to their pre-war practices. They had invited Edwards Deming, pioneer in the quality movement, to Japan (Aguayo, 1990). America uninterested, Deming went to Japan and taught the Japanese manufacturers all he knew about strong, efficient, *quality* manufacturing. They listened. They learned. During this time Konosuke Matsushita, one of Japan's pioneering industrialists, in Japan the "god of management," took a small family-owned electric business with manufacturing located in the family home to the company we know today: Panasonic (Kotter, 1997)!

Japan's manufacturers wanted to be *better* than before, they wanted to rival the industrial giants of the world. They introduced customer-focus, speed, innovation, and quality into all that they did (Imai, 1986). The world finally noticed, at least by the 1970s. Japan was aggressively entering and taking over one industry after another, from TVs to cars. From computers to steel. Japan was aggressive. Japan was innovative. Japan was cleaning America's clock, as they say! This is the world of GE in 1981.

For GE they *had* to be aggressive and innovative. Their customers had grown to expect this. What about GE being the fastest, most simple and self-confident organization in the world? Much as aggressive and innovative this can be reverse-engineered and traced directly back to customer expectations!

Your vision is where your stakeholders expect to find you!

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