

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Four Elements of Powerful Vision Statements

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This is the second installment in a series of articles about the elements of powerful vision and mission statements.

In our [previous issue](#) we drew a distinction between vision and mission statements. What sets each one apart? What distinct role does it play?

Now we want to turn to the vision statement itself. Vision statements are integral to one of the most crucial aspects of leadership.

Leadership and the Future

Leadership experts James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner wrote an article for *Harvard Business Review* entitled, "To Lead, Create a Shared Vision." The article captured their findings after reviewing data for over a million leaders and managers.

They concluded that "being forward-looking — envisioning exciting possibilities and enlisting others in a shared view of the future — is the attribute that most distinguishes leaders from non-leaders."

Vision statements peer into the future, pointing the way forward in language that is consistent with the organization's core values. And as we pointed out in the prior issue, they are more about where we want to go or what we want to become than about how we will get there.

Truly great vision statements have four additional qualities.

- First, they appeal to the heart. They lay out a future that is so important or so compelling that everyone in the organization embraces it eagerly. Ideally people across the organization will develop a deep passion to achieve the destiny spelled out in the vision statement. Put simply, vision statements should be inspirational.
- Second, when properly crafted and utilized, vision statements strengthen the organization's culture by giving it a unifying purpose, a cause around which everything else aligns. Vision gives meaning to the sacrifice that the organization asks of its people. That's why the vision needs to be compelling.
- Third, because they clarify "the big picture," vision statements help management and workers make better decisions, resolve conflicting priorities, and overcome

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self-serving or self-protective agendas which often pit one functional area against another.

- Fourth, by their very nature vision statements should also be “envisionable.” When people read the vision statement, they should be able to picture a world in which the vision has become reality.

Examples of Great Vision Statements

Two of the most powerful vision statements of the twentieth century came from Henry Ford, who developed the assembly line, and American President John F. Kennedy.

Ford’s vision was to build a reliable automobile that was so affordable that every working man could have one in his garage.

Ironically, at the time that he announced this vision, virtually no homes had garages. But Ford envisioned a day when people would want his product so much that they would add garages in which to park his Model T Fords, the first mass-produced vehicle for the common man.

Kennedy’s words that stirred the world were, “We propose to send a man to the moon and return him safely back to earth within this decade.” Strikingly, 80% of the technology that was required to accomplish this feat did not even exist when Kennedy spoke these words.

No less was ambitious was Microsoft’s original vision: “a computer on every desk.” In 2007, having seen this vision substantively achieved, Microsoft announced that its new vision would be to “create experiences that combine the magic of software with the power of Internet services across a world of devices.”

This wording was a bit cumbersome. And it did not really meet the “envisionability” test that we mentioned above. So the vision was later shortened to “empower people through great software anytime, anyplace, and on any device.”

Every Department Needs a Vision Statement

When we cite examples such as these, some people conclude that the crafting of vision statements is solely the province of top leadership in an organization. But to return to the distinction underscored by Kouzes and Posner, enlisting others in a shared vision of the future is the hallmark of leadership at every level.

Thus, those who lead smaller units within a larger organization need to articulate a vision of the future that both aligns with and advances the overall corporate vision. To word this another way, the vision statement for smaller units of an organization should capture the essence of how these units will move the larger corporate vision forward.

Likewise smaller units in a larger organization should have their own mission statement that converts the vision statement into more concrete, immediate commitments. In our

next issue we will delve into this topic further and identify the critical elements of every good mission statement.

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