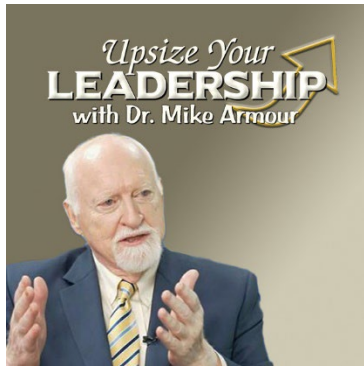


# Common Mistakes in Casting Vision

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The end of the year is always an inviting time to finalize plans for the upcoming 12 months. Over the next few weeks companies everywhere will be refining goals for the year ahead.

This marks an ideal time to add one other thing to the “to do” list. As part of your review, take a fresh look at your vision and mission statements. Do they still reflect your sense of where you are going and what you want to accomplish? Or do they need some refinement – maybe some touchup on a word or phrase here and there. Or perhaps a complete update or overhaul.

I’ve recently made a review like that of my own defining statements related to my firm. While that exercise is still fresh in mind, therefore, I thought I would devote a podcast to common mistakes which organizations make in defining and casting vision. What I’m laying out in the next few minutes is sure to upsize your leadership.

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Is there a single book on leadership or management that does not talk about the importance of corporate vision? It’s hard to think of one.

And the reason is fairly straightforward. The purpose of leadership is to take people someplace. The purpose of management is to achieve defined outcomes. Both endeavors necessitate a clear picture of what we want to accomplish. Vision statements fill that need.

As a business consultant and leadership coach for the past 25 years, I’ve had countless opportunities to observe how my clients approach the challenge of developing a crisp, concise, compelling corporate vision. Equally important, I’ve been able to observe how they go about implementing it.

From that perspective, I see certain recurring mistakes in the way that vision is defined, promoted, and carried forward. And these mistakes are as commonplace in giant corporations as they are in smaller, less sophisticated business environments. Let me touch on just a few of these today.

The most frequent mistake I’ve seen is having no clear delineation between what constitutes vision and what constitutes mission. There’s a website which lists the vision and mission statements of hundreds of organizations, big and small. As you start through them, you

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immediately notice that what many companies or organizations call their vision statement sounds very similar to what others call their mission statement.

It's interesting to me that management and leadership literature have reached something of a consensus as to what constitutes a goal or a plan. Or what separates strategy from tactics. But we're nowhere near accord as to what distinguishes a mission statement from a vision statement.

So, let me offer some thoughts on that. Now, I'm not so naïve as to believe that the world will suddenly rush to my doorstep to adopt the distinctions which I'm about to offer. But for our listeners, I hope that these guidelines will provide some clarity as they evaluate their own corporate vision and mission.

As I define vision, it is bigger, broader, and more abstract than mission – so big and so broad that mission is wrapped up within it. Mission statements describe what we plan to do in the foreseeable future to carry our vision forward.

Honda Motorcars has recently been touting their vision of being a zero-emissions company by the year 2050. Right now, however, they can't map out step-by-step, milestone-by-milestone how they will accomplish that dream. After all, many of the technologies which will allow them to achieve it are still in their infancy or not even in existence.

But they have a fairly strong grasp of the steps and initiatives which they will undertake in the next five to ten years to advance their dream. The role of their mission statement is to articulate what they are committed to doing in the foreseeable future to advance their vision.

A second mistake is settling for a vision statement that is not very "envisionable." The very word "vision" implies that we are providing a motivating picture of what our ultimate aim is. One notable leader who clearly understood this was Moses. As he led his people through a generation-long trek in a hostile wilderness, he kept holding out the vision of their destination, "a land flowing with milk and honey," as he worded it.

In the modern world, Henry Ford revolutionized the automobile industry with his vision of building a car – the Model T – that was inexpensive enough that the average worker could afford one. His workers could easily envision themselves and their cohorts all owning an automobile, and that made his vision contagious.

Nor must we forget one of the greatest vision statements of all time, John F. Kennedy's dream to send a man to the moon and return him safely to earth within a decade. At the time that he made that statement, no one could define precisely how that would be done. Two-thirds of the technology which would permit it to happen had not been developed. But the vision was so envisionable that it captivated the imagination of the world, and people from every walk of life rallied around it.

Compare that with the vision statement of one of my clients years ago: "To build a premier consulting firm." How easily can you picture what that means? It doesn't tell us what type of consulting firm is envisioned, what types of industries it will serve, or what being "premier" will look like. They might as well have said, "We want to build a good company." That's about all their vision statement tells us.

The third common mistake is reducing vision to nothing more than a slogan or motto or tagline. Slogans, mottos, and taglines are common in marketing and advertising. They quickly capture some essence of what the brand represents or promises.

For instance, the website for my own firm, Strategic Leadership International, has a couple of prominent slogans. One is, "big firm quality without big firm fees." That communicates our goal to provide affordable leadership development services without compromising on the quality clients would expect from the best-known giants in my industry.

Another is, "Build Leadership, Build Teams, Build Success." This slogan also appears on company business cards, on social media profiles, and general marketing materials. It emphasizes our methodology for making organizations successful. First, we build the necessary leadership, which is then equipped to build the essential teams, which when properly trained and deployed become the means by which the company achieves success.

But neither of these statements is our vision. Our vision statement is, "To equip leaders anywhere in the world to bring out the full potential of their organization." The slogans touch on aspects of how we undertake that vision. That is, we provide leadership services which will rival the quality of big-name firms without the fee which those firms command. And we position our clients to fulfill their organization's potential by building the leadership that can build the teams that build success."

I'm not saying that a vision statement can never do double duty as a slogan or motto. One worldwide non-profit states its vision as "A world free of Alzheimer's." It's an envisionable description of what they seek to achieve. But it's also short enough to be a slogan which quickly captures the essence of what they are about.

Most vision statements, however, are not nearly so compact. Companies need slogans in addition to a vision in order to market what they envision more effectively. But first comes vision, then slogans, mottos, and taglines. The mistake comes when companies come up with a slogan first and confuse it with their vision statement.

The final mistake I'll touch on today is not being rigorous in communicating vision. Organizations easily lose sight of their vision. They get distracted and drawn into activities which do not necessarily serve the vision which they have espoused. More strategic plans gather dust than gather momentum. Vision can languish quickly!!

Knowing that tendency, successful leaders talk constantly about vision. In fact, they've found that it's almost impossible to "overcommunicate" on the subject.

One reason we need to "overcommunicate" vision is because each person has a unique motivational pattern. Our individual patterns are some mixture of two basic responses to events. Either we move toward things which we want (what some call a "toward" motivation) or we move away from things we don't want (commonly called an "away-from" motivation).

All of us run some combination of "toward" and "away-from" patterns. We simultaneously strive for certain things and work hard to avoid others. On balance, however, most of us lean toward being either "toward" motivated or "away-from" motivated. We use that preferred pattern more often than not to motivate ourselves.

About 40% of the populace are primarily "toward" motivated. They usually spur themselves into action by focusing on what they want. Another 40% are "away-from" motivated. They "get moving" when they focus on what they want to avoid. And the balance are people whose motivational pattern is roughly a 50-50 split of "towards" and "away-froms."

Thus, if your organization is a cross-section of the community, about half of your people are "toward" motivated, the other half "away-from" motivated. And each of these will have a different reaction to your vision statements.

By their very nature, statements of vision are "toward" oriented. They emphasize what we want to achieve. Where we want to go. As a result, they resonate most fully with people who are themselves "toward" motivated.

Conversely, vision statements (which are inherently about dreams) are not so likely to energize those who are "away-from" motivated. That's because "away-from" motivations center on what I dread more than what I dream. People who are "away-from" motivated are much clearer on what they don't want than on what they truly want.

Perpetual procrastinators are typically "away-from" motivated. As are people who kick into high gear only when a deadline is upon them. When it's either "act now" or face eminent failure, they finally manage to get moving. They are motivated not so much by achieving success, but by avoiding failure.

If your statement of vision ignites a "fire in the belly" among your workers (or volunteers), it's most likely to do so with those who are "toward" motivated. They connect with the "toward" structure of your declared vision.

On the other hand, your "away-from" motivated people may find the vision statement appealing, but not necessarily inspiring. It's attractive to them only to the degree that it keeps them away from something which they don't want. But unless that "don't want" is gnawing at the door, they may not feel an urgency to "do all it takes" to make the vision a reality. They settle for doing well enough to keep what they "don't want" at bay, and nothing more.

When that happens, their low state of urgency creates a drag on organizational momentum. Left unchecked, this drag eventually becomes an energy drain for everyone. Even those who are "toward" motivated begin to lose their excitement for the vision. Their focus on the vision fades.

At first glance the strategy for solving this problem might be to generate a "buy-in" to the vision on the part of those who are creating the drag. But if their low enthusiasm for the vision comes from an "away-from" motivational structure, getting an enthusiastic "buy-in" from them is unlikely.

Instead, leadership must focus on continuously re-energizing workers who are "toward" motivated. Our strategy must be to keep them so highly committed to the vision that their enthusiasm overcomes the forces which are threatening momentum. Which is why leadership must communicate vision over and over and over. By doing so, we restoke the excitement of those who are "toward" motivated. It's how we keep them focused on vision. It's how we counter the drag.

Does this mean that we should forego any effort to inspire "away-from" people with vision statements? Not at all. Few people are 100% "away-from" motivated. Those who are primarily

motivated by "away-froms" generally have "toward" motivations, too. Their "toward" motivation is simply far less pronounced than their "away-from" motivation. With them, our goal is two-fold. First is to present the vision in a way that appeals to that portion of their makeup which has a "toward" inclination. And second is to stress the adverse consequences if the organizations vision and especially it's mission should fail.

I mention "mission" here because, as I said earlier, it encompasses a time frame which is nearer at hand than does a vision statement centered on a long-term dream. By nature, those people who are away-from motivated tend to be more focused on the near term than the long term.

The away-from folks should therefore not be ignored in communicating vision. However, the strategy for energizing them must be somewhat different.

But to get things done — to convert the vision into reality — our "bread and butter" folk are the ones who are "toward" motivated. Keep them focused on the vision. Keep their passion for the vision running high. And they'll bring the rest of the organization along with them.

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*Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at [www.LeaderPerfect.com](http://www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

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