

# LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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## What Vision *Actually* Runs Your Organization?

by Dr. Mike Armour

Recently I was coaching an executive of an international organization and asked him how clearly he could enunciate the company's vision.

"We don't have one," he responded, which was not surprising. From what I had learned about his organization in previous sessions, its culture did not seem to place a high premium on communicating vision and values.

But I wasn't ready to drop the subject. I've had this type of conversation so often that I immediately came back with, "You know, your company does actually have a vision. Perhaps no one has ever reduced the vision to a statement. But you have a vision, nonetheless. Let's see if we can figure it out."

Then I asked him to identify the themes that upper management returns to time and again, whether in corporate communication, performance reviews, and planning. He quickly identified two themes: a certain percentage of profitability and continued growth by acquisitions. A bit more discussion revealed a third recurring theme, namely commitment to a particular technology niche.

### De Facto Vision Statements

What he had just identified, in essence, is the de facto vision of the company's top leadership. A de facto vision is one which emerges by default in the absence of a stated vision or when the stated vision is allowed to languish.

In this case, the de facto vision was to focus on a specific niche in technology, to maintain a certain level of profitability, and to grow through acquisitions. These three considerations set the company's agenda.

My point is this. Whether written or not, all organizations have a vision. Some may be more short-sighted or less ambitious than others. Some are written in the form of a vision statement. Others are not. But the *recurring themes in upper management's focus point to the real vision which they are pursuing.*

Ironically, even where vision statements are in writing, the written statement may not be the vision from which top leadership indeed operates. Again, **the actual vision that drives a group is best seen in the recurring themes to which top leadership devotes its energy.**

We would hope that where written vision statements are in place, there is close alignment between the statement itself and leadership's recurring focus. In the healthiest, best-run organizations that's always the case.

But it's easy for a vision statement to become nothing more than some noble language published here and there in corporate literature.

## Espoused Vision and De Facto Vision

While waiting to see an executive in another corporation recently, I was looking through one of the company's promotional publications in the lobby. It centered on a very impressive vision statement.

I took the brochure with me into the meeting, opened to the vision statement, and asked my client, "Do you and your peers really believe that this is what your company is about?" He studied it for a moment, then answered, "I think it's what we would like to be about. But it's not what we are really about."

Again, I was not surprised. I knew enough about his organization to have picked up on the disconnect between its espoused vision and its de facto vision.

**Vision statements that are nothing more than words on paper are not only worthless, they can discredit top leadership even more than having no vision statement whatsoever.** When there is no vision statement, as was the case with the first executive, those within the organization will take note of it and see it as a short-coming on leadership's part.

But when a vision statement is published and widely publicized, yet some other vision – some de facto vision – seems to drive the organization, the disconnect always impairs the moral credibility of leadership. Through this lens, leaders are seen as guilty of sugar-coating at best and hypocrisy or intentional deception at worst.

Continual realignment around a well-articulated vision is thus imperative for leadership. Some vision will drive the organization. It ought to be one that is thought out well, communicated effectively and consistently, and is unquestionably the central focus of leadership.

## The Peril of a De Facto Vision

Inherently, there is nothing wrong with de facto visions. They can theoretically give an organization a set of priorities and a sense of direction. In practice, however, de facto visions rarely have telling impact.

Instead, because they are not explicitly articulated, de facto visions leave everyone with nothing more than a general idea of what the organization is about. With an expressed vision to guide them, managers are forced to reach their own conclusions as to what constitutes the corporate vision.

Not surprisingly, different managers will reach different conclusions on that matter. This then leads to competing and even conflicting priorities between departments. And because managers lack consensus on the vision, they cannot fully align the organization to maximum advantage.

De facto visions, in effect, usually mean that an organization falls far short of its potential. Unfortunately, de facto visions are more common than we might imagine. And the result is a world brimming with mediocre organizations.

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