



tom brown
inside
leadership

Vision To Reality

Managing A Vision: Nine
Major Questions Answered



Many companies work hard to “manage toward a corporate vision.” But after visiting a number of such companies, I find disparate managers with the same puzzled look on their faces as they confront questions about creating a vision and, then, determining what that means operationally. Here are nine of the most-asked questions about “management vision.”

1. Who needs a vision? Any manager, at any level, who seeks to unify all the members of his or her organizational team and lead them in the same basic direction should have “a vision.” Although the term may sound exotic, the approach is nothing more than that of a “head coach” enunciating for his players where the goal line is and how they’re going to cross it.

2. C’mon — isn’t that an oversimplification? Nope. But perhaps it would be better to describe “visioning” in terms of the managerial problem the concept addresses. In too many companies, too few employees (or managers) can adequately summarize what the company does, who it serves, or how things should be run to enable the company to meet its goals.

3. Who conceives the vision – and what does it look like? One of the things I am asked for most often is a formula for writing a vision statement. I resist such requests. The only people who can supply the vision are the top people in a company or division. The vision should look like whatever the top managers feel is a clear set of signals for the rest of the company to follow.

4. Are we talking about a fairly thick document that addresses where the company is headed for years to come?

Please, no. A page, maybe two. Tops! When corporate America jumped on the “strategy” bandwagon in the late 1970s, company after company developed a bloated image of what a strategy document should look like — and, as you might expect, the result was bloated staffs producing lengthy tomes that even CEOs couldn’t digest or operate from. The genius of management lies in making the organizationally complex simple enough to achieve. What is needed is a simple declaration of where the company is trying to go in, at most, a three-year period.

5. Once we have a vision, then what? Communicate it — to everyone in the company. Lobby for it. Beg for it. Demand it. But get people “with it.” Make sure that the first, second, and third shifts know what the company, as a whole, is trying to do with the products and services it’s betting its future on.

6. Isn’t that a lot of work? Why not leave well enough alone? Because when your quarterback lobs the ball to your halfback who scrambles left, then right, just before hurling the pigskin to an open tight end at the goal line — success is much more likely if everyone on the team is working ferociously to make the play happen. Unfortunately, in many businesses the “quarterback” often fails to find the halfback because he is trying to jump over the tight end — thinking that will “look good in the papers.”

7. Then “visioning” can be a competitive weapon in the marketplace? Sure. Imagine everyone on your payroll as clear and fired-up as you are about where the company should be heading in the near future.

8. How do we measure the success of an organizational vision? No doubt, more “objective” managers would argue that a clear vision should yield solid numbers. But a muddled organizational team will have real problems achieving targeted sales or production quotas — no matter how low!

Common-vision leadership does generate good numbers — and a good organizational mood.

9. Do vision statements ever get “out-of-date”? Yes. Vision statements should not be confused with long-lasting mission statements and statements of beliefs. The former describes in rather abstract terms what business you are generally in; the latter outlines in rather abstract terms how, philosophically, you choose to run your business. Vision statements pick up from those two starting points and make more concrete where the corporate leaders hope to drive the business.

Given the total business landscape of all the products, services, and markets that you could be pursuing — and given all the operational emphases that you could be accenting (like “quality”) — what is the specific mountain that you *prefer* to conquer? And how will you scale it? It may be a totally different mountain from the one the company attacked three years ago — and, thus, it may require a different vision statement.

The Ultimate Test

Perhaps the most important thing to remember about visioning is this: *It’s not how well-written or how handsomely printed the vision statement is; it’s how broadly the statement is understood, respected, and addressed by the company workforce day after day.*

The test is not whether a manager can write a vision statement; it’s whether he or she can transform vision into reality.

Tom Brown is a champion of vanguard thinking about leadership.

The author of hundreds of articles, he also wrote the first online book on leadership: *The Anatomy Of Fire: Sparking A New Spirit Of Enterprise*, which explores the look and feel of leadership in the 21st Century. To learn more about Tom, including his major role in *Business: The Ultimate Resource*, the largest handbook/database ever on managerial leadership, go to www.tombrown.us.

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