

Seven Steps to a Vision that Lifts and Stretches

7 Steps to a Vision



I worked with three senior leaders recently—a CEO and two Divisional Heads—required to produce a vision as part of their role, but in pain at the very idea. “They’re meaningless, my team hate them, my people smell the bull a mile off.”

Indeed, a bad vision exudes naughtiness. While Daniel Goleman showed in 2002 that the Visionary style of leadership produces the greatest impact on results, I have had some dreadful visions thrust before me. Visions so mired in corporate-speak or meaningless aspiration that they are fit only for the bin.

But a vision that is authentic, thoughtful, and conveyed in real language stimulates the leadership team, creates confidence, and motivates people. I’m not talking here about a ‘vision statement’ such as Ikea’s *‘To create a better everyday life for the many people’* which is pithy but lacks gravitas. Or, say, PepsiCo’s, which is laudably big on ‘integrating sustainability’ and ‘a positive imprint on society’, but says less about the zillions of cans of fizzy pop.

No, I’m talking about a vision that has stretch and specificity, is credible and sparky.

What is a vision? It’s a picture of what success will be at a time in the future.

How do you make yours mean something and involve your team as enthusiastic ambassadors with their people?

Here are seven, straightforward steps to arm you with a comprehensive guide. You may, as leader of the team, work up a first draft then refine it with your leadership team. If your core team is no more than six people, this can be done as a whole team from the start.

1. Pick the focus

A good vision is not generic, it is specific and relevant now. I worked with a company's new CTO: his topic was the development of the global IT Department from decent to outstanding. The MD of the Credit Division of a bank wanted to inspire his department to offer solutions to the front offices while staying resolute to hold standards.

2. Pick the Timeframe

As a general principle, visions work best if you go far enough out to get beyond present-day problems but not so far out that you have no sense at all of getting there. A two, or three, year vision is often a useful and realistic start.

3. Pick the Audience

Although the core content will be the same, your vision will need to be written differently for different audiences. Consider: who must you engage? Is it the team, customers, the board? What are their purposes, circumstances, and concerns? For the new CTO, it was initially his eight direct reports, to engage their ideas, refinements and buy-in before they took it out to the 500 people in the EMEA department.

4. Define a BHAG with Tingle

The BHAG is your Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal. Jim Collins coined this splendid phrase back in the '90s. What's essential is that yours must have a 'tingle' – no tingle for you, no tingle for your people. Tingle means a feeling of energy, ambition and being on the front foot while staying within the realms of possibility – this is a stretch not a fantasy.

Visions are most effective when expressed in the present tense as if they have already been realised: being in the 'future present' takes us there, plugs into the brain's sense of the immediacy of 'now'. So, in June 2018, the new CTO will open his vision by stating his two-year BHAG thus:

'It's June 2020 and we have moved from local heroes to a World-class technology division.'

5. Make it Vivid

Visions need vivid language not corporate-speak. This is about engaging the intuitive, emotional, and image-creating right brain using the vocabulary of real speech. Key elements are:

Metaphor

Find one that brings the BHAG alive. One leadership team we worked with in Research and Data Analytics articulated their vision to be *'A beacon, illuminating & energizing the thinking of our Customers, ourselves and our team.'*

For the CTO's team, their two-year vision for the department was to become *'like a top-of-the-range sports car, speeding along mountain roads with the precision, velocity and sleek design to negotiate hair-pin bends with style.'*

Values

Expressed in a way that makes specific the behaviours they imply:

'Walk into our offices and you'll see us living our values of thought-leadership and customer service. We're going beyond the day-to-day to create new possibilities for our colleagues and clients world-wide...'

And the business impact offered as a result:

'... We're offering more website options that deliver start-to-finish transactions in less than five minutes with zero outages and we're rock-solid confident now we're ahead of the pack.'

6. Know What You're Building On

You're asking people to put effort in and make a stretch. Give them the reasons to believe:

'We're building on three years of industry awards, consistent 20% jump in response time year-on-year, plus a lot of people asking me difficult questions that make me proud of our abilities and prompt me to lead smarter.'

7. Draft and Refine

Based on the six steps so far, write a first draft as if you are already in the future you envision. Either the leader writes the draft, and rigorously refines with the team, or you can make this a team effort: start in pairs then combine versions or choose the one that has most 'tingle' and knit in the best of the rest.

Put in details not vagueness – key numbers, what you're going to be doing. Put your own commitment in it. Get it down quickly before editing then refine as a leadership team to be as clear and compelling as possible. Aim for something that takes less than two minutes to share: that's about 300 words.

Great – you're ready to share the vision with your people. The vision is the 'what' and the 'why' of a clear direction. Now make it part of a living conversation so your people can work out what it means for them in practice and build energy to go beyond a compelling set of words to ideas, plans and execution.

Richard Spence

If you enjoyed this post check out - **Practical Exercises to Create a Vision that Lifts and Stretches**

For more fresh thinking, resources and practical tools visit <https://eye2eyedev.com/resources/>

Resources

Primal Leadership (2002), Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee

Leadership That Gets Results, Daniel Goleman (Harvard Business Review, March – April 2000) **For more on BHAGs see:**

https://www.jimcollins.com/article_topics/articles/BHAG.html

Built to Last (1994), James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras

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