CLARITY OF VISION

Defining Our Vision

The word *vision* has been trivialized to death. Many people in many organizations have discounted vision because it has come to mean vague "Mom and apple pie" statements that never lead to anything substantial. For too many companies, the advantages of real organizational vision has eluded them.

Authentic vision lives, breathes, and is tangible. The term implies *something that we can see well enough to recognize if it appeared in reality.*

Vision is not a vague notion made up of fuzzy inspirational feelings and sweet-sounding platitudes. It is a profound understanding of the desired state. It is clarity. It is the standard of measurement against which all actions are judged and adjusted. It creates continuity within drastically changing circumstances.

How did it come to pass within our organizations that the notion of vision was reduced to vapidity? Because, like many a good thing, it has been taken on superficially. But, in spite of the misuse of vision over the years, the organization that has real vision has a strength at its disposal.

A vision of the desired end results we are attempting to create is one of the two components of structural tension. Structural tension – the desired state in relation to the actual state – is the key ingredient in organisations that advance. The vision might be one about the organization's purpose, or business strategy, or goals that support both. In each case, when we construct a vision we have a solid picture of the desired end result we want to bring into being.

Once a vision has been established, we can observe current reality and notice the discrepancy between the two. *Current reality changes over time, but the vision usually does not.* The vision creates stability in a flurry of activities. Organizations that are unclear about what they are attempting to accomplish will not be able to create structural tension. They will be burdened with structural conflicts as the dominant structure, and they will find themselves in patterns of chronic oscillation.

A medium term view of both the vision and the current reality is the best combination for creating structural tension as the dominant force in an individual's life or in an organization. Aspirations and values form the vision of the desired state, and reality is seen objectively and from a wide enough perspective so that shapes, patterns, and tendencies can be understood. Clarity and caring combine to form a critical degree of structural tension, and this can easily become the dominant force in play.

**Authentic Vision**

Real vision is not an affectation. Instead, it is an authentic image of the desired end result. The discrepancy between our vision and its relevant current reality forms the most powerful form of structural tension.
A real vision cannot exist when nothing in particular is wanted, no matter how many mental pictures we may form about the future. We cannot have a real vision unless it is based on actual aspiration. Human beings have authentic aspirations that can become the centrepiece of a person's life. So do organizations. When our organizations are structured to advance, individuals can bring their talents, values, energy, experience, and spirit to bear, and both the members and the organization profit.

**Shared Vision**

An organization with a shared vision is a power to be reckoned with, because when the members of the organization share a common understanding of what they are creating, and a collective caring and commitment to see the vision become a reality, the first element of organizational structural tension is firmly in place. *Shared vision within an organization is the collective dynamic urge that is the prime generative strength that powers the enterprise.*

Because of a basic misunderstanding about shared vision in many management circles, its power is often dissipated. Confusion is caused by the erroneous idea that those who share the vision must have some say in its derivation.

When this is the case, shared vision moves from a vision that people share, to a vision that people do *not* share, *unless* they have some say in its formation.

One wonders why someone would be less enthusiastic if they are not part-author of the vision?

In 1961 when John F. Kennedy articulated a vision of safely landing a man on the moon the space program was in its infancy. There was much to do, and a whole world of technology to invent. There were principles to discover and challenges to meet. Tens of thousands of people shared in the Apollo vision. Did they withhold their participation because they did not author the vision in the first place? No, of course not. The members of the Apollo team found many ways to contribute to, and participate in, this vision in which they shared.

Let's end the myth that, for a vision to be shared, people must feel they are authors of it. This myth eliminates the possibility of an authentic shared vision. Not only are some of the most important shared visions in history not a product of a committee, but it is truly irrelevant whether the people who help bring the vision into being have anything to do with its creation.

When a vision is truly shared, we participate in it because we care about it, and we will support it through our participation. If we are willing to withhold or increase our participation based on our degree of authorship, our concern is not really about the vision itself but about ourselves. We have shifted our focus from the actual value of the vision, to our own ego involvement. Once this shift takes place, it would be disingenuous indeed to claim a shared vision.
If the vision matters more to us because we had a hand in creating it, then the vision's intrinsic value must be in question, or we have our focus in the wrong place. When we truly care about the vision, it matters little who originated it.

Imagine that they share a common understanding of the direction the organization is going, and imagine that they care about the organization reaching its goals and manifesting its vision. Anytime we dealt with anyone from that organization, we would get a sense of a company that had a shared vision, one that deeply mattered to them.

**The Great Vision**

Shared vision is a powerful unifying principle for an organization, or a movement. But not all visions are equal. A vision that captures the imagination is one that has the ability to move people to positive action.

It is an inescapable law of organizational structure that the values that dominate an organization will displace competing but lesser values. The greater the value, the lower the likelihood that lesser values will be taken into account, or be influential.

In light of true greatness, pettiness disappears. When individuals or organizations are pursuing great accomplishments, many of the trivial concerns that might otherwise have been distracting are no longer relevant within the context of their aspiration. This ‘law’ of organizational structure cuts two ways, however. If the dominant values of an organization are self-serving, political, and manipulative, then what is trivial will become more important than the accomplishment of a great cause. When pettiness is a dominant value, true greatness disappears.

Greatness can be measured, not simply by size or power, but by scope and character. When confronted by greatness as a dominant value, the organization has something by which to measure and judge every aspect of the enterprise. Is what we are doing consistent with our aspiration and vision? If it is not, we are ready to consider what types of structural changes we need to make. We not only tolerate change, we actively seek it. In light of true greatness, change and restructuring become naturally motivated. As we become clear about the vision we share, we can join together in making change work.

**The Spirit of a Vision Shared**

When people share a common vision, they can perform feats that would otherwise be impossible. They can put all of their actions into the same context, and they can align themselves in the same direction. However, even beyond the great advantages that a shared vision provides, is the power of the act itself.

There is something in the human spirit that longs for participation with others, that wants to be involved in a collective endeavour. Sometimes we find this spirit expressed on the level of a project team within a large organization. The members of the team are able to work together in ways that are reminiscent of the greatest
Olympic sports teams. Sometimes we see this spirit expressed in the wider organization. The organization takes on a life force that is truly extraordinary - a spirit that moves beyond simply doing a good job to doing something that deeply matters. These people seem to carry their own generative energy as their collective-dynamic urge is given full voice.

**Shared Structural Tension**

Even more potent than shared vision is shared structural tension. The vision is the desired state. People join together to bring the vision into being. The vision forms a context by which to review reality. Dedication to the vision is just one component of shared structural tension.

One of the other factors is the ability of the organization to deal objectively with reality in its evaluations and implications. We can see what is relevant to study in reality. We can observe the tendencies and patterns. We can learn from our successes and failures. We can innovate our processes as needed, and when needed. We can develop the overall capacity to manage the entire enterprise quickly, flexibly, and effectively.

Vision or shared vision without structural tension will eventually lead to wider oscillation when the organization is dominated by structural conflicts. But when shared structural tension is the dominant structure, we can grow, not only in size, but in competency, ability to learn, ability to invent, and the vital ability to discipline all of the organization's systems to support the common direction and purpose.