

Every part of an organization must stay in sync with what the organization is about
Bob Young

I have worked in public relations in commercial sales, in churches and in Christian universities. I consult with local congregations and church leaders in presenting church planning seminars. As a result, I have helped various groups define organizational purpose and have participated in crafting a number of mission and vision statements. In my work in advertising and public relations in commercial sales, because we all had a real sense of purpose and were genuinely concerned about delivering quality goods and services to our customers, this was exciting and inspiring work. In Christian higher education, I have found the task equally inspiring as we worked together to define the why, what, and how of the organization. More often in local churches, I knew it was an exercise in futility.

In our world, mission statements are often hung in gilded frames in lobbies and waiting rooms or posted prominently on a website. Too often, leaders pay them lip service but are not really focused on the carefully crafted words, but on measuring results.

The “vision thing” has taken a beating in recent years for a couple of reasons. First, concepts like mission and vision are not used consistently and many mission statements are not clearly focused. Second, mission statements have become fashionable and are often not effectively used in organizational development. “If you have a vision, you better act as if you believe in that vision,” explains Raymond Levitt, director of the Global Projects Center of the Collaboratory for Research on Global Projects at Stanford University. “What the senior executives do is at least as important, if not more, as what they say. People are on the lookout for deviations, and deviations will cause huge skepticism and a loss of morale.”

A good vision statement is an effort to say who you are and what you stand for. “It’s about purpose, identity, and long-range vision,” says Levitt. “What are you trying to do? What are the goals that you are trying to accomplish? And what are the legitimate means for doing that?” If you can answer those questions, your vision statement becomes more than a public relations exercise; it serves as a springboard to effective strategic planning.

For David P. Norton, founder and director of the Palladium Group, the key to making that happen is a process of defining your organization’s vision in ever more explicit terms. You start, he advises, by simply defining your mission, or the reason your organization exists. “The mission of the U.S. Army, for example, is to protect the security of the United States,” explains Norton. “And that’s always been the mission, from 200-plus years ago. The mission tends to transcend the issues of the time.” The next step is to articulate your values. These include things like honesty, integrity, teamwork, and innovation, says Norton. “Those things are always part of who you are, no matter what your strategy is.” The third step is to craft an official wording of the vision that bridges the gap between the abstract concepts of mission and values and the concrete goals that represent your business strategy. “When you create a vision, what you’re doing is creating a picture of where the organization wants to go or needs to go,” Norton says. “When John Kennedy said our vision is to put a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth by the end of the decade, he was creating a picture of something that hadn’t ever happened, but that they were committing to make happen.”

Norton says that a properly crafted vision statement sets specific goals and defines a time frame for achieving them. Since progress can be measured in objective terms, there is no

room for quibbling about performance. The targets either are met or they are not. And if they are not, it is relatively easy to find the reasons. This sort of vision gives managers and employees alike a real sense of where they're going and what will be expected of them along the way.

This level of clarity is crucial, because misunderstanding the mission or getting the vision wrong can have far-reaching consequences. Consider, for a moment, the case of Western Union. In their book *Executing Your Strategy: How to Break It Down & Get It Done* (Harvard Business School Press), Ray Levitt and co-authors Mark Morgan and William Malek note that Alexander Graham Bell offered to sell his new telephone technology to Western Union in 1876 for a very reasonable price. The company's executives, however, rejected the offer because their sense of Western Union's identity was, "We are a telegraph company." Had their vision been only somewhat more expansive—for example, "We're a long-distance telecommunications company"—Western Union's future might have been considerably different.

Organizations ignore the vision thing at their own peril. As long as it is clear and honest and stays away from the ambiguous platitudes that are so common in business-speak, a good vision statement will help define who you are as a company. And once you know that, everything that follows is little more than a matter of tending to the details.

An honest, well-articulated vision is a call to action. Employees and customers who agree with your company's goals and see that you are making a sincere effort to achieve them will rally to your cause and ultimately prove to be your greatest resource. In her book *Followership: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders* (Harvard Business School Press) Barbara Kellerman examines this largely unexplored side of the leadership equation and, in doing so, gives new insights into the important role of vision in the lives of followers.

"Most people let the vision stand on its own," cautions David P. Norton. "It becomes a tag line that they use at the bottom of their charts and things like that. They don't see it as the first step in converting this picture of the future into present-day actions." *The Execution Premium: Linking Strategy to Operations for Competitive Advantage* (Harvard Business School Press), co-authored by Norton and Robert S. Kaplan, takes the guesswork out of the process, giving the reader a step-by-step guide to the process of translating a vision into a successful strategy.