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Product Vision vs. Mission

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea." – Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

The product vision is one of the most important and highest-leverage tools for tech-powered product companies, especially for those trying to do product at scale, yet so many people and companies I meet have very fundamental confusions and misconceptions about the product vision.

There are two very common confusions:

Confusing Vision with Mission

Most people I meet, when they show me their "product vision," what they are really showing me is their "mission statement." They are confusing a slogan about their purpose, with a product vision.

This problem is enabled because so many people fall for the trap of thinking there's a simple fill-in-the-blanks framework, canvas or board that easily gives them what they need.

Now don't get me wrong, there's nothing inherently bad about having a pithy slogan, like "organize the world's information" to describe your company's mission. The mission statement tries to make clear to anyone that might not know the purpose of the company, what that purpose is.

The problem is that this is not a product vision, and most importantly, it doesn't address the *needs* of a product vision.

Having Each Product Team Create Their Own Vision

The other common confusion I see (and this is often combined with the first problem) is that each product team thinks they are supposed to create their own product vision.

This of course completely misses one of the key purposes of the product vision, which is to provide the common "north star" so that every product team, no matter what area they are working on, understands how their work contributes to the larger whole.

When each team has their own vision, it's the equivalent of everyone picking out their own star from the sky, and calling it their "north star" and then heading in their own direction.

You might be thinking, well ok, some call it a product vision and some call it a mission statement, what difference does it really make?

The issue is not the terminology. The issue is that empowered product teams have some very real needs that have to be addressed, if you want to have true empowerment, and a team of missionaries versus a team of mercenaries.

And a mission statement simply doesn't address these needs.

An inspiring and compelling product vision serves so many critical purposes that it is hard to think of a more important or higher-leverage product artifact:

- A good product vision keeps us *focused on the customer*.
- A good product vision serves as the *North Star* for the product organization so that we have a *common understanding* of what we are hoping to accomplish together.
- A good product vision *inspires ordinary people to create extraordinary products*.
- A good product vision shows us why this work is *meaningful*. A list of features on a roadmap is not meaningful. How you can positively impact the lives of users and customers is meaningful.
- A good product vision illustrates how we plan to leverage relevant *industry trends and technologies* that we believe can help us solve problems for our customers in ways that are just now possible.

But wait; there's more. Beyond the direct benefits addressed above, we have several other indirect benefits:

- A good product vision provides the engineering organization with enough clarity about what's coming in the next several years so they can ensure they have in place an *architecture* that can serve the need.
- The product vision is a primary driver of the *team topology*.
- The product vision, combined with the annual company objectives, drives the *product strategy*.
- A strong product vision serves as one of our most powerful *recruiting tools* for strong product people.
- The product vision also serves as one of our most powerful *evangelism tools* to enlist the necessary help and support of colleagues from all across the company and beyond—ranging from senior executives, to investors, to sales, services and marketing staff.

I don't think I can name a higher-leverage tool for a product organization.

Admittedly, a good product vision is a bit of an art form, as fundamentally it is a *persuasion tool*.

However, it's also important to not be too detailed or prescriptive, which runs the risk of product teams confusing the vision with a specification.

When done well, the product vision is *compelling*, *inspiring*, and *empowering*—leaving the product teams feeling excited to begin the hard work of making this vision a reality.

You can see several examples of what I'd consider strong product visions here.

Remember, the product vision needs to be *persuasive*. It needs to *inspire*. Have you ever been inspired by a canvas or board? I know I haven't.

This is why so many companies invest real energies into putting this product vision into a compelling medium. Increasingly that's a video of a *visiontype*, which is a special form of prototype. They dramatize the user experience. They show how our customer's lives demonstrably and emotionally improve. They make it visceral.

If you want to just rename your current vision as your mission statement that's fine, just be sure you put in the work to create a true product vision.

Unless of course you're a feature team organization, in which case I'm afraid none of this really matters, because mercenaries don't need to be inspired, just paid.

UPDATE: I received several follow up questions to this post, so please see this Product Vision FAQ for more.

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