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The power of vision: statements that resonate

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In a fast-changing world, the question for many senior managers is: ''What leadership strategy is needed for my organization to stay competitive and to thrive?'' To many academics and consultants, visionary leadership or leadership with vision as a core component is the answer. Although scholars, corporate trainers, and management consultants often emphasize the importance of espousing a vision and even suggest characteristics of an effective vision, no one really knows what such a vision looks like (Avery, 2004). In today's corporate world, we can observe that vision statements appear with a wide variety of characteristics, as these examples demonstrate:

> Year after year, Westin and its people will be regarded as the best and most sought after hotel and resort management group in North America (Westin Hotels & Resorts).

> FirstEnergy will be a leading regional energy provider, recognized for operational excellence, customer service and its commitment to safety; the choice for long-term growth, investment value and financial strength; and a company driven by the leadership, skills, diversity and character of its employees (FirstEnergy).

> Macy's, Inc. is a premier national retailer with brands that reflect the spirit of America. The timeless values that made our nation strong are the same values that make our company strong:

> - A belief in the promise of the future with the energy and determination to get us there.
>
> - A belief that our heritage mirrors the optimism, inclusion and integrity that provide for both stability and growth.
>
> - A belief that taking advantage of the right opportunities will continue to lead us to success in all that we do (Macy's, Inc.).

Adding to the confusion is when practitioners and consultants have great difficulty in differentiating vision from other related terms of mission, values, beliefs, principles and strategy. This is illustrated in Sage Software's ''Corporate Vision and Strategy'' as follows:

> As Sage Software has grown, we've been guided by a simple statement of purpose: to help make it easier for our customers to manage their business processes. Standing behind that purpose are our principles for operating the business – with a focus on agility, innovation, trust and integrity, and simplicity – all of which keep us closely connected with our customers.
> . . .
> We are confident in achieving those successes for our customers and have developed a strategy to guide our efforts. With the support of our customers, and through the dedication of our employees and partners, we invite you to share in that vision (Sage Software).

Some organizations already have a vision, but how effective is it? How should senior managers go about developing an effective vision? We know that vision is the starting point of any organizational transformation process, and should underpin business strategy. But senior managers have often been developing vision statements unaware of what the empirical evidence tells us about constructing an effective vision. According to many leadership scholars, senior managers need to distinguish between ''strong'' and ''weak''

visions (Rafferty and Griffin, 2004), as well as ''positive'' and ''negative'' (Senge, 1990) visions to ensure their vision is effective. This is particularly important in geographically dispersed organizations where people down the line must share the same vision. Given that senior managers want to develop a ''right'' vision, knowing about the latest research findings about vision is critical.

We first investigated this issue among retailers in Sydney, the most populous city of Australia (Kantabutra and Avery, 2007), and then their counterparts in Thailand's Bangkok, one of Asia's most populous cities (Kantabutra, 2008a). Our findings reveal that powerful visions that make a significant impact on customer and employee satisfaction – the bottom line of any business – possess certain characteristics: conciseness, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, and desirability or the ability to inspire. We found similar results by examining the vision statements of *Fortune*'s ''Best Companies To Work For'', a set of high-performing organizations from a wide range of industries in the USA (Levering and Moskowitz, 2002). Our research has led us to believe that these findings about the characteristics of powerful visions have important implications for leaders working across a wide range of industries, and possibly across different cultures.

Even if one already accepts that vision is critical to organizational performance, our research has identified a few practical guidelines for creating effective visions. In this article, we analyze and describe characteristics of effective visions, and offer practical tips for leaders.

Visions that work

For almost three decades, scholars have argued that vision is important to leadership, strategy implementation, and change. Kenneth Leithwood and colleagues (Leithwood *et al.*, 1996) even point out that vision building is intended to create a fundamental, ambitious sense of purpose, one to be pursued over many years. Despite its clear importance in the management literature, vision is still not defined in a generally agreed-upon manner (Kantabutra and Avery, 2002). This is a critical issue because how we define vision affects how it is espoused by practicing managers and studied by scholars. Indeed, a survey of practicing managers found little agreement as to what they thought ''vision'' is (Baetz and Bart, 1996), and in the corporate world today there is no commonly agreed definition for a vision.

Avoiding the definitional issue altogether, Robert Baum and his colleagues (Baum *et al.*, 1998) chose not to define vision in advance, but to accept the term as *each individual leader defines it*. They argued that it is the leader's actual vision that guides his or her choices and actions. This approach makes sense to us for three reasons. First, each leader develops a vision in his or her own way, sometimes rationally and objectively, often intuitively and subjectively. Second, visionary leadership often varies from leader to leader on important dimensions. For example, vision has been found to differ based on the leader's style, the content of the vision, and the context in which it takes root. Third, every leader induces his/her followers to act on the vision by using a range of techniques, such as legitimate authority, modeling, intellectual stimulation, goal-setting, rewarding and punishing, organizational restructuring, and team-building.

Adopting the definition based upon what individual leaders regard as a vision offers a pragmatic way around the definitional confusion in the vision literature. This approach was adopted by Robert Baum and colleagues (Baum *et al.*, 1998) in their study of American startup firms. They found that vision – based upon the definition espoused by each individual leader – had a statistically significant and positive impact on venture growth. Therefore, we adopted this vision definition for both our Sydney and Bangkok studies.

What do ''powerful'' visions look like?

Although business strategy and leadership writers have proposed different characteristics that a vision should have, some commonly shared characteristics can be identified (Kantabutra, 2008b). These include:

> **"Our findings reveal that powerful visions that make a significant impact on customer and employee satisfaction – the bottom line of any business – possess certain characteristics..."**

1. conciseness;

2. clarity;

3. future orientation;

4. stability;

5. challenge;

6. abstractness; and

7. desirability or ability to inspire.

These seven vision characteristics hold varying degrees of empirical support in the research literature, as well as face validity among managers. Nonetheless, few if any studies have incorporated all of them into a single vision construct for thorough empirical testing. This is the approach that we followed in our research.

Both our retail store studies used the above framework to explore the relationship between vision characteristics and organizational performance, as measured by customer and employee satisfaction. Both these measures are regarded as leading indicators of financial performance.

In the real world, many factors potentially affect organizational performance, and need to be taken into account by researchers. These are known as vision ''realization factors''. In our research, we included the following factors that previous research indicated were likely to affect realizing a vision:

- communicating the vision;
- aligning organizational processes and systems to suit the vision;
- empowering others to act to achieve the vision; and
- motivating staff.

We hypothesized that rating higher on these factors would demonstrate the existence of a more powerful vision. We further predicted that more powerful visions would be associated with stronger organizational performance.

The samples

The samples were drawn from apparel stores in Sydney and in Bangkok that sell brand-new, finished clothing products for individual use, excluding shoes and accessories. Both independent stores and those belonging to a parent company were sampled. All were located in a shopping mall and had their own identity, being in a clearly defined walled area.

A total of 19 of Sydney's major shopping centers were selected and all qualifying stores approached. Of these, 111 stores (70 percent) agreed to participate, with 48 stores (30 percent) declining. From the participating stores, store managers and up to three staff and three customers were interviewed. Store managers refer to those full-time store employees who manage their own stores and are stationed there daily. The latter criterion is important because we were interested in the effects of one manager's vision only. Staff includes

full-time, part-time and casual employees working under the store managers. Customers comprise individuals who were observed buying a product during our visit. If no customer was observed buying during our visit, we returned later until three customers agreed to participate or three visits were made to the store. One hundred and forty eight staff members and 214 customers participated in our Sydney study.

A total of 12 malls in major Bangkok shopping areas were selected. All qualifying stores in each center were approached. Of these, 126 stores (88.7 percent) agreed to participate, with 16 stores (11.3 percent) declining. From the participating shops, store managers, and up to half of each store's total staff members were asked to respond to store manager and staff questionnaires. Based on the number of staff determined for each store, the same number of customers for each respective store was also asked to respond to a customer questionnaire. If no customer was observed buying during our visit, we returned later until the determined number of customers agreed to participate or three visits were made to the store. Store managers, staff and customers were defined in the same way as those of the Sydney samples. A total of 251 staff members and 258 customers are surveyed in Bangkok.

The store managers were asked to answer questions concerning their vision and organizational alignment, while staff members were asked about vision communication, motivation and empowerment, as well as their level of job satisfaction. Customers responded to questions concerning their level of customer satisfaction with the store.

Does vision make a difference?

From our results, we confirmed prior findings that powerful business visions possess all seven characteristics – conciseness, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, and desirability or inspiration. Robert Baum and colleagues (Baum *et al.*, 1998) were among the first who found positive relationships between vision characteristics of brevity, challenge, future orientation, aspiring, abstractness, clarity, stability and vision content, and organizational performance in entrepreneurial firms. They surveyed CEOs of architectural woodwork firms, and found that vision characteristics and vision content were directly related to venture growth, as measured by sales, profits, employment, and net worth in these entrepreneurial firms. These vision characteristics were strongly related to venture growth through their effects on vision communication. In our Australian study, we discovered that when one or more of the seven characteristics were missing from a vision, there was no significant effect on either staff or customer satisfaction. Visions with the seven characteristics also impacted the satisfaction of both customers and staff in Bangkok retail stores in significant, positive ways. How each characteristic combines with the other six characteristics to create this effect is explained next.

A vision's conciseness is indicated by whether the vision statement is brief; effective visions contain between 11-22 words, rendering them easy to communicate and remember. This was the case in both retail studies where concise visions were indeed frequently communicated.

Clear visions directly point at a prime goal. They can be understood without extended presentation and discussion, often in five minutes. The following is an example of a store manager vision that rates highly on both conciseness and clarity: ''to be known as the most interesting store in Sydney''.

At the same time, however, powerful visions certainly do not consist of a one-time, specific goal or productivity target (e.g. sales or profit) that can be met and then discarded. They are also abstract, such as the example above. After all, a vision is meant to act as a guide for a wide range of business activities over a long period of time. More critically, abstract visions suggest a longer-term goal that also allows for individual interpretations. This characteristic provides a basis for achieving support from a broader base of stakeholders. This abstractness also allows staff members to apply their own creativity within the framework of their store manager's vision as they carry out daily store operations. An example of a vision rated highly on abstractness is: ''to be the market leader in fashionability''. This abstract vision allows staff members from all store functions (e.g. designers, front officers and even

"**In the real world, many factors potentially affect organizational performance, and need to be taken into account by researchers. These are known as vision 'realization factors'.**"

support officers) to interpret the vision in their own creative ways as they carry out daily store operations for their store to become ''the market leader in fashionability''.

In addition, effective visions are challenging – being challenged motivates staff members to try their best to achieve desired outcomes. Challenging visions possess a high but achievable degree of difficulty enabling staff members to enhance their self-esteem as they seek to achieve the store's vision. In our studies, challenging visions usually aim at achieving a national or international status for the store and/or its brand, such as ''to be the best retailer in Australia''.

Powerful visions clearly indicate the long-term perspective of the business, and the future environment in which it functions. This is because a vision has no power to inspire staff members or attract their commitment unless it offers a view of a clearly better future.

In addition, powerful visions are *stable*. They do not shift in response to short-term trends, technology or market changes, although they must be flexible enough to weather fluctuations. An example of an effective vision with these two characteristics is: ''to be the best retailer in New South Wales''. This vision statement indicates the long-term perspective of the business (to be the best retailer) and the future environment in which it functions (New South Wales). It is also stable, because no matter how far it is projected into the future, being the best retailer will still be meaningful, despite any change in markets or technology.

Since the hallmark of management is achieving results through others, the ability to motivate staff is central to leadership. As a consequence, powerful visions must be highly desirable and inspiring. They state a goal that directly inspires staff.

An especially strong ''vision'' statement in our studies incorporating the seven characteristics is ''to be the number one retailer in Australia''. This vision statement is brief, pointing directly at a prime goal. Aiming to be the number one retailer in Australia makes this vision statement very challenging and inspiring. Unlikely to be affected by technology or market changes, it also indicates the long-term perspective of the organization and the future environment in which it functions. This vision statement is abstract, inclusive to all organizational interests. Anyone in the organization can use this vision to guide his/her daily operations. Some other powerful visions in our studies include:

To remain the flagship store of the company by excellent customer service having the best product and a beautiful store.

To be the number one choice for youth in surfwear, streetwear and to also do this at the best quality yet the cheapest price.

To bring the store to its full potential giving it recognition as one of the best in the company.

How does vision make a difference?

Since the literature so consistently emphasizes the importance of vision sharing between leader and followers, we investigated this relationship further in the Sydney retail stores (Kantabutra and Avery, 2005). More specifically, we examined the relationships between vision components shared between store managers and their staff; the way store managers motivate and empower staff to achieve and sustain the shared vision; staff enactment of the vision; and both customer and staff satisfaction.

Instead of investigating the seven vision characteristics alone, these analyses also took into account vision content. It makes more sense to investigate both characteristics and content when it comes to understanding how vision is shared between the leader and followers. Vision content examined in our study focused on images relating to customer and staff satisfaction in the vision statement – because both staff and customer satisfaction are critical to organizational performance.

Our analysis reveals that the shared vision characteristics and content have positive, direct effects on both customer and staff satisfaction. Moreover, staff use of the shared vision to guide their daily operations; and employee motivation and empowerment are critical to staff satisfaction. The most surprising discovery, perhaps a convincing endorsement for the essence of shared vision, is that sharing both vision characteristics and vision content is especially important to customer and staff satisfaction. Simply sharing a vision is even more important than either the leader's efforts at motivation and empowerment, or employees actually using the shared vision to guide their daily activities.

In the Sydney study, in addition to shared vision being important, empowering staff directly improved customer satisfaction, while motivation and empowerment of staff directly predicted improvements in staff satisfaction. Organizational alignment and vision communication predicted improvements in staff satisfaction, but only indirectly.

The vision realization factors appear to operate differently in Bangkok retail stores. Motivation of staff is the only direct predictor of enhanced staff satisfaction, while empowerment of staff, organizational alignment, and vision communication indirectly predicted improvements in staff satisfaction. On the other hand, vision, vision communication, empowerment of staff, motivation of staff, and staff satisfaction indirectly predicted improvements in customer satisfaction.

Do these findings apply more broadly?

Of course, we must be careful about overstating the results of a few studies, even when they are built upon a foundation of earlier research. Thus, it is natural to ask, ''Are these findings about vision specific to the retail industry?'' In response to this question, we followed up the earlier studies with additional research aimed at determining whether these findings could apply in other industries.

To begin to answer this question, we analyzed 41 available ''vision'' statements from the 2002 *Fortune*'s ''Best Companies To Work For''. This sample comprised high-performing US companies from a wide range of industries. These organizations claim that their ''vision'' statements guide their strategic behaviors, strategies and plans.

Our analysis suggests that the ''vision'' statements used by these *Fortune* best companies also reflect the seven characteristics found in the Sydney and Bangkok research. Judged against the seven vision characteristics, the most powerful ''vision'' statement from our *Fortune* best companies sample is: ''to be recognized as the best professional services firm in the world'' (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu). This vision statement is concise, pointing directly at a prime goal. It is unlikely to be affected by technology or market changes. Very challenging and desirable, this vision statement indicates the long-term perspective of the organization and the future environment in which it functions. No matter how large or dispersed the organization, everyone can use the vision to guide his or her daily operations

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because it is abstract. Other ''visions'' from the *Fortune* sample that strongly conform with the seven attributes are shown as follows:

> To provide the most useful and ethical financial services in the world (Charles Schwab Corporation).
>
> To be a world-class provider of food and services (Ukrop's Food Group).

This research leads us to believe that the seven characteristics of powerful visions found among Sydney and Bangkok apparel retailers, and previously among US start-up firms, could apply across different industries and even cultures.

Linking vision and results

At first glance, one may question what is so new and original about the samples of ''effective'' vision statements from both the Sydney and Bangkok retailers, and the *Fortune* best companies? These sample vision statements may not appear to contain innovative ideas. In some cases, they highlight simple, known ideas. However, simplicity and ''banality'' do not limit the value of powerful visions.

Kotter (1999) found in his research that successful visions do not have to be brilliantly innovative; in fact, some of the best ones are not. Effective business visions can even have an almost mundane quality, often consisting of fundamental ideas that are already well known. We believe this is because a vision is used to guide organizational members, and therefore needs to encompass all organizational interests. That is, the more inclusive a vision, the more mundane. Although this quality seems obvious, Daft (2005) found in his research of business organizations that many visions fail to adequately involve employees. The more specific, unique and innovative a vision statement, the less likely it will appeal to a wide range of organizational interests and stakeholders.

In addition, we found that the retail store managers' visions enhanced staff satisfaction in both Sydney and Bangkok. This applies especially to those managers who actively communicate their visions, model their visions through their own actions, and who motivate and empower their staff to act on the visions. Furthermore, where store managers align store management systems to match their visions, staff satisfaction is enhanced. In such settings, visions displaying the seven characteristics also positively affected the satisfaction of both customers and staff. This is important because customer and staff satisfaction are frequently correlated with financial and other performance measures.

How differently should managers now develop a vision?

Clearly, more research is still needed into characteristics of powerful visions and vision realization factors. However, our studies, building on prior research, suggest several interesting practical implications. An organizational vision should be shared by organizational members. Vision sharing can be developed when each manager first develops a vision and then communicates it to organizational members or when all organizational members derive a vision. In particular, research suggests that visions that are concise, clear, future-oriented, stable, challenging, abstract and inspiring are likely to bring about better performance outcomes than visions without these characteristics. Appropriate realization factors should also be put in place. For example, the vision should be aligned with the strategy, and the people empowered.

Some specific guidelines for developing a vision are provided below. A leader should espouse a vision that:

■ is brief (so that it can be remembered and repeated easily);

■ contains a prime goal to be achieved;

■ can encompass all organizational interests;

■ is not a one-time, specific goal that can be met, and then discarded;

> **" ... research suggests that visions that are concise, clear, future-oriented, stable, challenging, abstract and inspiring are likely to bring about better performance ... "**

- provides a source of motivation for employees to do their best by including a degree of difficulty or stretch (e.g. to achieve a national/international status);
- offers a long-term perspective for the organization and indicates the future environment in which it will function;
- is unlikely to be changed by market or technology changes; and
- is viewed as desirable by employees.

Visions containing these characteristics are expected to bring about higher performance outcomes, initially through employee and customer satisfaction, than those without.

Simply having a vision that meets the above criteria is not enough. To maximize performance outcomes, managers should also communicate the vision, motivate and empower employees to act on the vision, and align organizational systems to support the vision. As for employees, the research suggests that they too benefit when managers are able to create and shape a vision meeting the attributes described here. This enables followers to work more effectively, and leads to higher job satisfaction. Therefore, managers who work effectively with a ''powerful'' vision could benefit from being aware of these characteristics and realization factors.

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