

Why Your Nonprofit's Vision Matters

When It Comes To Moving Your Nonprofit Forward, "Vision" Is The Gas In The Tank

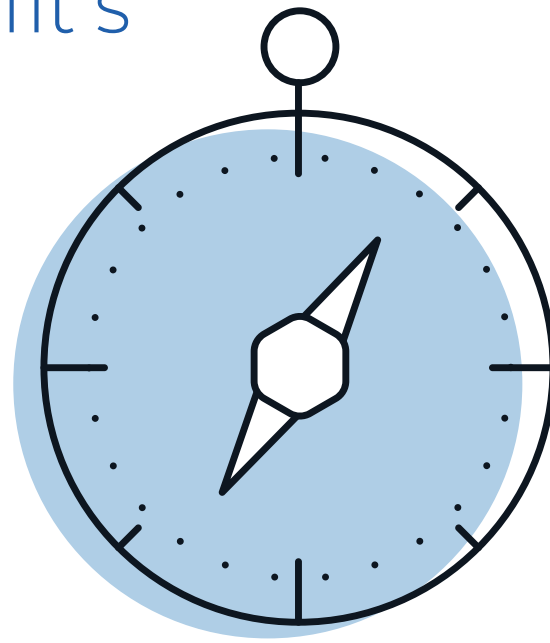
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In the northwestern quadrant of the United States, there are devoted, believing souls who spend their time searching for a mythical creature—a thing so rare and hard-to-comprehend that it has become almost an obsession for those in pursuit. Also known as the Yeti, Sasquatch and the Abominable Snowman, this legendary beast is perhaps best recognized as Bigfoot. And, for more than seven decades, people have been finding and photographing traces and clues of its existence. But, to this day, this large, hair-covered, man-like animal has never truly been documented.

And so it goes with most nonprofit vision statements. Indeed, like the illusive Bigfoot, vision is often talked about but genuine sightings are rare.

To be sure, like searching for Sasquatch, endless hours in countless board and staff meetings have been dedicated to capturing this brute. Tragically—despite the effort invested—very rarely does a nonprofit's vision live up to its full potential.

In this article, we're going to do a number of important things. First, we are going to examine what "vision" really is. In so doing, you'll gain a trusty and reliable way of thinking about the visioning process which



will help you greatly as you move forward in developing and refining the perfect one for your organization. Next, we'll explore what vision does and how it specifically works. And finally, we'll list three important reasons why your organization's vision matters.

As a result of reading this article, you'll gain a much greater understanding of what vision is and how to harness its power in your organization.

With that said, let's get started.

What Vision Is

More often than not, organizational leaders (and their board members for that matter) make crafting and maximizing a nonprofit's vision statement so much harder than it needs to be. In fact, virtually every nonprofit executive has experienced the pain and suffering that accompanies the group exercise of developing an inspiring, pragmatic vision statement. Legion are the stories told by

nonprofit executives of the hours invested in dialoguing, discussing, debating and arguing what vision is and what vision is not. And despite the best of intentions—not to mention the exhaustive group effort put forth—consensus is seldom reached.

From where we sit, there has to be a better and easier way. Let's see if we can't break this down into more helpful, manageable bites. Literally translated, the word "vision" simply means "to see." And, believe it or not, this is perhaps the most useful definition that exists when it comes to establishing an organization's vision.

this same exercise. As simple as this sounds, this is how it should be when developing a shared vision with your board members. And here's the bottom line, a vision is genuinely shared when you and your board members have identical pictures in mind and are wholeheartedly committed to achieving what you collectively see.

What Vision Does

Specifically, shared vision creates energy and alignment. Let's take a closer look at each. First, because vision is inspiring, it produces energy. This energy fills the heart and then

⋮ AT-A-GLANCE

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- #1:** Shared Visions Provide Hope
- #2:** Shared Visions Compel Courage
- #3:** Shared Visions Beget Even Bigger Visions

So burn this into your brain: developing an inspiring organizational vision begins with what you see in your mind's eye.

Here's a useful exercise. Put your feet up on your desk. Close your eyes. Now, picture in your mind's eye your nonprofit functioning at its very best. Who specifically are you serving? What services are you providing? What differences are you making? These are just a few of the questions that need to be answered. But, by seeing all of this activity in your mind's eye, your vision no longer remains an abstraction.

Now, imagine having 10-15 of your closest and most trusted advisors participating in

moves the feet. Certainly, most—if not all—nonprofit executives know what it's like to be inspired by a noble, breathtaking organizational vision. Indeed, it's most likely the reason why they entered the field in the first place.

Peter Senge, one of the nation's leading scholars on organizational vision, further relates that vision is "a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power...It is palpable. People begin to see it as if it exists. Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision."

Make no mistake, when people genuinely share a common vision, they take action.

And this is what it's all about for a nonprofit.

But there's more.

In addition to creating energy, shared vision creates alignment. By alignment we mean that shared vision not only gets everyone energized, but it ultimately and effectively channels that energy to get everyone moving in the same direction.

And this is a very powerful thing. When you, your staff, your board members and your constituents share the same vision and everyone begins moving in the same direction, great things happen.

Why Vision Matters

Certainly, shared visions matter for a whole host of reasons, but there are three specific ones that stand out.

REASON #1:

Shared Visions Provide Hope

As a nonprofit executive, it's important to understand that you are in the "hope" business. By articulating a rich, vivid and inspiring vision, you provide others with hope—possibilities and potentials of better days, better circumstances, a better quality of life and a better world, just to mention a few. And, when people have hope they make the conscious decision to "hang in" and ride out the storm because they know that there's something better waiting for them on the other side of setback. The more inspiring your vision is the more hope that you'll instill in others.

REASON #2:

Shared Visions Compel Courage

Once again drawing from Peter Senge's wisdom and insight, shared visions compel courage. In fact, courage appears to be a direct bi-product of a great vision.

Here's how it works.

When people are inspired by your organization's vision, they are moved to take action in an attempt to help others or to improve challenging circumstances—and the bigger the vision, the more action people will take. If your organization does not have an inspiring, breathtaking vision, it's a sure bet that your constituents won't be moved to get outside of their comfort zones, roll up their sleeves and apply themselves to moving your cause forward.

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—Peter Senge

REASON #3:

Shared Visions Beget Even Bigger Visions

Perhaps the greatest power of any bold, shared vision is that it prompts people to dream even bigger dreams. Consider this. When your constituents are moved by your vision, they take action. And when they take action, results materialize—and when results materialize, a whole host of actions and

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reactions begin to take place inside the brain. Specifically, people experience the powerful effects of certain neurochemicals like oxytocin and dopamine and these chemicals induce intense feelings of well-being and satisfaction. As you can plainly see, a virtuous cycle is then created where the dominos are pushed over and vision takes hold and your constituents begin to dream even bigger dreams. And this, in essence, is the ultimate power of a shared vision.

Here's Your Challenge

In this article, we've explored what vision is, what vision does and why vision matters. As you can see, your vision is vitally important to the success and impact of your organization. But here's the rub. Very few nonprofits have an organizational vision statement that inspires the heart and moves the feet. And, as a result, very few nonprofits reach their full potential—which is tragic because others are depending on you.

Your challenge—should you choose to accept it—is to carve out time to dream big dreams. And although this sounds like a relatively easy thing to do, it's going to require concerted effort and discipline on your part to make it happen. We all know that the “urgent” has a way of sneaking into even the best laid plans.

If you hope to reach your full potential, both as an executive and as an organization, a bold and inspiring vision is the thing that's going to get you there. ●

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