



Vision Quest: Part 2 – Reality vs Fantasy – How to Get What You Really Need

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My previous column, Vision Quest: What You Get is Rarely What You Need includes the following thoughts:

"The core problem is relatively simple and probably obvious... Every organization puts these things together, but too often no one outside of the 'must-know' crowd can remember what the heck the words are, let alone what they mean. They are just another meaningless poster on the wall..."

"Why do we spend so much time, energy, and resources on efforts that no one remembers? Because clearly, when it works it has an amazing impact. Equally clear is that it does not work very often. The real question is how do you get what you need? How is a Vision crafted and made real and alive? How do you make sure it is not just another forgettable slogan?"

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The first foundational principle that supports any and all effective and robust Visions is really simple. That principle is **Reality Trumps Fantasy**. Every time! What companies put out there as Visions are such end state, drug-induced fantasies that the people in the organization quickly know it is just a bunch of malarkey. Huge amounts of time are spent daydreaming about what the heck the facility will look like in five or ten years, when it is inconceivable that the organization could get there in 25 years.

There is an unspoken, unanalyzed mindset that Visions are intended to be perfect reflections of achievable end state fantasies: "We will become an ownership-based work system, yet our present environment is one of employee/management internecine warfare, using unreliable and undercapitalized equipment, staffed by uncaring and unmotivated employees, led by command and control freaks, where everyone is pulling their oars in countless different directions." Somehow a magic wand is waved, the silver bullet is found and voila, a self-actualized team environment is created—usually in a few months!

In one major capital project in the paper industry, part of the Vision for a new product system was that no *human being would touch the paper* once it left the end of the paper machine until it was driven away from the loading docks. In a paper mill this is a long way to travel. The route from a paper machine to converting department to loading docks is complicated and dangerous. The automated handling systems must navigate multiple intersections, doors, pedestrian cross walks, and all sorts of other obstacles.



This organization's Vision also included the idea that *there would never be a lift truck* operating in the Converting Department! If you are familiar with heavy manufacturing/continuous process operations, you know that the hourly workforce viewed "no lift trucks on the converting floor" as the dream of very naïve, and very foolish, salaried employees. It is a great dream, but not one that was ever achievable in the available time frame. It took more than 18 months just to get the automatic transfer equipment to work as intended.

The first day paper was made, lift trucks were required. Lift trucks were required to transport and stage paper rolls, and to load converted product onto the trucks and rail cars to be shipped. The operators were laughing and crying; the mechanics were laughing and crying. Operators and mechanics knew that the stated Vision would not—could not—work. Nevertheless, the workforce had to live with the consequences of a Vision that over-reached terribly. They paid the price of brutal hours, brutal working conditions, and brutal reality. Everyone that worked on the floor was saying "I told you so." This Vision was not aspirational, uplifting, or motivating. It was the exact opposite. It crushed hope, destroyed trust, and made people bitter and suspicious!

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They are by their very nature – bold! 】

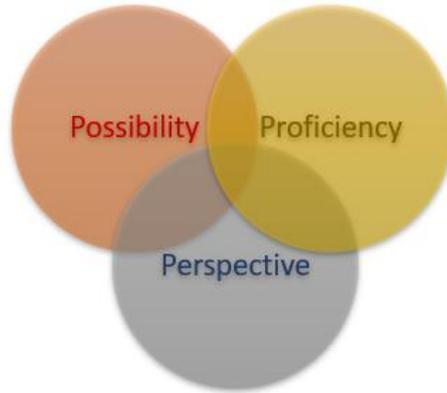
This is not to say that "*no human beings and no lift trucks*" was not the place that this organization needed to get to. It is critically important to set stretch goals, big leaps. Visions are not small teeny steps, nor easy to achieve. They are, by their very nature, bold! Hand-in-hand with bold leaps goes turmoil and chaos. Almost always, bold Vision requires working in concert with other employees in profoundly different ways. Often it means adding and modifying job responsibilities so that they become unrecognizable compared to current state.

Finding the Critical Intersection

The critical question is how to get there, and if the "there" is unbelievable, you are doomed to fail. Guaranteed! My advice is to confront, in a brutally honest way, current reality. Start from what is. Do not talk about creating a transformational change endeavor that reaches such a glorious Vision that the Harvard Business School will want to write it up as a case study.

【 Vision is the Venn diagram intersection of
Proficiency, Possibility and Perspective. 】

Simply put, Vision is the Venn diagram intersection of **Proficiency**, **Possibility** and **Perspective**.¹



Possibility is focused on leverage points, often linked to projected major change initiatives. Is there an upcoming capital project? Is there a new product launch or modification? Perhaps a facility-wide operator skills training initiative is planned. There are a host of opportunities.

Proficiency is focused on the skill of the workforce. Is the workforce capable of performing maintenance tasks, change overs? Are they able to flow to work? Are they qualified in multiple tasks and jobs? Are they self-directed? Do leaders empower and inspire?

Perspective is focused on the business outlook. What is the competitive landscape? What is the risk reward analysis? Is there time to experiment, or is doom on the horizon?

Vision comes from where all three intersect. As is shown in the diagram, this is a very small subset of the total set of options – a very small subset. If the organization has no upcoming major capital projects (**Possibility**) and is perfectly happy with the current state (**Perspective**), then acting on a Vision that requires everything to be turned upside down and inside out (**Possibility**) is probably a non-starter.

If you are staring shutdowns and curtailments in the face (**Perspective**), then the Vision may be as simple as doing what is necessary to survive; economic crisis eliminates many options and opens up others. You cannot have flow to work (**Proficiency/Possibility**) if operators are not qualified at executing multiple tasks, in multiple jobs (**Proficiency**), as needed. You cannot reasonably expect a workforce that has never been responsible and accountable (**Possibility/Proficiency**) for much of anything to become self-directed (**Possibility**) in a few months. It just will not happen.

For some reason, **Proficiency** is often the most difficult of the three elements to evaluate and accept. Leadership's inability to realistically judge organizational effectiveness and skill continues to stun and amaze me. Either that, or the shiny gold ring of creating a "high-performance work team" or an "ownership-based work system" overwhelms practical thought and action. Most leaders believe



there is a competitive advantage to ownership-based systems. Most leaders want it in their business. However, having the Vision of high performance and doing the work necessary to get high performance are two very, very different things.

Do not get hung up on precise definitions of these three terms. They are intended to be a guide. They are intended to help one think about what a creative, stretch and attainable Vision might be. All three are critical; Vision is the intersection of all three elements, not just one or two.

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1 10-plus years ago, while a member of a Koch Industries Market Based Management team, I saw a version of this Venn diagram centered on a free market perspective, using free market language. I have never come across anything like it in a classroom setting or in print since that time. I believe I have made this model more powerful, simpler, and more useable.



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