



Vision Quest: Part 1 – What You Get is Rarely What You Need

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Have you ever been a part of a visioning exercise? If the answer is yes, then raise your hand. I am sure a whole bunch of hands went up. If you have been part of an organization, work system, or department for longer than a year the real answer to this question is—everyone. Why is this done? What is the reason?

The answer is to make sure we avoid the Abilene Paradox¹, where everyone agrees to go somewhere when actually no one wants to go there at all; or the insanity of a boat where half of the occupants' paddle one way and half the other. It is a foundational approach to gaining alignment, to come to an agreement on where we are going, to make sure we are all on the same page. If you do not know where you are going, then how can you possibly get there? Right? Right.

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So, everyone's hands are now up in the air. The next question is: what did the process of building a Vision look like? Did you imagine what your facility or department would look like in five years?

For instance:

Safety: no lost time accidents, no recordable injuries, no first aids...

Reliability: best in class uptime and runability...

Workforce: highly motivated, skilled and qualified operator owners...

Does this sound familiar? There would also be a discussion about, or a road trip to, recognized world-class organizations. What are their Visions like? How did they make them real and alive? Toyota, Procter & Gamble, and Google might have been high on the list.

Toyota has been the gold standard in the manufacturing world for a long time. The Toyota Way/Lean Manufacturing has been a force, so much so it seems that every continuous process manufacturer in the United States has tried at one time or another to emulate Toyota. So, often Vision teams say, "let's go to the Toyota Georgetown plant and see how it is done."

P&G is also high on the benchmark list. The story line about P&G is that the words are real, and everyone knows and understands them. The Vision is not an exercise, but the way that people act and think and make decisions every day. It is the North Star of who and what the entire company is all about. The Vision is real!!

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It is interesting to remember that General Electric, Kodak, and Saturn used to be on this list, but not anymore. General Electric was (and perhaps will be again) a best-in-class company. They used to be the largest US industrial company by market value. Boeing now holds that position. Right now, GE must rediscover and retool what works. Jack Welch's vision no longer fits, and Jeff Immelt is no longer the CEO. The company is a shell of what it used to be.



Kodak's vision during its heyday was formulated and driven by George Eastman. He did not have a degree in Chemical Engineering, but his approach to film was that of a chemical engineer. This mindset helped to create one of the most successful companies in American history. Kodak made photography inexpensive and easily accessible to everyone. All well and good until the world of digital photography arrived, with a vengeance.

In a manufacturing environment, if you are cutting edge you might have hourly operators and salaried leadership working together to create the Vision. They would be equal partners. The result, when done right, is joint ownership and tremendous buy-in. This is how it used to be at Saturn. In its heyday, the storyline was that Saturn had turned visiting its organization into a profit center, never laid employees off, had a very identifiable brand, and sold a large number of well-made vehicles. They are no longer in existence.

When a Vision Works

Out of all this effort comes a Vision statement. A Vision statement describes a picture of what the company, division or department will be. This statement captures that essence. In a short and concise phrase or a sentence or two, the future state is laid out there. It is easily remembered and has an emotional appeal to all members of the team, the department, or the entire company. Ford's "Quality is Job 1," Nike's "Just Do It," the Army's "Be All You Can Be," and Facebook's "Get Members" all are examples of pithy and powerful statements. They are memorable and remembered.

A Vision statement can also be loaded with ideas like beating all future competitors, being first or second in a business segment, having world class uptime and efficiencies, deploying capital more effectively than anyone else, or being world-class comparative to internal competitors and, even more importantly, to external competitors! Length and complexity, however, are both red flags. Very quickly the statement is no better than a computer-generated algorithm of buzzwords and jibber jabber.

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Successful Visions are aspirational as well as directional. A Vision is intended to capture the hearts as well as the minds of the organization. Everyone must row in the same direction, in unison, at the right time. Leadership schedules a series of communication meetings. A banner or two is put up and everyone signs it. Wallet cards are printed, and T-shirts are handed out. The new Vision is rolled out. Hurrah!

Heartfelt congratulations to everyone who has participated in and tried to make real such efforts. It is the right thing to do. However, in reality; the whole Vision thing is messed up.



The core problem is relatively simple and probably obvious. To everyone who raised a hand: without looking at a wall poster, a wallet card, or asking your nearest colleague, what is the Vision statement? 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.

Every organization puts these things together, but mostly no one outside of the must know crowd, can ever remember what the heck the words are, let alone what they mean.

There must be a better way. Vision is critically important, essential and necessary! I have been a part of two organizations in my professional lifetime that were non-traditional, high-performing, ownership-based... call it what you want. Work at these organizations was not a four-letter nasty word, but rather an inspirational gift. I really did not understand at the time what a gift it was to work with a group of people that cared, gave a damn, and were committed and dedicated to living the dream. It was electric. It was successful.

These organizations were competitive and enduring. They beat the socks off any internal comparative operation and were better than almost every comparable external facility (not all, but almost all!) I would go back if I could. I wish I had appreciated better at the time what I had. These experiences are alive in my heart and mind. They guide my actions with regards to every subsequent effort to create a High-Performing Work Team. I have a personal/professional vision of Ownership-Based Work systems.

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?

In follow on articles I will speak to what works better. Please stay tuned.

¹ *The Abilene Paradox: Harvey, J. B. (1974). "The Abilene paradox: the management of agreement". Organizational Dynamics. 3: 63–80: In the Abilene paradox, a group of people collectively decide on a course of action that is counter to the preferences of many or all of the individuals in the group."*



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