

# Vision Is Critical—Especially During Tough Times

BY CARL ROBINSON, PH.D.



One of the potential pitfalls that happens to leaders in a crisis is that they become preoccupied with solving short-term issues. That is completely understandable if the

house is on fire. You should be preoccupied with putting the fire out. But, have you ever watched a top-flight fire brigade battle a major fire? While the firefighters fight the blaze, the brigade captain is taking in the whole picture, planning for and setting things up to not just put out the immediate blaze but to prevent it from spreading. The leader is planning the battle, not just the current firefight.

In our current economic turmoil, many people have been preoccupied with putting out fires—hoping to stay alive. However, if you want to be more than a survivor, you have to think about and plan for the future, and that takes vision. Furthermore, crafting and communicating a vision for your organization is even more critical when you are working with a highly educated workforce in a work world where there are no long-term commitments between the company and the worker. Ordering people into battle has limited effectiveness. You might get short-term compliance with your commands, but you're unlikely to gain long-term commitment unless you craft and communicate a viable vision.

According to the noted Harvard professor John Kotter, Ph.D., in his book *Leading Change*, an effective vision has six characteristics:

1. **Imaginable:** It conveys a picture of what the future will look like.
2. **Desirable:** It appeals to the long-term interests of employees, customers, stockholders, and others who have a stake in the enterprise.
3. **Feasible:** It comprises realistic, attainable goals.
4. **Focused:** It is clear enough to provide guidance in decision making.
5. **Flexible:** It is general enough to allow individual initiative and alternative

responses in light of changing conditions.

6. **Communicable:** It is easy to communicate; it can be successfully explained in five minutes.

Developing an effective vision is not easy. It sounds easy on the surface, but because it can be an emotionally charged exercise, getting it right can be a messy and difficult process. It can be emotionally charged because vision is informed by the values of the vision creators. Values, or guiding principles, are intangible beliefs that tend to be idiosyncratic rather than universally held.

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For example, if you value sustainability and creating a legacy, then your vision for your company could be significantly different than if you are simply trying to build up a business to a level that it will become a takeover candidate, thus allowing you to cash out at the maximum price you can get in the short term. Imagine the scene where two senior executives with those views are trying to create a new vision for their company!

The essential ingredients for developing an effective vision are:

- An aligned team;
- Accommodating both the “head and the heart.” An effective vision makes good business sense and engages people on an emotional level;
- A tolerance for ambiguity and an appreciation for the messiness of the process that fosters an enriched vision development process and outcome. It will not be a linear endeavor; and
- A sense of urgency that keeps people focused and energized.

Frequently, you won't really know where your team members stand until you get into the thick of it. You may think the team is aligned, but you will only see your team members' true colors when you begin discussing where the company should go. It is critical that you surface all of the important issues and concerns that your team members harbor or your vision will be blurred at best. Without full and open participation, team members will not fully support the agreed upon vision in spirit (be less motivated) and may well exhibit behaviors that are not an accurate reflection of it. Unfortunately, “because of the anxieties and conflicts attending

vision creation,” people often cut off the process prematurely.

Therefore, it's best to get everything on the table and allow enough time for a fully vetted vision creation process—which can take months to do right. Allow for open consideration and debate before deciding on a final version. Then, with a clear and informed understanding, people can self-select in or out of the organization based on their acceptance of and commitment to the vision. You really don't want anyone remaining who isn't fully onboard and committed because they will inevitably act out and potentially derail your efforts. Once you have a clear vision, you can begin to develop a strategy and the tactics to achieve it.

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