

## Unfogging The Future: The Challenging Task of Building a Vision Statement

*by Mike Gospe*

What do you need to build a vision statement? If you are Harry Potter, you might find the answer in Divination Class, whereby peering into a crystal ball shows the future. For the rest of us, the journey to building a vision statement can be a struggle challenged by skeptical participants, conflicting views, and an ineffective process. Organizations that fail to envision their own future, however, will find that someone else has created one for them, whether they want it or not.

### Why do you need a vision statement?

A vision statement is a tool that can guide your organization as market conditions, technologies, and buyer behaviors change and evolve. It summarizes what an organization wants to become within a specified time frame and should resonate with management and staff. Not only does a vision give shape and direction to the organization's future, it helps set priorities and criteria for product development plans and strategies. A well-crafted vision will help employees feel proud, excited, and part of something much bigger than themselves.

The essence of survival is adaptation. Consider a few companies that were successful in one market and, at the same time, envisioned future opportunities and then executed a plan to evolve their business.

- **Owens Corning** started out manufacturing pots and pans, then produced glass cookware, and now is the leading manufacturer of fiber optics.
- **Westinghouse's** first products were airbrakes, then radios. Later, they became an independent subscriber broadcasting network and the owner of CBS.
- **Motorola's** first product was the "motoring victrola." Now a manufacturer of cell phones and other hi-tech equipment, they haven't produced car radios in decades.

How is it that each of these long-lasting companies changed so dramatically? One common ingredient in their success was the ability to envision a future where their core competencies could continue to flourish in light of the changing world around them.

### Driving the process

Many visioning exercises fail because they are viewed as static events—an activity to be checked off of today's "to do" list. Consider this important task part of the overall business strategy and an on-going process. Since the future is always changing and

we can not see beyond today's headlines, team leaders must be ever-vigilant in understanding the present and the trends most likely to affect your industry, your employees, and your attitudes and culture.

### **Practical tips:**

1. **Involve others in a “future council.”** Vision exercises that involve only the executive team will end up with an image of political correctness that everyone has already agreed upon. Invite participants who will challenge the status quo.
2. **Define your values first.** When everything else changes, your values cannot.
3. **Avoid falling into the trap of creating a “false vision.”** A false vision is the present referred to in future tense – a replay of history.
4. **Be prepared to walk the walk.** Take a few visible actions that make it clear where your future bets are placed, but never find yourself so deeply in the future that you can't change your vision of it without looking like a hypocrite. For example, although Smith Corona explored the development of word processors in the mid-1980s, they remained heavily committed to manufacturing typewriters, as they had done for nearly 100 years. Despite the sweeping adoption of personal computers, they failed to adjust their plans and saw their marketshare quickly evaporate as a new industry was born.
5. **Never stop asking questions of the future.** Today's leading companies like Hewlett Packard, Apple, and Microsoft are vigilant in monitoring and assessing current market trends. Their business strategies and plans evolve in real time rather than on a pre-scheduled timetable.

### **Reconciling the present with the future**

Building a vision is an exciting challenge facing all companies. But it is also difficult because it requires teams to manage today's business in the present while also planning for the future. The paradox of balancing short-term versus long-term goals and objectives can create tension. It's how companies deal with this tension that stagnates or propels their future growth plans and strategies.

The discussions and insights that come from debating images of the future should be used to create organizational alignment and purpose. In the end, team members will need to agree and commit, or disagree and commit. Either way, they commit to drive towards a common future vision. If not, the vision will be in jeopardy.

Vision statements provide a ready reference for everyone to use as a benchmark when making decisions. These decisions may be as mundane as how the receptionist answers the phone to whether the board approves a new product development plan. Properly designed and implemented vision statements enable an organization to maximize its potential by focusing all its elements on the same goals while actually reducing decision making mistakes and stress.

For more information on how to build effective vision and mission statements, please contact [Mike Gospe](mailto:mikeg@kickstartall.com) at 650.464.7663 or [mikeg@kickstartall.com](mailto:mikeg@kickstartall.com).