



A New Lens on Mission and Vision

Robert A. Goldberg

I help leaders manage change. In this role, I often facilitate processes to establish an organization's mission and vision. The feelings I encounter in doing this are frequently contradictory. On one hand, people are well aware that mission and vision can provide direction for the future, help motivate and energize people, and lead to committed action. On the other hand, the same people report that they have found mission and vision work to be hollow and academic—in short, a waste of time.

What's wrong? I think the traditional understanding of mission and vision, and how they relate, is flawed and needs to be reframed. In what follows, I aim to provide leaders with some clarity about mission and vision and to present a new lens on them that, although requiring more courage, will yield better outcomes.

Mission and Vision

I propose that a mission should be thought of as the *what* of an organization—its strategic objective, its tactical goals, and its subsequent action plans put

in play to achieve its objective. With this definition in mind, John Kennedy's assertion that "we will put a man on the moon by the end of the decade" can actually be understood as a mission statement. Quantifiable as a strategic objective, and certainly

elevating, it stimulated an enormous range of activities and expenditures. Yet even though it describes a mission, people often read it as a vision statement—probably because it evokes an emotional pull toward something previously considered impossible to achieve.

GE's credo of owning a business only in an industry in which it can be number one or number two is often thought of as a vision statement but in reality is a mission statement. Quite specific, briefly outlining a strategic objective, it leads to actionable acquisition and divestiture tactics. You can usually tell a mission statement because it helps describe

the organization's future business or operational achievement goal. The best of their kind are brief, specific, and measurable and yield commitment to achieve the outcome desired. Without a mission, an organization has no reason for being and it will flounder.

In contrast, I propose that a vision should be thought of as the *how* of an organization. The purpose of vision work (note that I do not say *vision statement*) should be to identify and reinforce the values and behaviors considered important for success

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(and by implicit contrast, the behaviors not sanctioned), to indicate how people should treat each other and customers, and to identify management practices that will support those values.

Visioning can thus establish boundaries, or norms, of behavior beyond which people generally will not wander. An example of a vision statement is, "We will delight our customers and ourselves." Another example is, "We will learn shoulder-to-shoulder with our clients." These statements depict values (delighting and learning) that are important to each organization even as they influence its mission. For instance, delighting customers may lead to a strategy of frequent new product introductions, whereas learning with clients may lead to a marketing strategy that helps distinguish inappropriate from appropriate clients. One could also predict that in these organizations people will care about delighting and learning from each other.

Values in Action

Thus, I believe that creating a mission should be a future-oriented activity and visioning should be primarily about values, especially values in the here-and-now.

Working with organizational values can be a tricky business, however; they seem so conceptual, so abstract and invisible. No one ever sees a value

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organization.

The ideas in this paper are evolving and have come from four sources: the business, sociological, and psychological literature; contact with managers and executives in CCL programs; ongoing action research, which includes my interviewing people in senior leadership positions about their experiences with organizational politics, particularly with respect to power and service; and of course, my own experiences in organizations, including six years as a software engineer and project manager in Silicon Valley and in Europe.

I have attempted to present these ideas in a suggestive rather than exhaustive way, while keeping them true to the sources. For instance, politics is often defined primarily with respect to power—consider, for example, Philip Sadler: "The process of achieving, maintaining, and exercising power is called politics" ("The Politics of the Corporate Jungle," *Director*, 45[10], 1992); Jeffrey Pfeffer: "Politics and influence are the processes, actions, and behaviors through which . . . potential power is utilized and realized" ("Understanding Power in Organizations," *California Management Review*, 34[2], 1992, an article excerpted from *Managing with Power*); and Ronald Clement: "Politics is power in action; it involves acquiring, developing, and using power to achieve one's objectives" ("Culture, Leadership, and Power: The Keys to Organizational Change," *Business Horizons*, 37[1], 1994). For the purposes of my action research, I have synthesized these views into the following definition: politics can be understood as an activity (or process) intended (1) to build and maintain power and (2) to exercise power to achieve goals.

If you are interested in participating in action research on constructive politics, please contact me by e-mail at rosinskip@leaders.ccl.org, by fax at 32-2/346-41-37, or by telephone at 32-2/340-02-10.

decide to work at having more power, increasing the range of sources he or she draws power from, thus becoming a builder.

Another common situation is that a leader who is a prince is concerned about a legacy, how he or she will be remembered. Such a person may decide to concentrate on using power to serve others, thus becoming a builder. This requires developing the abilities necessary to serve others.

Whatever the desired change, in order to use politics constructively, I have found that executives

need to assess and then address power and service in a systematic way.

Conclusion

Seeking power in order to engage in constructive politics is a legitimate and necessary leadership activity. There is much talk today about the need to change

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leadership so that it can help us build meaning and community, bring more human resources to bear upon the challenges of complexity, and come to decisions that work for us all. Instead of tearing organizations apart, politics, if it balances power and service, can play an important role in the evolution of such leadership.

SUGGESTED READING

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except in how it plays out in someone's actions. Here's a simple definition of values: they are those deep-seated beliefs that are so important to people that they influence people's actions and even help people predict the behavior of themselves and others.

Let me give an example from the organizational level: a family-owned consumer service company that prides itself on loyalty as a core value. This

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organization makes it quite difficult for managers to fire employees, unless the organization feels betrayed by an employee (incompetence is usually *not* considered betrayal). Yet when an unfortunate downturn in business occurred, the value of loyalty appeared to be in conflict with the firm's need to cut labor costs. As could have been predicted, this organization found ways to keep people on the payroll (for instance, job sharing and salary cuts), laid people off based on seniority, and provided generous severance and outplacement services.

Whether these were good or bad practices is not the issue. The point is that if you know the deeply held values of the organization, you will be able to predict its actions during times of financial and management challenge. It would be difficult to imagine a firm whose core value is "wealth creation for shareholders" taking a similar path in these circumstances.

Thus, the values of an organization play out through its management practices and through the behavior of its members—and when the future is an issue, they can play out in unanticipated ways.

Aligning Values and the Future

When an organization is going through what has been typically understood as visioning, the values of the organization get forcefully expressed. Often there is a real discrepancy between those values and the desired future.

Here's an example: the president of a high-tech manufacturing company wanted an organization that would work in cross-disciplinary teams, be focused on customer needs, and reward innovations to core technologies. His interactions with his executive group, however, contradicted this. He set the vice

presidents in competition with each other for resources and for his recognition. He excluded the vice president of marketing from key client meetings, insulating her, and thereby the organization, from customer feedback. And no management practices were put in place to reward or recognize individuals or teams for process or service innovations.

Although his notion of the future organization was optimistic and laden with positive values, he operated with the autocratic, divide-and-conquer principles and values that had helped him succeed in his own career. Unfortunately, these principles played out not only within his executive team. His vice presidents treated their own departments the way they themselves were treated by the president.

The values of the organization and the future must be brought into alignment.

The discrepancy between current values and the desired future was painfully obvious to most of the organization.

Thus, the values of the organization and the future must be brought into alignment. The required transformation involves everyone but must begin with the leader.

Personal and Organizational Transformation

The CEO of a pharmaceutical company went to a leadership seminar with other CEOs. The workshop emphasized the importance of organizational vision, and they each worked on theirs.

Back home, the CEO was excited about this work, and he distributed his vision statement at a meeting of the senior executive group. When he asked for feedback, he got some comments about how well written the few paragraphs were, and he received some wordsmithing advice as well. Taking this commentary as endorsement, he had posters of his vision statement hung throughout the office and even had laminated wallet cards made with the statement displayed against a picture of a beautiful mountain scene.

This organization was, like so many today, in the midst of enormous turbulence. Increased competition in an industry that was consolidating into ever-larger corporations was creating pressure for the firm to reach beyond its traditional definition and to reconceive itself. The CEO understood the challenges and articulated them well and often. Yet,



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despite its "correctness," the vision statement fell unheeded on the ears of the organization; it was derided (behind his back, of course) as another top-down enthusiasm soon to be forgotten.

This CEO was behaving congruently with his values when he published his vision statement. He valued being known as a strong and decisive leader and being seen as knowledgeable and sophisticated. His vision statement expressed these values to the organization. So it was surprising to him when he learned that what he complained about most in the organization—how people sat around and waited to be told what to do, how risk- and change-averse the managers were, how lethargic people seemed despite the challenges and opportunities that lay ahead—was largely a result of the values he was expressing in his leadership.

For the president of the high-tech manufacturing company described earlier, his command-and-control value was expressed in his behavior toward his direct reports: he criticized them in public, he let them influence him behind each other's backs

The successful transformation of the organization depended on the personal transformation of the leader.

in closed-door meetings, and he kept the organization structured in functional silos that prevented the kinds of breakthroughs he hoped for.

In both cases, the successful transformation of the organization depended on the personal transformation of the leader. Unless these two leaders enlarged or shifted their own core values, their behavioral patterns would remain the same, and they would be unable to help their organizations enact any future different from the ones they found themselves living out. Yet, although it is easy to discuss personal transformation, this is an extremely difficult process and requires a different kind of courage than leaders are accustomed to accessing. One does not embark on this journey casually. I have found that the only time leaders are willing to do such work, which entails pain and vulnerability, is when they realize that if they continue on their personal path but expect others to change, they are deluding themselves and they will fail to achieve organizational goals.

Their first task was to identify the domain of the global strategy team, which entailed a detailed understanding of the responsibilities of the regional directors and the product line managers (that is, what issues were local and within the scope of the regional directors and what were superordinate global-product-line issues). The establishment of role boundaries enabled the regional directors to see that although they might be losing some clout, their roles were still crucial and valued. This freed up their energy to participate in the second task, which was to decide on a process to create the global strategic plan.

The path the team chose was to select a point person for a particular issue and to work in cross-functional subteams accountable to the larger group for their research and recommendations. The team plotted the commitments on a time line that covered an entire wall of its meeting room and scheduled a future meeting to review recommendations and finalize its work.

Over time, several successes resulted. Bottom-line savings through global plant utilization, lowered inventory levels, and collateral promotions were

gained, and top-line revenue generation was accelerated through new-product introductions. The team successfully found the balance between addressing local and global concerns in the same way it found the balance between being led and leading.

For the team to enact this new way of doing things, organizational members needed to commit to a new set of values. These values included thinking globally rather than

parochially (which could entail a regional director's taking a hit to his or her own short-term results in order to pursue a larger global payoff), working across organizational boundaries, and feeling accountable not only to a boss but to a global strategy team. For this traditional, 120-year-old organization with an average management tenure of about twenty years, this value shift was unprecedented, and eventually led other divisions to follow a similar, though not identical, path toward globalization.

The leader of this organization knew that in order for the new global organizational structure to

pay off with new behaviors, a new value set needed to take hold and that it was up to him to deeply understand and enact a new set of values in order to set the wheels in motion.

Yet at no time did this group of nineteen executives create a mission or vision statement for itself. Rather, it created a new future for itself by having its members act differently with each other in the present. The division president realized that the values

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he had grown up with as he rose through the ranks were no longer going to sustain the organization. His courage was in the depth of his recognition; his bravery was in doing something about it.

One might predict that with time, management practices to reinforce the new value set will be established (for instance, a compensation system that emphasizes global contributions while still acknowledging local performance, an MIS system that permits everyone to see results on a global basis). At a deeper level, one might predict that the new value set of involvement and communication will infiltrate deeper into this 60,000-employee organization now that the leaders of the firm have chosen this path of values and behavior for themselves.

The Role of Leadership

Although there are several tools available that leaders can use in the creation of a future based on new values (for instance, future search conferences, open space, and other large-system change methodologies), these tools have an important common element: they each require organizational members to talk and listen to each other differently than they had before. Implicit in these methodologies are values of honoring others' voices, sharing accountability and commitment to the success of the enterprise, and driving out the fear that is often an unfortunate by-product of hierarchy. Regardless of methodology, it is in the enactment of these values that the seeds of organizational transformation germinate. Thus, methodology is subordinate to value change. Short of this, organizations will not be able to sustain their change efforts.

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The good news is that the process by which leaders have the opportunity to engage in personal transformation is the very same process by which

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organizational missions and visions can be created. All leaders have to do is give themselves permission to learn from others.

The Values of the Process

It is now considered a given that organizations need to get the most out of their people. Some leaders consider employee commitment to perform on behalf of the goals of the organization to be their only potential competitive advantage. And by now, most leaders acknowledge that involving employees in decisions that affect them will yield higher levels of commitment and performance. Most organizational members are interested in being part of a process that they consider fair.

The values of a process that involves different levels of employees (laterally and vertically) in its creation are fundamentally different from the values expressed in a traditional top-down approach. These values include:

- Honoring the input and perspectives of people lower in the hierarchy.
- Opening oneself to being influenced by ideas not of one's own making.
- Sharing information so people can make well-informed contributions.
- Encouraging conversations about the future among people who often don't talk to each other or don't see eye to eye.
- Trusting that others may have as much to contribute as the leader(s).

This is not simply getting input and buy-in for one's own conceptions. If this were all it took, the traditional approaches would be sufficient. Rather, embarking on a path with these values requires leaders or leadership teams to actually possess these values.

Nor is this a matter of blaming leaders for something they've done "wrong"; most of us have grown up in systems and institutions in which we are told what to do. It is natural that once we attain power we end up telling other people what to do.

And it is not only leaders who need to examine their fundamental values; everyone does. Yet, if an organization needs to fundamentally shift its understanding of itself—its culture—it will find it impossible to do so with the past authority-dependency relationships in place. Given the reality of power relations, it's unreasonable to expect those not in power to begin the process. Visioning and mission work need to start with the leader.

A division of a global industrial-machinery organization structured around regional reporting (for instance, North America, Asia) had been reorganized around global product lines. Its top leadership

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group then struggled to make sense of the new organization. Whereas before, a regional director controlled manufacturing, marketing, and human resources in his or her region, now global product-line managers were emerging as a more powerful coalition.

A year into the new organization, the president of the division assembled the top leadership group, including regional directors and product line managers, to examine the effects of the reorganization and to create what he called a "global strategy team."

He had two guiding principles for the group. First, that the combined group would be responsible for establishing worldwide strategy—no subgroup would dominate or succeed without the others. Second, he announced that although he preserved the prerogative to make final decisions on global strategy and investments, he would not impose a process by which this strategy would be established. To create the strategy *process*, he would consider himself equal to the rest of the group.

This second principle was crucial. It was a value statement that these executives had to find a way to become accountable to each other as members of a cross-functional global team, with an output (global-strategy process and plan) and interdependent roles.

The president's statement signaled his commitment to a more widely involving process of leadership than these executives had before experienced.

Organizational leaders play a crucial role in the mission and vision process, but it is a difficult role. It is easier to write a vision statement in a room with one's own direct reports or to learn about the "twelve steps" of leading change than it is to take a hard look at one's own behavior.

And there is a catch-22 here. Leaders come to their positions with certain assumptions about how the world works and how their organizations should function. They express these values in their behavior. People respond to the leader's behavior, and the leader comes to believe that his or her behavior is getting the desired result. Thus, the leader's value

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set is reinforced, making it even more difficult to change. In this scenario, even actions that aren't successful won't be perceived as having anything to do with the leader's values. Rather, a lack of success will be interpreted as people's not getting it, not working hard enough, or not sharing the leader's core values.

That is why leaders often are the last to hear the bad news (do *you* want to tell your boss that the values expressed by his or her behavior are not in line with what is necessary for success?) and why they often don't get the information they need to make better informed decisions ("You tell him." "No, you!"). They are permitted to go on thinking their values are not the problem.

Unfortunately, the only way out of this is at the values level, yet the people that need help the most are those that seek it the least. Leaders who are willing to authentically question themselves are also most likely to already possess the values needed for change.

A high-energy, paternalistic president of a manufacturing firm never had the time to get to the work he claimed he wanted to accomplish: namely, analyzing and revising the company's global product portfolio. Most of his time was spent fielding telephone calls from regional directors, visiting the field sales offices, and resolving the interpersonal conflicts his competitive direct reports brought to his attention.

Vision Statements

Vision statements, although necessary, can be a problem. Sometimes people get so focused on them that they ignore the real work that needs to be done—changing the organization. In addition, in talking with people who have had bad experiences with visioning, I commonly hear the following complaints:

- The vision statement was written in management jargon so arcane and devoid of feeling that few even knew what the words meant, let alone became interested in them.
- The words in the statement were so generic that any organization could aspire to the vision.
- The vision statement was plastered all over the place, in some cases etched literally in stone.
- People's experience of the organization was in such striking contrast to the organization represented in the statement that it sounded hypocritical.

He knew he was spinning his wheels (and about to burn out) and complained about his people not empowering themselves to make decisions on their own. Everything seemed to come to his doorstep.

When the vice president of sales retired, the president seized the opportunity to create an operating team of his direct reports that he believed would be the vehicle for them to rely on each other as resources, rather than on him, and would free up his time to pursue his portfolio ambitions. In their first meeting, after he outlined his objective and they began a discussion of how they were going to organize this new leadership group, the president asked what might prevent the team from being effective.

Each person spoke of his or her fear that the president himself would unwittingly sink the effort by sending mixed messages about team members' decision authority, reaching down into the organization and bypassing them with their own staff, and generally not trusting them to make it work. Angry, he defended himself by accusing them of not taking the leadership mantle, of bringing situations to him without even a suggestion for resolution. A heated conversation ensued.

The president had thought the work would be a simple delegative task; over time he realized that only by challenging his own core set of beliefs and through his commitment to change his own behavior based on a new set of values would progress on the team be made.

Conclusion

Visioning is often viewed as a waste of time today not because people dislike what it attempts to do

Reframing our understanding of vision and mission will enable organizations not only to move into the future but to learn from the present.

(they don't) but because, as it is usually practiced, it does not do enough. In its focus on the future, it ignores the current values that may well prevent the organization from undergoing the necessary development. If a leader has a vision of his or her organization that is different from how it currently functions, but leads a visioning process that is consistent with how decisions have come to be made, the result will be the same organization as before. However, if different values are mani-

fested in the visioning process, there is a chance for fundamental change to take root.

In other words, it is the visioning process itself that will be the most salient outcome. A process that is leader directed and involves only a select few will result in a leader-directed, hierarchical, and dependency-oriented organization. A process that engages a broad spectrum of people will lead to an organization in which many are able to take empowered, committed action. You reap what you sow.

The solution to the problem, I believe, is to reframe our understanding of vision and mission work so that the future of the organization, its strategy, appropriate actions, core values, and leadership can all be addressed. This will enable organizations not only to move into the future but to learn from the present.

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Announcement

The editors of *Leadership in Action* are pleased to inform our readers that on May 22, 1998, David P. Campbell received an honorary doctor of humane letters degree from the University of Colorado. In awarding the degree, the university said:

"David P. Campbell is a world-renowned scholar who has made many substantial contributions to the fields of organizational psychology, vocational assessment, leadership and creativity. He had a part in developing assessment instruments, including the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory and Campbell Leadership Index, that are currently in worldwide use. Under his guidance the Center for Creative Leadership developed and grew into a premier leadership training institution.

"His educational and professional activities have taken him around the globe many times in the past forty years, notably to Russia, China, Peru, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, and most of Western Europe. Establishing his reputation as an outstanding scholar and respected scientist, he has become a significant presence in dozens of U.S. corporations and universities. High school counselors using his tests to help students and university professors teaching guidance and leadership instantly recognize his name.

"The Center for Creative Leadership is recognized in the U.S. and overseas as the foremost provider of leadership training for managers at all levels, and David P. Campbell must be accorded credit for this. He continues to be a prime mover in development of the center, starting with his appointment as a visiting fellow, continuing with his assignment as vice president for research and programs, and later taking the position of executive vice president.

"In addition to dozens of professional publications, David P. Campbell is the author of the popular books *If You Don't Know Where You're Going, You'll Probably End Up Somewhere Else*; *Take the Road to Creativity and Get Off Your Dead End*; and *If I'm in Charge Here, Why Is Everybody Laughing?*

"For his superior achievements and significant contributions to his field, and to acknowledge the impact he has made in leadership and education, the University of Colorado Board of Regents is pleased to have the opportunity to award David P. Campbell the degree Doctor of Humane Letters, honoris causa."