

# Visioning: More Than Meets the Eye

*Moving a company forward takes more than measurable goals and objectives. The first step is to create a vision. Here, an expert tells how to go about it, including specific steps and activities for a daylong visioning session.*

*Big organizations, as a rule, only change significantly when certain preconditions are met.*

*First, there must be enormous external pressures. Second, there must be people inside who are strongly dissatisfied with the existing order. And third, there must be a coherent alternative embodied in a plan, a model, or a vision. . . .*

*Instead of being routine and predictable, the corporate environment has grown increasingly unstable, accelerative, and revolutionary. Under such conditions, all organizations become extremely vulnerable to outside forces or pressures. And managers must learn to cope with non-linear forces, . . . situations in which small inputs can trigger vast results and vice versa. The adaptive corporation . . . needs a new kind of leadership. It needs "managers of adaptation" who are equipped with a whole set of new, non-linear skills.*

*From The Adaptive Corporation, by Alvin Toffler.*

**M**ost good managers have the ability to analyze information and solve problems logically. But another kind of skill is just as important: the ability to create a vision of the future and lead others toward it.

Having a vision of an ideal future helps us provide balance and order in our lives—and in our organizations—enabling us to survive outside pressures and radical change. Visioning is a way of preparing the mind for whatever may come along. If we do not have a vision, we may not recognize the opportunities that can lead us to our ideal future.

With rational analysis, the reasons why something *won't* work are already in the mind. We all know from experience how and why something *cannot* be done. John Center, speaking in 1989 at the World Future Society's Sixth General Assembly, noted that forecasts about the future are usually inaccurate, because they are based on simple extrapolation of historical data. He said forecasts that emphasize "critical" current issues are shortsighted. The future is not always a creature of the past.

Visioning is a process that enables us to put aside reason temporarily and look beyond the present to the future as we would like it to be. "It can't be done" is irrelevant; we can't make that judgment about something we have not invented yet. How to turn a vision into reality is something that happens *after* the vision is created.

The visioning process is valuable in building a team or group, starting or revitalizing a business, or creating a life purpose that fits deeply with a person's ideals.

**By Judith Simpson**

The recent past is filled with examples of visions. Some examples are of human rights and national purpose (Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech and John Kennedy's admonition, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country"). Others are from the business world (Fred Smith's slogan for Federal Express, "absolutely positively overnight," and Paul Hawken's "legendary customer service" in his book, *Growing a Business*)

## **Eliminating distractions**

Visioning may not be a cognitive, rational process, but it is a skill that can be learned, usually in a workshop setting with the help of a trained facilitator.

The first—and most important—step in helping people use visioning is to remove anything that will interfere

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with the visioning process.

Some interferences are internal. Most of us have been chastised for "daydreaming." We've also had our ideas edited by helpful others: "How are you going to do that?" "Where will you get the money?" "That's too idealistic." We begin to internalize such comments and wind up editing ourselves even more harshly.

Another kind of mental interference is the habit of doing two or three things at the same time. When we are busy planning and doing at the same time, it is impossible to reach a deep enough inner state to consider our highest ideals. We can also block ourselves by judging and analyzing, skills that may have been highly rewarded in the past.

Internal physical interference can include our responses to noises around us, to tension in our bodies, or to discomfort from heat or cold or light. We may also be "turned off" by a leader who uses hackneyed techniques that sound like poor hypnotism. Hypnotism may be useful for changing behavior, but it is not a part of visioning. Relaxing is the last thing we want to do when we're working to create a vision.

External interferences can include conflicts among participants or between participants and facilitator, jarring language, and physical locations that are filled with interruptions.

In order to prepare for visioning or thinking on a deep level, we need to eliminate as many interferences as possible. The ideal state for visioning is one of comfort and physical and mental clarity. Visions come from the use of all of our faculties while we are in a state of quiet alertness.

### **Leading the visioning process**

Once internal and external distractions have been removed, you can prepare for the visioning process. Various techniques and reminders are important for getting started.

**Sensory awareness** is an ideal way to prepare for thinking and feeling from deep within the self. Sensory awareness is bringing your attention to the body and its processes: the breath, the amount of tension in the muscles, and one's position in a chair.

The leader can invite people to become more aware by saying such

things as, "Notice your breath . . . the speed . . . the depth of it. Where does the intake of air go within your body? How far does it reach? Notice if you are pressing against the chair in any unnecessary way. If you want to move in order to be less crowded or cramped, do so. Notice how you are holding your hands . . . your feet," and so on. Obviously, the group leader must give people enough time to make these observations.

By practicing sensory awareness, participants will naturally move into a physical and mental state of comfort. This is one way of ridding the mind of busy thoughts and bringing people into the present.

**Guided imagery** can also be helpful in exploring this new territory. In this process, the facilitator encourages the

through it, the temptation may be to move faster than is helpful.

Music is often used in guided imagery to stimulate the imagination. It's good to know something about participants' tastes, so that you don't choose something with negative associations. Music should be inviting but not intrusive. I have used baroque music, harp music, and some New Age music. The music should inspire variety; it should not be repetitive or boring.

People who are "thinkers" rather than "feelers" may find it difficult to place themselves in unrealistic or playful settings. It may help to use the example of the "play" in a sail, its ability to move back and forth with the wind, to enable it to move forward. A rigid sail, with no play in it, would soon capsize the boat.

## **People who are "thinkers" rather than "feelers" may find it difficult to place themselves in unrealistic or playful settings**

participants to use their imaginations to move to other places in time or to see something from different points of view.

The language of the guide must be simply that—guiding, not imposing. She or he might suggest an imaginative structure, such as a walk in the woods or on the beach. Whatever the structure, it should be something desirable; it should be an invitation to participants to feel happy, reflective, and comfortable, free from fear of correction or censure.

One example of guided imagery that was used with a company quality team is this: "Imagine that you have just won an award and an opportunity to present Kodak's quality program to the Association for Quality and Participation. What does your presentation consist of?"

It is important to remember that people need time to create. If the facilitator concentrates on the process rather than on the people moving

**Writing it down** is important. Research suggests that remembering and letting go of past experiences can help people feel free to vision. Writing about such experiences can be useful, as both a way of letting them go and a way of seeing a tangible expression of the ideal.

The facilitator asks such questions as these:

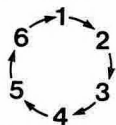
■ "What are some of the times in your past when you've worked at your personal best?"

■ "Have you ever been part of a group that reached an ideal? Describe what happened."

■ "What have been the highlights of your career?"

I give all the members of a visioning team bound books, each with a different cover and blank, unlined pages. Participants can keep their books to use as journals for their thoughts about the vision or for drawings or symbols that may provide later inspiration.

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## Resistance to visioning

It is logical to assume that in business some people will resist the visioning process. Resistance always occurs for a reason; you must honor resistance if you want people to buy into the concept enough to try it. Arguing and trying to overpower participants never works in a creative process; it stifles the very creativity you are working for.

By acknowledging the value of rational, "left-brain" activities, the leader can defuse some resistance. It helps to emphasize several points:

- negative or analytical feedback has an appropriate time and place
- logical, careful planning is critical to the success of any project
- goals must indeed be analyzed and measured, but not during the visioning process.

Mixing analytical, linear thinking with intuitive, or "right-brain," thinking usually causes intuition to go into hiding. Stress the importance of separating visioning and other creative periods from planning and goal setting periods.

## The vision process

A day devoted to creating a team vision is typically divided into two parts, the first focusing on the individual and the second on the group. It is important to start with a personal vision before attempting to create one for the group, because it's easier to practice visioning with something familiar. Also, a team vision should be based on the individual ideals of each of its members.

**Focusing on the individual.** The first part of the day might include

- Remembering personal events from the past and writing them down.
- Using guided imagery to create each person's ideal future, and then writing or drawing the vision.
- Creating a symbol for the vision with colors, paints, clay, or other creative tools. A large supply of color pencils is helpful if people are working in their bound books.
- Sharing parts of the vision with others. It is important to give participants a choice about participating in this step, because their visions may be too new or too personal to share.
- Making a transition from the individual to the group. One way to create the transition is by sharing a meal,

which encourages easy conversation. People usually like to talk with one another about their ideals, especially when everyone has been involved in the same process. A group discussion over a meal can add some team building to a day of visioning.

**Focusing on the team.** Once the transition is made, the facilitator helps the group create a team or corporate vision, using the following steps:

■ Remembering team highlights from the past. This is effective if the team has worked together over time. If not, the group can discuss the history of the organization, which also provides common ground.

■ Working alone with guided imagery to create a team vision. Guided imagery is necessarily an individual process, but the focus here is on a vision for the group or company.

■ Collecting elements of the team visions and putting them together in a way that is acceptable to everyone. Creating a shared team vision is like developing any other product by a group—it may take discussion and negotiation.

■ Creating a shared symbol of the vision in some form of words, music, or visual art.

■ Discussing opportunities and threats to keeping the vision alive.

■ Creating suitable "next steps" for the team. If the team creates a symbol of its vision, the next step could be giving that idea to a graphic artist. The next step could also be to set up a series of team meetings or to do whatever is appropriate to start turning the vision into reality.

## Back to the present

Once the vision has been created, it is important to spend some time on the present again. Participants must have a clear, non-judgmental awareness of the current situation before they can start to change their vision into reality.

The tension between the actual present and the ideal future (Robert Fritz calls it "structural tension") allows people to be aware of opportunities leading to the visualized future. As Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors only the mind that is prepared."

All in all, visioning is not simply a skill; it is an attitude. Visioning is also an act of faith, the faith that we have the ability to be the best we can be. ■