

# Realizing the

By Lawrence Holpp

It's a little like dancing with a 500-pound gorilla. It takes a little while to get the steps down, but once the dance is over, you know you've really accomplished something.

In a similar vein, getting managers to develop far-reaching organizational visions is tough, but if you can do it, your whole organization will reap the benefits. This article explores successful techniques that can help managers work through the barriers

of developing clear, purposeful visions in work-related settings. But first we

courses in leadership, creativity, and quality improvement to try to get supervisors and managers to envision themselves and their organizations performing not only in an excellent, but in a "breakthrough," manner. To do so, they must have a sense of their own possibilities and

dreams—what we shall call a vision.

John Kotter, in *The Leadership Factor*, describes vision in the business world: "Too often, I fear, we fall into the romantic trap of believing that great vision comes from magic or divine grace. In the business world, it rarely (if ever) does. Great vision emerges when a powerful mind working long and hard on massive amounts of information is able to see (or recognize in suggestions from others) interesting patterns and new possibilities."

Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus also discuss vision in their book, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*: "A vision may be as vague as a dream or as precise as a goal or mission statement. . . . (It is) a target that beckons. . . . Leaders pay attention to what is going on, they determine what part of the event at hand is

must answer the question, "Exactly what is a vision, and how do you know when you get one?"

## What is a vision?

We're talking about that good, old-fashioned, but only recently recognized notion that people who make things happen do so because they're driven—by a vision. Florida Power & Light Co. offers

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# Possibilities

and Michael Kelly

important for the future of the organization, they set a new direction, and they concentrate the attention of everyone in the organization on it."

Some people say a vision is merely a personal goal you try to persuade others to believe in. Others say a true vision represents a glimpse of what can be—the most desirable state possible. In this state, conditions are better, people are happier, goals are achieved, and life is richer and more complete. In theory, at least, the vision state is a place where personal values are realized as daily events. An organizational vision should articulate a clear picture of the optimal state of the company or unit.

Does a vision have to be realistic and credible? No, not if it's truly visionary. Should you be able to explain it clearly and concisely? Not necessarily. Should it make sense to you? Yes, definitely! And how do you know when you have a vision? When it excites you to do something, when it gives you pleasure and a sense of satisfaction, and when it fulfills your most important values.

## Visions and values

The biographies of both great and infamous men and women convey the sense that they were driven by an inner purpose that attached itself to external circumstances. Right or wrong they often succeeded in spite of incredible adversity that would have discouraged ordinary mortals. John Kennedy's vision of America stemmed from a broad understanding and appreciation of history. Religion and ethics fueled Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision for a better world. Vladimir Lenin was inspired to a vision of possibilities by Karl Marx's writing. Adolph Hitler's vision was the demented dream of a fabled heroic past.

Visions are anchored in values and are sometimes tough to articulate. When we ask great business leaders of today, such as Lee Iacocca, Ross Perot,

and Steven Jobs, what drives them, vision is seldom what they say. Instead, they describe the goals they have for their organizations, such as "superior product," "highest quality," "customer satisfaction," or "total solution." Unlike goals, however, visions are never gratefully achieved and put to rest. They are always in the actualizing stage, enshrined atop Maslow's pyramid.

The values behind great visions tend not to be the rational values of analysis or tradition or even the vogue values of participation or customer satisfaction. They are the outrageous and

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speculative values like achievement, imagination, creativity, and excitement. They are seldom the managerial values of control and measurement, but the leadership values of inspiration, empowerment, and focus.

Visions stem from such diverse sources as:

- deeply held values;
- personal experiences;
- listening to others articulate their own visions;
- shrewd political awareness of others' needs and dreams;
- the creative capacity to hold a steady picture of something that doesn't exist;
- the objective analysis of one's own weakness compared to a competitor's strengths.

Still, we haven't a clue as to how to achieve a vision. How do we do it? Perhaps we could simply buy a lot of great

biographies and hand them out to the decision makers.

## Create your own vision

If reading about the great, the rich, and the famous doesn't evoke inspiring visions, perhaps it's because the gap is just too wide. We are tempted by our own insignificance to say, "That's an executive responsibility," and just get on with fulfilling our personal goals as best we can.

In *The Path of Least Resistance*, Robert Fritz describes the process of determining what you want to happen in your life in very simple, elegant terms. "You make it up," he says. "You become the predominant creative force in your life."

Of course, that seems too simplistic for most of us, schooled as we are in the byzantine complexity of numerical analysis and cost justification. But consider the process of anything happening. What mystical force causes us lowly managers to scout down figures, justify budgets, and create new programs? That's easy: some visionary executive dreamed up an idea and then went about making it happen.

A manager of training and development at Johnson & Johnson once tried making a vision happen by sending out copies of Alvin Toffler's *Third Wave* (with relevant passages on Tylenol's win over Datriil highlighted), Kenneth Blanchard's *The One-Minute Manager*, and Tom Peters's *In Pursuit of Excellence*. In a last-ditch attempt at triggering some significant emotional event, he included Richard Bach's *Illusions*. The senior executives probably appreciated the books, but nothing much came of the manager's efforts. Follow-through and the time to do it are a large part of the visioning process.

Three more direct approaches that address different thinking styles may yield more tangible successes in a training program situation: the intuitive approach, the analytic approach, and the benchmarking approach.

## The intuitive approach

The first method focuses on forming visions through guided imagery and imagination. For the intuitive supervisor or manager, this is less tricky than you might suppose. Many already have visions they call "philosophies" or "management styles." In most cases, these visions are fuzzy models for decision making and leadership. With some, however, these models fulfill many criteria of a true vision: they are personal, value-based, energizing, and have the capacity to inspire others.

To begin the intuitive approach, ask the participants to imagine themselves doing their jobs in a qualitatively different way. Have them imagine themselves getting what they really want out of themselves and their people—without the inhibiting constraints of reality. This approach tends to free managers' imaginations from mundane concerns better than any other motivational talk or feedback.

Managers participating in this exercise report renewed excitement about their jobs, fresh ways of looking at old barriers, a sense of purpose, and unique insights on dealing with nagging problems. The approach works like this:

- Begin by asking the participants to make a list of all the things they want to create in their professional and personal lives. Insist the list include at least 10 items. This will be difficult for some people, as they will struggle mightily to limit themselves to the possible. These lists invariably fall short of the *truly* possible.

- Next, have them prioritize the list and select the top two or three. Ask them to picture themselves having achieved those items. Then ask whether they're satisfied. If so, move on to the next step. If not, ask them to select another item on the list until they can visualize having it with true satisfaction.

Paradoxically, having a vision and realizing it are two different, and sometimes mutually exclusive, skill sets. You must convince your trainees that creating and holding a clear picture of what they want is the first and most important step toward getting it. That's often easier than you might imagine, because those who are able to produce this clear visual picture feel, at a gut level, its worth and power.

- Now, get them to focus on where they currently are with respect to that vision. Fritz calls this *current reality*,

and it's an important step linking managers to the practical matter of achieving their vision.

Fritz advises allowing them to experience the tension between what they want and what they have. Too often we rationalize our dreams and try to reduce the tension of incomplete aspirations. In this method, we try to exaggerate that tension. The net effect of this process is to drive the individual toward reducing the tension, not through rationalization or cognitive dissonance reduction, but by beginning the tough process of doing what it takes to achieve the dream.

- Work with your managers to help them structure action plans to pursue

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their vision. Let them talk with each other, share their visions, and discuss the tension it produces when contrasted to their current reality and their preliminary plans to work toward it.

- Offer support to the group throughout the procedure—a critical element that may best be carried out over several meetings. In time, 40 to 90 percent of participants will report that they have achieved their full vision, or at least a significant measure of success.

This is an intuitive process, but it's actually quite concrete and provokes little resistance even from the most hard-nosed analytic types.

## The analytic approach

In some organizations, vision is described as a mission statement. It is formed by management, demonstrated through posters or publications, and communicated to the staff through meetings. The problem with this mission is that it's presented for show and may become inflexible and thus useless when circumstances change. Dynamic organizations must reexamine their mission periodically and change it as needed.

Digital Equipment Corporation, for instance, used the phrase "Computer solutions for the laboratory and front

office." But when the company changed its strategic focus to compete with IBM in large office computing environments, it also changed its mission to "Digital has it now," to emphasize that Digital's products were available, while IBM's were still on the drawing board.

Sole managers or individual contributors also can hold and express a vision. Characterizing this vision is the notion that one's purpose in the organization is one's function or role with respect to peers, subordinates, colleagues, and superiors. As such, a single contributor can have many roles—those defined by the products and outputs and those defined by others within and outside the organization who come into contact with that position.

The "Management Molecule" in the accompanying figure, with its expanding interlocking circles of influence, can help define this type of vision. One training group used the Management Molecule to define its vision not just as a single statement that described the department's mission or role, but as a series of guidelines that helped management *and* employees know how to act and what to expect from each other.

For subordinates, the group expressed vision this way: "Our vision is to develop our people to the highest levels they are capable. To that end, we will provide them with training, evaluation, and frequent challenging assignments to help them grow."

For their peers: "Our peers in the organization have a right to expect timely and accurate data from us in a friendly and cooperative manner. In addition, it is our responsibility to provide them with new services and information as we become more aware of opportunities to do so."

For managers: "Our role with management is to help define and meet their needs for our operational output and to keep them apprised of critical issues in our field and with respect to our people. It is our goal to demand of our management the resources we require to fulfill this goal."

At Florida Power & Light, the departments that tend to make the most significant strides toward integrating the company's wide-ranging Quality Improvement Program (QIP) with the regular day-to-day work are led by managers who have a clear and operative vision of their purpose and have

found ways to communicate it down the line.

Management in those departments affirm that as far as they are concerned, "QIP activities and job duties are no different. QIP is the way we do our work. You cannot do the work of this department without doing QIP." That clear vision has helped the company implement QIP in a planned and purposeful way.

Leaders often piece together their vision statements in an analytical way using the "5ws and 1h"—who, what, when, where, why, and how:

- Whom do we serve?
- What do we do?
- When do we do it?
- Where do we want to go with our efforts?
- Why are we focusing on this work and these goals?
- How do we put the above into operation?

Vision statements that can answer these questions help guide organizations or departments from where they are to where they want to be.

### The benchmarking approach

Both the intuitive and the analytical

## Benchmarking works because it gets managers out of their insulated operations and into the light of the competition

approaches focus on events that are internal to the manager or the organization. Benchmarking, on the other hand, looks outside the organization and contrasts standards against a lofty criterion: the standards of its stiffest competitors. Many Japanese companies take a similar approach to performance reviews, contrasting quarterly sales and production targets not against last year's results, but against the competition's current results.

The visioning process driven by benchmarking is practical and gets the manager to investigate outside forces competing on the same turf. It differs from simple quantitative measures such as market share or ratings by also seeking qualitative standards.

To develop a vision statement using the benchmarking process, follow these steps:

- Determine whom—you want to emulate. Ask, "What is it they do well that I can be doing better?"
- Describe the standard you aim to achieve in qualitative *and* quantitative measures.
- Describe yourself as having arrived at that standard—not striving for it, but there already. Ask yourself, "What does it feel like to have succeeded?" If your answers are positive, you've selected a good benchmark.
- Create a vision statement that specifies your end result and some of the critical steps needed to get you there. For example, if you want to achieve the standard of excellence for quality set by another manufacturer you might say, "We will be recognized as the highest quality manufacturer by our customers in terms of product reliability, lowest repair or recall rate, and highest performance. We will do this by conducting regular customer surveys, reducing our error rate, and increasing our performance characteristics until they exceed those of our competitors."

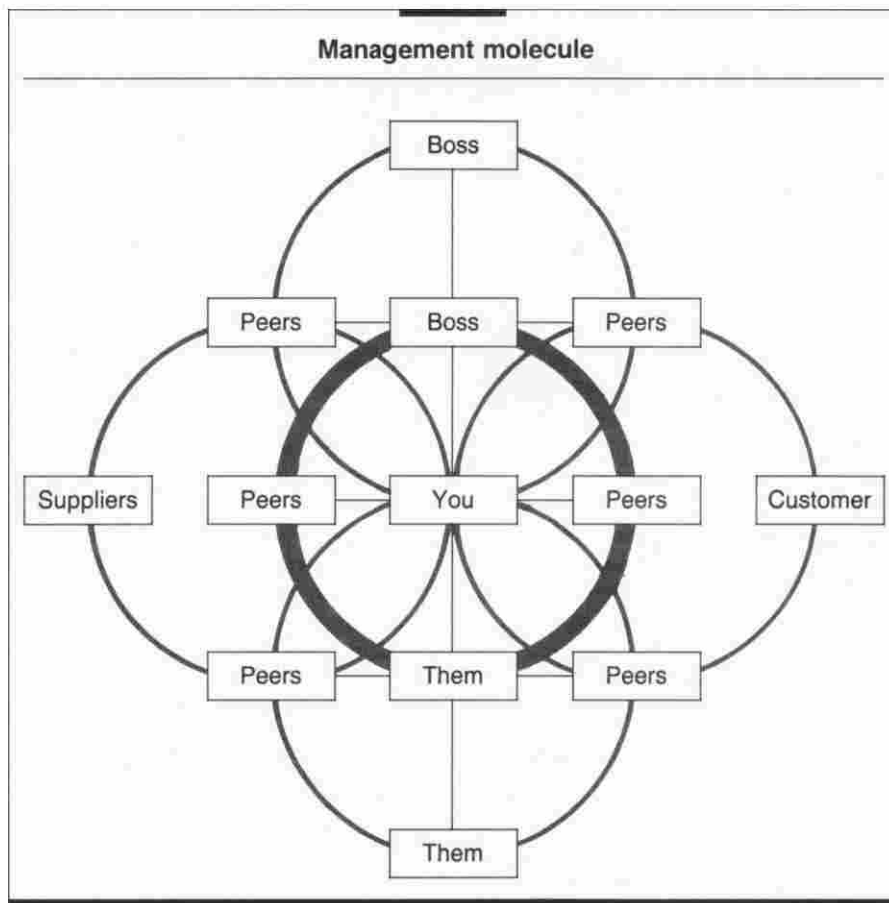
Benchmarks are available to anyone who wants to improve, whether the business is manufacturing, sales, or human resources. All fields have paragons of excellence just waiting to be surpassed. Benchmarking works because it gets managers out of their own insulated operations and into the light of the competition. Being the best personnel department in a company in which there is only one personnel department is hardly an achievement. Being the best in your industry is another matter entirely.

### Demonstrate commitment to your vision

Any organizational vision, no matter how clearly thought through, cannot be productive if there is no method of delivery. A demonstration of your commitment to the vision is important, as it can be publicly affirmed and can serve as an example for others.

When people think of their most inspirational, most effective bosses, most agree that what characterizes them above all other bosses is that they act on their beliefs and believe in what they do. Subordinates know what good bosses stand for and why.

Thus, there is no better way to



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demonstrate commitment to your vision than to live it. Unfortunately, that opportunity is not given to us all, nor can we all be inspirational leaders. Most of us have to remind ourselves to do the right things, to keep track of them through structures we set up to guide us and our employees, and to make sure that we get feedback on how we're doing on a regular basis.

The process of demonstrating commitment is the basis for building alignment with those around you who are also pursuing your vision. After all, what's a leader or a visionary without followers? In a sense, there is no better definition of an *effective* leader than one who can amass followers for the long term. The following specific actions can help you gain a consensus around the value of your vision among your employees:

**Announce your vision.** Let your group know in the clearest possible terms what it is you are all about. Otherwise they'll have to guess, and chances are they'll guess wrong and will wind up doing things that are only approximately, not exactly, what you want. Set a time, assemble your people,

and provide them with a brief, clear announcement of your vision and its implications. Let them ask questions and give some input, but remain decisive and firm in your leadership role.

**Build alignment.** Make a special effort to get people on board who support your vision. Spend some time with them individually. Let them know where you see the department going, how they can contribute, and what you expect of them. Ask for their support and commitment. Answer their questions, and try to solve whatever problems they have with your goals.

**Spotlight your success.** Select an opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of your vision. Show the world how, through the mechanism of your vision, you achieved a goal. For instance, if your vision is developing your employees to a high level of expertise in a technical area, hold a presentation for management where your people can display their competence and get credit for it. Such a demonstration proves the power of your vision and shows the world that your people are winners.

**Reward excellence.** Once you've clearly demonstrated your vision, look for an example of excellence and reward it. Find someone doing something right, and celebrate his or her success. But moreover, show *how* that person is doing well and how everyone can do equally well.

**Be open to change.** Should circumstances warrant, change your vision. Maintain regular dialogue with your people, listen to what they say, and make necessary changes. Let them know they have a voice in the life of the department and a role in its direction.

**Hold your ground.** After having listened, communicated, and gathered input on other approaches, if you feel your approach is still the best, hold firm. But let your people know *why* you are maintaining a difficult direction. Tell them you heard what they said and recognize the merits of their arguments, but that for now, you have final responsibility and have made your decision.

**Provide feedback.** If feedback is, as they say, the "breakfast of champions," and you want your people to be winners, you must nurture them accordingly. Hold regular sessions to let both groups and individuals know what's going on, how the department is

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doing, what has changed, and what hasn't. Don't wait for performance appraisal time to roll around to let people know the score; by then, either they already know it and your information is old news, or they don't and you're liable to shock them.

**Lead the way.** The single most effective demonstration of commitment to vision is you, the leader, doing what you say you are going to do and doing it in full view of your people. That's a little like the old joke about the three umpires discussing how they assert their leadership in the game: The first umpire says, "I call 'em as I see 'em." The second umpire says, "I call 'em as they are." The third umpire says, "They ain't nothing 'til I call 'em."

In similar fashion, leaders help structure the event they lead by giving it character and personality. They help their followers understand and conceptualize current reality. It is the role of leaders to try to understand what is happening in the environment and communicate that information back to their people in a language and format they can understand.

**Uphold the bottom line.** In business, the "bottom line" is a phrase that always wakes the sleepers, draws attention, and focuses everyone on what's important. For visionary leaders, the bottom line is results. The leader must always face the question, "Is what you want to do getting done?" If the answer is either "no" or "unsure," something's missing in the equation formed between leadership and followership. Traditional managers can always cling to their position in the organization and say, "Do it!" A true leader won't dictate, but instead will build consensus and create alignment. When results aren't forthcoming, the responsibility always rests on the leader.

To get a reading on your strengths and weaknesses as a leader, don't ask yourself how you're doing—ask your people. Then really listen to what they say. In large part, the real strength behind effective visionaries is their willingness to hear what people are saying and to trust that they mean it and will react favorably to positive change.

### Examples of commitment to visions

Leaders must demonstrate their commitment to their vision. The fol-

lowing are some examples of how some leaders at Florida Power & Light did so.

■ After reaching agreement on an organizational vision statement, a management team presented the statement to the entire company in small groups and asked for feedback. Based on the employees' responses, the team decided to rethink and reposition its vision better to meet the existing needs.

■ One director, whose vision involved having the best trained and motivated staff in the company, realized that his department didn't have an organized development planning process. Thus, he created a committee to review and recommend different approaches to career development. He and the committee interviewed people in the department and outside consultants, and together they arrived at a plan that everyone could support.

■ A division manager realized that a lack of technical understanding of the tools of QIP was holding her group back. She organized a regular departmental training process in which the most skilled people mentored and coached those less skilled. A management team made sure mentors were at the same level as those taught so that intimidation wouldn't be a factor. To test how they were doing, the team surveyed the entire organization before and after the training.

■ Insufficient communication was seen as the major barrier to progress in a power resources department. As a remedy, a consultant was brought in to interview the employees on their primary concerns. With the data, the management team organized a planned communication program to help support the department's vision and to foster a more cohesive environment.

Responsibility is apparently a tricky concept in today's world. We are often reminded of the picture of leaders accepting responsibility but never the consequences. Success is a child with many parents, while failure is an orphan. A true vision, however, that motivates and guides must be linked to consequences. Responsibility begins with commitment and ends with consequences.

The process of visioning can be fun—kind of like dancing with a 500-pound gorilla. But it's serious business, too, so make sure you know the dance steps, or you could get your toes stomped on.

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