

VISION

Charles D. Allen and Andrew A. Hill

Of the three strategic leader tasks presented in the US Army War College *Strategic Leadership Primer*—alignment, vision, and change—arguably the most important is for the leaders to develop and promulgate a vision for the organization.¹ Chapter 2 of the primer covered the strategic environment in detail and demonstrated the challenges for leaders operating in an environment characterized by VUCA.¹ To be successful strategic leaders, however, requires the development of a set of competencies that enable them to effectively navigate the strategic environment and through their influence promulgate a vision. They must be agile enough to learn from the past, adapt to current circumstances, and anticipate the future from trends and potentialities.² Leaders should establish clarity of purpose for themselves and their organization and have the ability to communicate with internal and external constituents.³ The preceding skills are necessary and invaluable in developing and sharing the vision for an enterprise.⁴

Like the concept of leadership, the construct of vision can be conceived at overlapping levels and yet still linked to specific goals. At the individual level, there is a personal vision (e.g., “be a millionaire by age 30”). More common treatments of vision are at the organizational and institutional levels (e.g., “be a Fortune 100 company” or “the most prestigious institution for the education of strategic leaders”).⁵ More difficult to attain are the visions at the civic, governmental and societal levels (e.g., “best community—America’s Hometown” or “beacon of freedom for the world”.) Having coherence in visions such that the lower levels are nested within those visions at higher levels may preclude goal conflicts and cognitive dissonance among members.

Definition and Importance of Vision

The concept of vision has become so familiar within academic, government, defense, and corporate circles that it is sometimes dismissed or derided as “oh, that vision thing!”⁶ As the various definitions are examined, however, some common characteristics and trends emerge. The term “vision” suggests that a core element is a *visual image*—a mental picture of what the future enterprise or environment will look like. The concept also implies a longer time horizon. This time horizon tends to be middle to long-term in nature (five to twenty years).

Definitions of vision are as numerous and varied as those for leadership. Our USAWC vision statement meshes well with the definitions by John Kotter, “...a picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people

¹ This is a revision of Charles D. Allen, “Chapter 3 Vision” in Stephen J. Gerras (ed.), *Strategic Leadership Primer* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2010), 20-27.

should strive to create that future”⁷ and Peter Senge, “...a shared picture of the future we seek to create” and “...pictures... that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance.”⁸ Practically, visions should be clear and concise, communicate a sense of purpose—the *raison d'être*, and be shared with others. When enterprise members perceive it as worth the effort, the vision creates energy, commitment, and belonging. When shared by all participants, the vision can bring people to significant achievements.

So defined, vision transcends all levels of an organization. The importance of vision is demonstrated through many facets. It provides a sense of identity for individuals and members of organizations. An effective and enduring vision becomes part of the culture that dictates how people behave and serves as a motivating influence on their actions. Visions compel and guide. For senior leaders, visions serve as touchstones as well as aligning mechanisms for decisions and actions. For strategic leaders, a vision is important for spanning organizational boundaries. A statement of vision not only directs internal members, but is useful in influencing and garnering support from external stakeholders by building consensus and providing access to otherwise unavailable resources as well.

Vision provides a sense of ultimate purpose, direction, and motivation for all members and activities within an enterprise. It provides an overarching concept that serves to initiate and then specify goals, plans, and programs. The process of developing the vision offers a means of analyzing and understanding the pressures and exigencies of the external environment. The vision helps to identify what in the environment is important, what requires action, and what action should be taken. It also establishes and reinforces the basic values of the enterprise and of its leaders.

Visions are intended to be enduring. During the process of environmental scanning and organizational diagnosis, however, it may become apparent that the vision has become out of focus or irrelevant. The visioning process allows leaders and their enterprises to define the vision, to rediscover and affirm the vision during times of stress and turbulence, or to adjust and adapt the vision to better align the enterprise with its environment. Consider the following visions and statements from across an array of domains (national, societal, and corporate).

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Declaration of Independence

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.⁹

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

To enable people and businesses throughout the world to realize their full potential.¹⁰

Microsoft

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.¹¹

Google

Saving people money to help them live better.¹²

Walmart

Should visions be sacrosanct and unchanging? No, visions help leaders and enterprises sustain relevancy in changing environments. What if Steve Jobs and Apple Computer, Inc. stayed the course with its 1976 vision of "An Apple on every Desk"?¹³ Recognizing and seizing opportunities, "that vision thing" changed for Apple to "make a contribution to the world by making tools for the mind that advance humankind."¹⁴ This mindset led to the now-ubiquitous iTunes, iPods, iPhones, and the iPad.

Strategic Leader Responsibilities

Are vision statements useful for leading organizations? Do they enable strategic leaders to develop and communicate a compelling, understandable strategic direction for the organization? An effective vision is a means of focusing effort and progressing toward a desired future—what ought to be. While the vision is an image of a future state, it is also the result of a process that an enterprise leader can use to guide future development. An effective vision also requires an implementing strategy or plan to enable its attainment—how to get there.

At best, visions inspire collective commitment to a worthy goal and a deep connection to the organization's identity. At worst, they alienate the organization's members, undermine the positive aspects of the culture, or misdirect strategy. But those who have experienced the development of an organizational vision have probably experienced something in between these

extremes—the fundamental irrelevance of the vision to the real life of the organization, a vision that is little more than an empty assertion.

We intuitively grasp the importance of vision; its development and communication is a crucial element of good leadership. “Visionary” is a title given to the greatest of leaders: men and women who transform the expectations of not only their followers, but of entire societies and nations; who “change social structures in order to realize new values and purposes.”¹⁵

Creating the vision is a collaborative effort that begins with strategic leaders. Their competency, coupled with the authority of position, bestow upon strategic leaders the unique responsibility and opportunity to establish long-term strategic intent and direction. A strategic vision, properly articulated, can be compelling and enduring.

Few organizations, however, are blank slates. Strategic leaders may find themselves in organizations that already have a purpose, resources, stakeholders, culture, and history. Most organizations will also already have some sort of vision. Leaders are tempted to see themselves as better than their predecessors, and leaders as a result often discount the resources that they inherit. In the case of vision, this may result in an imprudent attitude of “out with the old, in with the new.”

Defining the vision is the first step in the development of strategies and plans for change. Once the vision is expressed, then the methods and resources to achieve it should be identified. Visioning is an inherently creative process that may come from years of experience or deep study through education (Note that the Google founders were 23 years old when it was initially released in 1996.) The process brings together known information and new ideas, integrates these ideas with prospective technologies and future organizational requirements, and blends them into an innovative approach to realize the potential of its people. Through visioning, leaders forecast the future based on environmental conditions and trends to seek opportunities and identify competitors and threats. Leaders then develop the image of the desired “what ought to be” for the enterprise, positioning it for success in the future environment. Leaders build upon the visions of others that have gone before them.

*If I have seen further it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.*¹⁶
Sir Isaac Newton

Creating the Vision

A vision should be the product of a dynamic, logical, and collective organizational process. Vision is often attributed only to leaders because of their critical role in developing, articulating, and directing it. Effective visions however, are rarely the

result of leaders creating visions in isolation. Visions do not reside only in leaders; rather, visions are developed as a collaborative effort, with leaders performing the critical role of integrating and guiding the process.

Though far from simple, the visioning process consists primarily of examining the external environment, projecting likely future states, and developing a desired end state. In this task, leaders are assisted by the efforts of key members of the enterprise: deputies, chiefs of staff, subordinate leaders, and advisors. Visioning may be an informal process; however, at higher levels of organization, temporary or permanent specialized staffs—"think tanks" or "futures groups"—often assist leaders in this complex task.

The visioning process begins with a comprehensive assessment of the environment, the organization's history, mission, and trends as well as an understanding of competitors, to determine which are most likely to be dominant in determining the future of the enterprise—to discern opportunities and threats to its relevancy. The process should also incorporate an internal assessment of the organization to determine its strengths and weaknesses. From the examination of the environment and the enterprise, leaders project into the future and develop likely alternative future states. They must assess the future environment and state of the organization as objectively and realistically as possible. Creating a vision involves intuition based in judgment gained through experience. Experience in analyzing, integrating, and synthesizing information equips leaders with "frames of reference"—the ability to perceive new information, relationships, and possibilities. Although the collaboration with others internal and external to the enterprise is important, it is the leader whose experience, values, frames of reference, and role contribute most to the creation of the vision.

Complex visions captured in a few words, a sentence, or a paragraph can inspire and guide a large organization even without the direct presence of the leader. A brief vision statement can convey a conceptual image broad and powerful enough to give authority and offer utility over a more detailed, but less easily remembered, presentation of the vision. The vision statement should be flexible enough to accommodate a range of plausible futures and contain values that make it worthy of the effort required to achieve it. For example, this statement was made about the European Recovery Plan, better known as the Marshall Plan.

Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos. Its purpose should be the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist.¹⁷

George C. Marshall, Secretary of State

Drawing from experience and knowledge, leaders apply judgment to create and decide upon the vision to pursue. As the U.S. Army struggled with defining its role with the disintegration of the Soviet Union threat in the 1990s and facing the 21st century as a new era of conflict, its senior leaders offered the following statements. We see a consistent theme in the purpose of the Army and should also discern its institutional responses to environmental conditions before and after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The Army's fundamental purpose is to fight and win the Nation's War by establishing conditions for lasting peace through land force dominance. This dominance is established through integration of the complementary capabilities of all the services.¹⁸

FM 100-1 The Army, June 14, 1994

The Army's nonnegotiable contract with the American people is to fight and win our Nation's wars. Our unique contribution to national security is prompt, sustained land dominance across the range of military operations and spectrum of conflict. The Army provides the land force dominance essential to shaping the international security environment.

FM1 The Army, June 14, 2001

U.S. Army Vision

Our Army is serving a Nation at war. This war requires that all elements of our national power be applied in a broad, unyielding, and relentless campaign... This is not business as usual... The Army's Way Ahead...explores how we will obtain a more relevant and ready campaign-quality Army with a Joint and Expeditionary Mindset.¹⁹

General Peter J. Schoomaker, CSA, 2004

The Army will remain America's principal land force, organized, trained, and equipped for prompt and sustained combat or operations on land to defeat enemy land forces and to seize, hold, and defend land areas, and provide forces for long term area security operations abroad, including initial establishment of military government pending transfer of this responsibility to other authorities.²⁰

Army Capstone Concept, 2009

Once a desired future state and resulting vision are developed, strategic leaders create a pathway to the future by means of strategy and plans. They develop ends (objectives), ways (concepts and methods), and means (resources) to achieve the vision. Explicitly defined objectives make vision attainment recognizable when it comes to fruition. Definable objectives also provide a method of measuring and evaluating progress toward achieving the vision. Thus said, visions serve another purpose—that of accountability. There is an inherent accountability of the leader to the enterprise members and external stakeholders to ensure that the leader's actions are consistent with the espoused vision. The vision is also a means of holding enterprise members accountable so that the organizational structures and processes, as well as their behaviors, remain in alignment with the vision.

SUMMARY

Vision is a leader-focused activity that gives a sense of identity, purpose, direction, and energy. This process exists at many levels and in every type of organization; its content is the desired future of the organization. For that reason, vision adds value by providing the means for the enterprise to anticipate and move toward the future. Visions generally increase in complexity and extend in the time horizon at successively higher levels of organization. Strategic vision establishes the priority for influence and the allocation of resources.

This chapter has provided several perspectives on visions and the visioning process. It should be clear that there is no “cookie cutter” solution or best template for creating and implementing a vision. It is important for future strategic leaders to consider several techniques and to pursue the technique that fits the context of the enterprise and its environment.

Whether a leader offers a vision for change or a re-affirmation of the organization, the process of vision development is iterative and complex. The vision may emerge from within the organization; it may come about as a response to a radical, external threat; or it may reflect a leader’s singular insight into an ambiguous future. Accordingly, success of an organization depends on strategic leaders’ competency in influencing organizational alignment, conveying an effective vision, and managing change.

Leaders at every level of organizations must be effective custodians, developers, and articulators of their vision. In the military context, whether advisors to senior and strategic leaders or members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, leaders guide the definition of the desired endstate for U.S. national security. Arguably, only strategic leaders possess the decision authority, perspective, position, and experience to derive a vision from assessment of the environment, understanding of personal and professional values, and appreciation of the potential of the enterprise. Leaders are also responsible for the continual evaluation and refinement of the vision in response to internal and external

changes. The measure of effectiveness of the vision is both objective and subjective—the degree to which the enterprise accomplishes its mission and maintains its relevancy in the present and in the future aligned with its environment.

¹ Stephen J. Gerras (ed.), *Strategic Leadership Primer* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2010).

² This framework of Learn, Adapt, and Anticipate is modified from the work of Eliot Cohen, and John Gooch. *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*. (New York: The Free Press, 1990).

³ Bob Johansen. *Get There Early: Sensing the Future to Compete in the Present*, (San Francisco; Berrett-Koehler, 2007), 45-68. He turned the VUCA acronym on its head with these proposed strategic leadership skills.

⁴ Johansen's model of VUCA does not include the additional "C" for communication.

⁵ *U. S Army War College Strategic Plan*, (Carlisle, PA; United States Army War College, February 1, 2005), 5.

⁶ Attributed to Governor George W. Bush in 1987. See Robert Ajemian. "Where is the Real George Bush?" *Time*, January 26, 1987;

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,963342-2,00.html>.

⁷ John Kotter. *Leading Change*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1998), 68.

⁸ Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. (New York: Currency, 1990), 9.

⁹ Martin L. King, Jr. "I have a Dream Speech," (Washington, DC, August 28, 1963); <http://www.usconstitution.net/dream.html>.

¹⁰ See <http://www.microsoft.com/enable/microsoft/mission.aspx>.

¹¹ See <http://www.google.com/corporate/>.

¹² See <http://walmartstores.com/AboutUs/8123.aspx>.

¹³ S Ditle. "An Apple on every desk: How Apple Computer has inaugurated the workplace of the future," *Inc.* Retrieved December 10, 2009, from:
<http://www.inc.com/magazine/19811001/2033.html>.

¹⁴ See <http://macdailynews.com/index.php/weblog/comments/22817/>.

¹⁵ James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). Emphasis added.

¹⁶ Isaac Newton. "Letter to Robert Hooke," (February 5, 1676);
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standing_on_the_shoulders_of_giants.

¹⁷ "Remarks of Secretary of State George C. Marshall at the Harvard University Commerce Exercises, (June 5, 1947); <http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/marshall/pam-sp.htm>.

¹⁸ Department of the Army, *Field Manual 100-1 (FM 100-1) The Army*, (Washington, DC; Department of the Army, June 14, 1994), 2.

¹⁹ U.S. Army Strategic Communications, (Pentagon, Washington, DC, December 11, 2003), online at <www.army.mil/thewayahead/>, accessed February 6, 2004.

²⁰ Department of the Army. *The Army Capstone Concept Operational Adaptability: Operating under Conditions of Uncertainty and Complexity in an Era of Persistent Conflict 2016-2018*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, December 21, 2009), 9.