

VISION – A LEADER’S INDISPENSABLE TOOL

- ▲ **Vision Provides Leaders a Tool for Organizational Alignment**
- ▲ **When Paired with Mission, Vision Creates Intense Focus**
- ▲ **Sense of Purpose Engages an Organization’s Members, Producing Improved Outcomes**



Vision: Churchill had it, Lincoln had it, Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, too. In each case, the outcome was not certain. Each faced monumental challenges; many might have concluded that there was little or no hope of success. At the outset, they did not know how they were going to realize their objective. Each would require time and tireless energy. None achieved their goal in the near term – all suffered setbacks and substantial criticism in the pursuit of their vision.

What was it? Each had the ability to visualize a long-term outcome and communicate that picture in a compelling way so that people could see, believe in, hope and move toward that described future state. What made them stand out was the knack for articulating the broad view of the “fixed” state they had conceived and giving their supporters a way to realize where they could contribute.



The Right Stuff

In the 1960s, the United States was locked in a fierce ideological and existential struggle with the former Soviet Union. The atomic age cast a foreboding shadow over any interaction between the two superpowers. **Missile technology was in its relatively early stages, and the Soviet Union had scored a series of early technological victories, the most vivid of which was the successful execution of the first human space flight, piloted by the Russian Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin.** In the background was the specter of the Soviet Union’s ability to launch missiles with atomic warheads as payloads.

President John F. Kennedy realized that a compelling picture was necessary to channel the energy needed to bypass the Soviets and assure our well-being. NASA was in its infancy and struggled to deliver the technological breakthroughs necessary. In need of adequate funding, the agency requested resources from skeptical lawmakers. In a speech to Congress in 1961 endorsing this effort, Kennedy boldly established the vision that, **“I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to Earth.”** In one simple, galvanizing declaration, this leader transformed the space race from two countries desperately struggling to weaponize a new environment into a noble quest of exploration and wondrous discovery.

It is naïve to think that Kennedy’s speech defused the arms race; that race continued unabated despite his speech. Nevertheless, the vision that he projected achieved two important goals: It shifted the entire focus from



war and mutually assured destruction to one of seeking out new, unexplored places, something Americans had done throughout their history; second, it captured the imagination of the members of NASA, who would have the demanding task of actualizing his vision along with that of the voters who could easily conceive of the success of the mission and provide vital popular support.

What Kennedy and all these leaders did was to create a clear, compelling picture, and people were eager to contribute their unique talents in pursuit of that vision.

Vision Statements of Highly Successful Enterprises

To become the world’s most loved, most flown, and most profitable airline
- Southwest Airlines

Our vision is to create a better everyday life for the many people - IKEA

To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete* in the world. (*If you have a body, you are an athlete.)
- Nike

A world without Alzheimer’s disease
- Alzheimer’s Association

To teach others to become successful
- Anago Cleaning System

Passionate People Inspiring Fruitful Ideas - Leahy-IFP

Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis
- Patagonia



True North

In an earlier Level Three Performance Solutions article (Mission – Pointing the way to True North), exploring the importance of the concept of Mission as a compass gave us a means of orienting organizations to focus directly on that which members should concentrate their energies on a daily basis. The pursuit of that daily focus, properly executed, should then lead the members toward the attainment of the vision. To the Compass of Mission, Vision statements are the True North to which the mission points. Leaders use these two aspirational tools to help align and guide the members of an organization. They do it in alignment with the Values of the organization, which aid in decision-making. While we will discuss values in another conversation, we can see that in this context, Mission becomes the “What” – which connects with Vision as the “Why,” the overall reason for the organization’s existence.



The Search for Purpose

This sense of purpose is a key driver in generating alignment within an organization. People yearn to be connected to something greater than themselves – and they want to know why they are being asked to do something. Most workers today, many of whom are millennials, approach a role and a company with a highly defined set of expectations. They want their work to have meaning and purpose. They want to use their talents and strengths to do what they do best every day. They want to learn and develop. They want their job to fit their life. Engagement comes as a result of the satisfaction that the work that they do for an organization is meaningful.

This notion of meaning and purpose presents an enormous opportunity for many organizations. In the data revealed by the Gallup organization in its 2017 Study on Engagement in the Workplace, they found that:

- **Only 22% of employees strongly agree the leadership of their organization has a clear direction for the organization.**
- **A mere 15% of employees strongly agree the leadership of their organization makes them enthusiastic about the future.**

- **Barely 13% of employees strongly agree the leadership of their organization communicates effectively with the rest of the organization.**

Given these types of statistics, is it any wonder that only 33% of workers in the U.S. are “Actively Engaged?” Organizations that are not performing among those statistics have a singular opportunity to create strong improvement in traditional outcomes.

Another reason for vision is that humans are teleological beings: we subconsciously go toward those things about which we are thinking. Skeptical? Next time you are driving down the road, be sure to focus on the pothole in your lane and see what happens!

Kennedy’s genius was in providing a vision that, according to Professor Emeritus John Kotter at the Harvard Business School, was critical for vision statements: Imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible and communicable. Creating a powerful vision for an organization not only charts a powerful destination toward which its members can actively strive, it sharply frames the value proposition that it seeks to deliver to its external audience as well.