

The "Vision Thing": How to Find It, Frame It, and Live It

By Roxanne Emmerich

In the absence of a great dream, pettiness prevails.—Peter Senge

At some point in his or her career, every politician gets tarred with a catch phrase—and usually not one they would have chosen.

There was Bill Clinton parsing the meaning of "is." Dan Quayle and his "potatoe." And let's not forget Rod Blagojevich, whose favorite word clocks in at a mere four letters.

George Bush, Sr. is stuck with two. There was "Read my lips, no new taxes," of course. But only slightly less unfortunate was his dismissal of what he called, "The 'vision thing.'"

He was trying at the time to shake the impression that he was a competent day-to-day manager but lacked any grander vision of where he wanted to lead the country. His choice of words and tone of voice didn't exactly help.

Vision matters.

John F. Kennedy had a vision: "A man on the moon before the end of the decade." And it inspired the seemingly impossible. We had about 15 percent of the needed know-how when he made that declaration.

Bill Gates had a vision that there would be a computer on every desk in America. And this was back when most people didn't even know what a computer was!

Why vision matters

Imagine you've given the best minds in your organization the task of forging a new vision statement. You imagine a powerful phrase that captures your values and propels the company toward a brilliant future.

Weeks pass. Countless flip charts and white boards are blackened with big impressive circles and arrows. At last, the team unveils your new vision:

"We will offer high-quality products and world-class customer service for total customer satisfaction every day and in every way."

Oy for *jeez*. They've taken your gold and spun it into 24-karat straw. It manages to somehow say less and less as it goes along. It's worse than nothing, it's...it's a lack-of-vision statement. Like some sort of promise to the world that you plan to only color inside the lines. Sit. Stay. *Gooood* company.

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You're tempted to forget the whole thing.

You wouldn't be the first. I once had a CEO look me straight in the eye and say he didn't really "go for" visions. "I put my energy into training," he said. "Training, training, training."

But training for *what*? I wondered. You do training without a vision, you're all gas pedal and no windshield.

A 2004 study at the Sloan School of Management showed just how important the "vision thing" is. Leaders who create, communicate, and implement successful organizational visions were shown to be more successful in EVERY measure of a business than those who did not.

Every measure, people. That's a whole lotta measures.

Three elements of a truly GREAT vision

There are a thousand ways to write a bad vision. I can't even list them all. But if it's a powerful, effective, propelling vision you're after, they all have three things in common:

1. Short, simple and strong. This is true for almost all writing. Little Stevie King wanted to be a writer, but he didn't sell a thing until an editor took pity on him and scribbled in the corner of his rejected manuscript, "FINAL DRAFT = FIRST DRAFT minus 10%." In other words, LOSE words, don't add them, to strengthen whatever you're writing. Did you know that? Little Stevie King didn't. But *Stephen* King sure does.

Shorter is *stronger*. Take a given sentence and ask which words are pulling their weight and which can take a hike. Change vague expressions like "high-quality" and "world-class" into specific, powerful language that reflects your values. Simpler is also better. Use words that a fourth grader could understand.

2. Visual. There's a reason it's called a VISION. A statement that doesn't create a powerful visual image of the future isn't a vision. It doesn't give people anything to keep in their mind's eye while they work. You need a landmark on the horizon, a lighthouse, or you're driving blind.

3. Of service to others. Do you walk into a five-star restaurant hoping you'll walk out the door "satisfied"? I hope not! "Customer satisfaction" is a miserable goal. You want to be of genuine service, to help people succeed beyond their wildest expectations, to fulfill dreams they didn't even know they had. Make sure your vision statement reflects an intense, focused drive to serve the needs of your customers, not just to "satisfy."

The human spirit will not invest in mediocrity. That's why a vision always starts with a bold and audacious idea. A vision statement is nothing less than an invitation for others to invest in your

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dreams and a promise to do the same in return. By following these simple rules, you can create the kind of vision that has been proven to power companies beyond what was ever thought possible.

Vision doesn't stop at the top

Once you've got your vision defined—your clear, concise, powerful, visual, service-oriented vision—don't put it in the drawer. Pour it all over your company. Let it seep into every nook and cranny of everything your company does. Put it on the lips and in the hearts of your workforce or it will never find its way into the wider world.

The turning point for a vision is when everyone sees it, gets it, and buys into participating to make it happen. And if you've built your vision around a bold and audacious idea, a ludicrous, unreasonable, captivating idea—like, oh, I don't know, *going to the moon*—people will throw their hearts over the bar with you to make that unreasonable dream a reality.

SIDEBAR

Spreading the vision

- Create a vision for every important project. For example, you might tell your graphic designer that your vision is to have a brochure that pops as bold and cutting edge and inspires action.
- Encourage intense pride in the work. Tell your direct reports that you want "Every project to be a work of art that you can write home about."
- Make a game of spreading the vision to customers. Tell your frontline customer service employees to try to so overwhelm customers with the quality of service that they walk dazed into the front door on the way out. Give the first person to manage it a day off.

Roxanne Emmerich is renowned for her ability to transform “ho-hum” workplaces into massive results-oriented “bring-it-on” environments. To discover how you can ignite the passion of your employees, catapult performance to new levels, and boost the morale of your company subscribe to the [Thank God It's Monday](http://www.ThankGoditsMonday.com)TM e-zine at www.ThankGoditsMonday.com.