

TRENDLINES

The Employers' Association's monthly whitepaper on essential Business/Human Resources practices

The Employers' Association (TEA) delivers reports for businesses that contain relevant and up-to-date information based on our work with hundreds of employers each month. TEA is known to produce a number of essential benchmark survey reports every year and we also compile data and observations that provide organizations practical perspectives on important business trends.

Effectively Developing and Executing an Organizational Vision

What you should know

There is no shortage of vision-specific information available from which to create and effectively execute a vision for yourself, your department, or your organization. Operationalizing a vision once developed, however, involves much more than awareness and knowledge.

For some organizations, creating and executing a vision is perceived to be convoluted, time-consuming, and difficult. One reason is driving the development of the document down too far into the organization and getting bogged down in the exact verbiage of the vision statement – seeking consensus from all before implementation. While a vision projects a clear image of a possible future, it should not necessarily have to be developed with the input of all stakeholders. It should generate the enthusiasm and energy to persevere and move forward, especially when the going gets tough, through its clarity and focus. A vision does not “push” people into it, rather, it compels them. Effectively executed visions seem to “pull” and inspire people forward.

Typically, a corporate vision emanates from higher-level leadership conversations, often including the development of mission and values statements, and involves an organizations' Board of Directors. While this approach is often characterized by robust debate, keen insights, and attention to current and future goals and strategies, most vision statements are developed by “the top” then taken “down the mountain” for the benefit of the masses. While an effective utilization of time this can create compliance with the vision rather than commitment to it for other employees.

In order to inspire and motivate an organization, effective vision creation needs to be collaborative. While the adage “too many cooks can spoil the broth” may ring true, having the “right cooks in the kitchen” feels a bit more appropriate. A broader, co-creative process that includes engaged persons from many levels of organization helps create a better vision and set the stage for its effective execution. An organization may be successful OR may struggle but it is difficult to know when it is “on target” without knowing where it hopes to be in the future.

What we know

Organizations that successfully execute their corporate vision make specific and thoughtful choices about how they create and implement it and they want everyone in their organization to be committed to – and aligned with – the established “hoped for” results.

The relationship between vision, culture, employee commitment and service quality is recognized in literature (Harber, Ashkanasy, and Callan, 1997). These researchers proposed that cultural development initiatives like vision development and execution processes can positively influence organizational commitment, job satisfaction, occupational alienation, and job performance. Further, in a number of milestone studies (e.g. Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992, Kouzes & Posner 1988), the authors have documented the importance of organizational vision and its relationship with these same outcomes. Baum, Locke, and Kirkpatrick (1998) have stated explicitly that vision is an essential part of change initiatives and organizations that create a compelling and inspiring view of the future create a “pull” or proactive step forward for every employee.

The benefits of a strategically created and executed vision include:

1. True north. An effectively executed organizational vision provide a rallying point of common purpose for everyone. It focus decisions, provides guidance when business and market conditions change, and helps unify people and processes so that all are “pointing in the same direction” to accomplish the same thing.
2. Employee alignment, engagement, and commitment. Employees want to be a part of something bigger than the daily work they perform. Even though they may not say this specifically, they value their legacy (what they have done) and knowing that they have made a difference (in what has yet to be done). Collaboratively conceived and executed visions create meaning that helps employees feel, a part of something important.
3. Emotional connection. Great visions are aspirational and become shared. The best implementation strategies engage employees by providing meaning for what they do and encouraging a deep discovery of how and why the vision is personal to each employee.
4. Organizational alignment. In order to properly execute a vision, it must be aligned and be in congruence with an organizations’ goals, strategies, plans, and performance measures. Without this alignment, the vision will not have the relevance and generate the commitment it deserves from employees and might end up as lightly regarded words on a poster in a break room.

Some vision experts say that successful vision execution is based 1% on the vision itself and 99% on the alignment and engagement of others. Peter Senge (a renowned systems scientist, senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, and founder of the Society for Organizational Learning) has stated that it is “rarely, if ever, what the Vision IS, it is what the Vision (actually) DOES that truly counts. The “DOES” part of this quote implies strongly that in order to be successfully executed a vision must inspire, motivate, and engage people. To do this effectively, vision execution becomes every leaders’ responsibility, not just the responsibility of the C-Suite. Since the most important and influential person in each employee’s work life is their individual manager, each leader has a profound opportunity to model the importance of committing to a shared vision and encouraging those who report to them to follow their lead.

A vision must be unique to the company and not be copied or patterned after others. Authenticity and the strategic direction of every organization, large or small should drive vision development. Shown below are three Vision Statements from respected organizations, offered as examples only:

Entertainment Company Vision: To entertain, inform and inspire people around the globe through the power of unparalleled storytelling, reflecting the iconic brands, creative minds and innovative technologies that make ours the world’s premier entertainment company.

Major Airline Vision: To become the world’s most loved, most flown, and most profitable airline.

Learning Software Company: Our vision is to bring our students into the 21st century through innovation and modern technology. Learning will be enhanced with computer software and educational games that will allow students to proceed at their own rate according to their ability.

What it means

Effectively executing an organizational vision may be more reasonable and achievable than one would think but clearly knowing the desired results or outcomes before beginning to develop the vision can help to clarify the path that must be taken as you move forward. Like the scarecrow said to Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, “if you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there”. The understanding of why the vision is needed is absolutely key and starting a new vision initiative for the right reasons can help maintain focus should progress stall. Vision development and deployment must be done thoughtfully, intentionally, and collaboratively, however, and true success has always been measured by “what the vision accomplishes” rather than by the quality or quantity of its words or the time and energy spent create it.

The over-arching influence of COVID-19 in our work and personal lives has made “seeing around the corner” more challenging or difficult than ever. Many companies are focusing (rightly so) on decisions that will keep them viable now as they continue gainfully employing their employees in the future. Any consideration of a company’s particular vision may take a backseat to other priorities during times of crisis and/or survival.

Prioritization of what needs to be done in order to achieve what must be accomplished right now, though, is critical for every organization. We also realize that COVID-19, like other challenges in life, is temporary (believe it or not), and will fade in time (unfortunately to be replaced by some other issue or crisis). Thankfully, an organization’s vision is long-term, aspirational, and can help to reset perspectives and reduce anxiety during the difficult, immediate challenges we are all facing today.

What you can do

TEA has assisted in several common practices that help ensure successful outcomes within the process from our strategic planning and vision development / execution work with members. In order to create engagement and collaboration, an organization must **first determine how the vision will be created**. A vision that is “pushed” and “driven” down through an organization can feel like coercion to some employees. Since the goal of vision execution is understanding and commitment, its development must be collaborative and reflect multiple perspectives rather than just the brainstorm of a visionary CEO or executive team. **Consider assembling a multi-disciplinary project team to build the initial drafts of the vision** before inviting others in the organization to review and discuss it. Additionally, the following action items represent best practices for organizations interested in creating and executing a vision:

Make the Vision Compelling, Aspirational, and Memorable

- Share the full “why” including the context of the vision and its overall intention
- Make the vision a high and aspirational standard
- Use metaphors, word pictures, examples, symbols, alliteration, and analogies
- Use words that everyone understands, are truthful, evoke excitement
- Do not use time-dated jargon
- Create a vision that can be easily “seen” by everyone

Align the Vision with Strategy

- Conduct (or refer to an existing) SWOT analysis for your organization. Awareness of what is true now along with industry trends for the future can provide the foundation of a compelling and aspirational vision.
- Build an explicit linkage between Organizational, Departmental or Functional, Team and Individual Performance Goals so everyone has a “line of sight” and feel vested in the future focus of the organization.

Communicate, Encourage Dialogue and Gather Personal Insight

- Communicate...a lot. Launch communications with energy, invite people to make the vision their own and discover HOW they connect with it and why it is personally important to them
- Engage your organization in discussion about the linkages of strategic goals with the vision. Ensure everyone “gets it” before they are expected to “live it.”
- Integrate the developed vision into performance plans (competencies aligned with the vision and values)
- Leverage all forms of communication, organization intranet and website, social media, company newsletters, annual reports, etc. to regularly display the organizational vision so that it becomes imbedded within your infrastructure

Sustain it

- Breathe life into the vision by talking about it and bringing it into your ongoing work interactions. Reinforce it by reconnecting with it during business updates and when communicating new strategies (as sometimes are necessary when unexpected things occur – such as COVID-19!) Use it as a “litmus test” when rallying the troops during difficult times.
- Look for key learnings and other noteworthy accomplishments and experiences that positively reflect the vision then celebrate and communicate them (a lot)
- Make the tough call by encouraging people to point out actions, behaviors, or decisions that are incongruent with the vision. Thank them authentically for having the courage to speak up.
- Things change, strategies change, but the vision will change less (e.g. True North) but, sometimes the vision must be revised quickly, especially if the world, industry, market, etc. have changed or shifted (e.g. COVID-19). It is NEVER wrong to change your mind (or your vision) if circumstances change dramatically – it IS wrong to change “for change sake” or to panic into changing course without strategic thought and deliberation.
- Listen and stay connected with the emotions and commitments of employees regarding their understanding of, and commitment to, the vision

Effectively executing an organizational vision requires an organizational commitment and should not be the work of a few persons. Execution should be perceived as “never ending” with the objective of engaging every employee by helping them clearly understand they are essential contributors to the organizations’ efforts of getting closer to the vision. Every day the organization exists is a day to reinforce the vision, recognize progress towards it (or lack thereof), and celebrate the many “wins” along the way.