



## Visionary Leaders



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### Introduction

For more than 30 years, I have worked with nonprofit organizations. For 26 of those years, I have served as a consultant to nonprofit organizations not only in the United States, but also in Canada, Europe, Latin America and Asia. During this time I have witnessed firsthand the profound effect that vision — and visionary leaders — can have not merely on their organizations and communities, but on our world.

As my understanding and appreciation of visionary leaders has matured over the years, the importance of understanding the essence of vision has increased correspondingly. What exactly *is* vision? Why does it seem to be increasing in impor-

tance? What distinguishes visionary leaders from other, even charismatic leaders? Where does vision come from? How does one person's vision become a shared vision? Does a visionary leader make a visionary organization? How is vision assimilated into an organization's culture or social architecture?

These and a great many other questions are behind the reflection and research that have gone into this paper. Because literally dozens have books in the last decade have addressed the issue of vision, and because my present objective is to merely write a paper rather than another book, my treatment of these and other questions will necessarily be limited. Specifically, we will begin by looking at the need for visionary leaders at all levels of society and in organizations of all types. Results from a 1989 survey will be reviewed showing the desired traits and skills, ranked in order of importance, of executives then and in the future.

We will then provide a number of definitions of vision and briefly explore why it is considered by many to be the very essence of leadership. Along with considering what vision is, we will look at visions from a number of perspectives: visions as images of the future; visions as mental models; visions as a force of

impressive power for transforming organizations; and, somewhat more esoterically but no less intriguingly, visions as a "field." In addition to providing a variety of definitions of and perspectives on vision, we will also consider the elements of vision, where vision comes from, the role of temperament in vision, and the relationship of visions to popular but often woefully inadequate vision "statements."

Having addressed these fundamentally important issues and elements, we will turn our attention from vision to visionary and transformational leaders, exploring the role of vision in leadership and vision as a source of transformational power. We will consider the corporate visioning process and the crucial ways in which individual vision becomes — or fails to become — *shared* vision. We will conclude the paper with a look at the issue of alignment, and what the mechanisms and processes are by which visionary leaders can succeed in building visionary organizations. How these visionary traits become interwoven into the organization's culture or social architecture will be considered before summarizing the key issues addressed in this paper. Finally, we will briefly examine the elements in a formula for successful visionary leadership.

## I. The Need for Visionary Leaders

In 1983, the Public Agenda Forum undertook a major study of the nonmanagerial workforce in the U.S. The survey yielded the following disturbing results:

- Fewer than 1 out of every 4 jobholders say that they are currently working at full potential.
- One half said they do not put effort into their job over and above what is required to hold onto it.
- The overwhelming majority, 75 percent, said that they could be significantly more effective than they presently are.
- Close to 6 out of 10 Americans on the job believe that they “do not work as hard as they used to.” (This may not be true, but it’s their perception.) (Bennis and Nanus, p.7)

Another survey of U.S. workers revealed that 85 percent could work harder, and that more than half could double their effectiveness “if [they] wanted to.” (Huseman & Hatfield). Nanus cites evidence that as many as 60 percent of the adults in America feel powerless and alienated — twice as many as twenty years ago — and that one-third of the American people don’t lead happy lives (1989, p. 22).

Putting a dollar estimate to the cost of “time theft,” or time lost as a result of insufficiently challenged and motivated workers on the job, Robert Half, the head of one of America’s most respected human resource firms, estimated over a decade ago the economic costs alone to be \$140 billion annually. But what about the costs beyond the vast economic consequences of human potential and productivity lost to workers who are uninspired and unmotivated to perform at consistently high levels? Some commentators and analysts have strongly suggested that in the presidential race between George Bush and Bill Clinton, it was the inability to get “the vision thing” that cost George Bush the election, and few Americans (including Dole himself) could even hint at let alone compellingly articulate what challenger Bob Dole’s vision for America was. What’s more,

Can you imagine the cost, both in economic terms, as well as in human potential and productivity lost, of workers who are uninspired and unmotivated to perform at consistently high levels?

despite the current popularity of President George W. Bush, most Americans would be hard pressed to articulate the vision for the country held by the present administration, other than eradicating terrorism (clearly a noble and necessary goal, but hardly a compelling vision for a nation).

Regardless of the criteria chosen, I contend that the cost of the lack of a shared vision — to our nation, to our society, to our communities, colleges and universities, corporations, organizations

and places of worship — is simply incalculable. The pages that follow will attempt to explain why.

### Vision as “The” Key Leadership Attribute

In 1989, Korn/Ferry International reported on a survey of 1,500 senior leaders, 870 of them CEOs, from 20 different countries including representatives from Japan, the United States, Western Europe and Latin America.<sup>1</sup> The leaders were asked to describe the key

#### What Traits CEOs Have -- And Will Need

Percent describing traits or talents dominant now in the CEO and important for the CEO of 2000

	Personal Behavior	NOW	YEAR 2000
*	Conveys a strong sense of vision	75%	98%
*	Links compensation to performance	66%	91%
*	Communicates frequently with employees	59%	89%
*	Emphasizes ethics	74%	85%
*	Plans for management succession	56%	85%
*	Communicates frequently with customers	41%	78%
	Reassigns/terminates unsatisfactory employees	34%	71%
	Rewards loyalty	48%	44%
	Makes all major decisions	39%	21%
	Behaves conservatively	32%	13%

Blue shaded area indicates increasing in importance.

Gold shaded area indicates decreasing in importance.

\* More than 75% in the year 2000

**FIGURE 1.** Traits CEOs have and will need. Percent describing traits or talents dominant now in the CEO and important for the CEO of 2000. (From Lester B. Korn, “How the Next CEO Will Be Different,” *Fortune*, May22, 1989, p. 175) Quoted in Quigley, p.8.

traits, talents, and characteristics desirable for a CEO today and important for a CEO in the year 2000. The trait most frequently mentioned, both now and expected in the year 2000, was that the CEO convey a “strong sense of vision.” A remarkable 98 percent saw that trait as the most important for the year 2000.

## II. Vision Defined

The very essence of leadership is you have to have a vision. It's got to be a vision you can articulate clearly and forcibly on every occasion. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet.

**Theodore Hesburgh**

Vision is central to leadership. It is the indispensable tool without which leadership is doomed to failure.

**Burt Nanus**

A growing consensus in the literature on leadership and management recognizes the absolutely critical role that vision plays in organizations. Yet what exactly *is* vision? The following definitions provide slightly different perspectives but with a clear common essence:

Burt Nanus (1992) states that “A vision is a realistic, credible, attractive future for your organization.” Kouzes and Posner (1987) define vision as “An ideal and unique image of the future.” I personally define vision as “A clear,

compelling, magnetic and galvanizing mental picture of a desired future state.” All of these elements are significant in my personal experience.

First, a vision must be *clear*. Hesburgh gets to the issue of clarity when he indirectly cites a well-known biblical passage regarding the response to an uncertain or unclear trumpet (I Cor. 14.8). Second, powerful visions are *compelling*.

They have a driving force that thrusts people forward.

Third, visions are *magnetic*.

They act as a magnet that draws people forward to a preferred future.

Fourth, powerful visions have a *galvanizing* effect on individuals, teams, and organizations. Like a

current of electricity flowing through individuals and groups, powerful visions stimulate people in significant ways, energizing them and lifting them toward higher levels of aspiration and performance. Fifth, good visions are *clear mental pictures*. Although individuals

What is “vision?”  
I define vision as “a clear, compelling, magnetic and galvanizing mental picture of a desired future state.” All of these elements are significant in my personal experience.

may articulate the same vision using different words, each should carry in his or her mind a clear pictorial image of what the desired future looks like. And last, visions are always *future-oriented*. Visions, unlike missions, always speak to what the individual or organization seeks to become or do in the future, often many years out.

## Values, Mission, and Vision

Although different models will approach the issue of vision, values, and mission from different perspectives, there is a broad and growing consensus among scholars and practitioners around the importance and interplay of the key elements of values, mission, and vision in both personal and organizational performance. While the meaning of values is typically somewhat more self-evident, one continues to encounter widespread confusion among many organizations over the issues of mission and vision, and, unfortunately, the terms are often used interchangeably. My personal stance, echoed by a significant number of other writers on the subject, is that “mission” is primarily a statement of *purpose*. It answers the “Why?” question, such as “Why do I exist?”, “Why does our organization, division, department, etc. exist?” “Vision,” on the other hand, is a statement of *direction* or *destination*. It answers the “Where?” question, as in “Where, exactly, are we headed?”

Peter Senge gets at this distinction, but he demonstrates the seemingly endless potential for confusion inherent in different meanings attributed to the same terms (i.e., the element of “direction” inherent in “purpose,” typically part of a mission statement) when he writes,

Real vision cannot be understood in isolation from the idea of purpose. By purpose, I mean an individual's sense of why he is alive.

But vision is different from purpose. Purpose is similar to a direction, a general heading. Vision is a specific destination, a picture of a desired future. Purpose is abstract. Vision is concrete. Purpose is “advancing man's capability to explore the heavens.” Vision is “a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s.” Purpose is “being the best I can be,” “excellence.” Vision is breaking four minutes in the mile.

It can truly be said that nothing happens until there is vision. But it is equally true that a vision with no underlying sense of purpose, no calling, is just a good idea — all “sound and fury, signifying nothing.” (1990, pp. 148-149).

We can begin to understand the confusion between mission and vision when we see the essence of vision being articulated as “mission” as does Charles Garfield when he writes, “Mission is the source of peak performance. Mission — an image of a desired state of affairs that inspires action — determines behavior and fuels motivation.” (1986, p. 77).

Despite the terms used, to secure some reasonable footing on these semantically slippery slopes, I want to emphasize two indispensable elements of vision that are not essential elements of mission or purpose. First, vision is a “see” word. If you can’t *see* it, you can’t *be* it. Second, unlike “mission” which can simply address why an organization currently exists, visions are future-oriented. To speak of a current mission is eminently sensible. To speak of a *vision* for the present is oxymoronic.

How important is vision? Vastly more important than the average person realizes. In fact, in a sweeping study of Western civilization, the Dutch sociologist Fred Polak (1973) speaks to the power of our mental images of the future as being the single most important dynamic and explanation for understanding cultural evolution:

Any student of the rise and fall of cultures cannot fail to be impressed by the role played in this historical succession of the future. *The rise and fall of images of the future precedes or accompanies the rise and fall of cultures. As long as a society’s image is positive and flourishing, the flower of culture is in full bloom. Once the image begins to decay and lose its vitality, however, the culture does not long survive.* (1973, p. 19)

If one simply substitute’s “organization” for “culture,” one begins to plumb the

depths of the significance of the images we carry in our minds. So potent is this issue of vision, understood as a compelling image, that the philosopher John Locke stated 300 years ago, “In truth, the ideas and images in men’s minds are the invisible powers that govern them.”

We have touched here on a meaningful distinction between mission and vision, between general purpose and specific direction or destination. But with all the talk about vision, where does vision come from?

## Where Does Vision Come From?

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,  
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower  
Of facts...they lie unquestioned, uncombined.  
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill  
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom  
To weave it into fabric...

**Edna St. Vincent Millay**

It seems clear to me that at the most fundamental level, vision has its origins in the matrix of human development and in the “soil” of deeply held personal values. When Levinson writes about the concept of the “life dream,” for example, he is dealing with the issue of personal vision. For Levinson, the concept of personal vision has its roots in the unfolding life course of an individual. (Levinson, et al, 1978). This “dream” or “vision” typically emerges from a pro-

cess of deep soul-searching, of wrestling with issues like the meaning of existence and questions like “Why am I here?”, “What is the purpose of my life?”, “What do I care most deeply about?”

Garfield addresses this latter issue, this dynamic of “being pulled by values” when he notes from his extensive research that peak performers shared an obsession to follow what they really cared about, their most basic or core values. Peak performers are those who live out values that tap and transmit their deepest reserves of energy and motivation. Although I would frame the issues of mission and vision differently, I concur with Garfield that values play an absolutely determinative role in vision and peak performance because values are “the leverage point for the whole internal impulse to excel, because they encompass not only what but why.” (Garfield, 1986, p. 266). Quigley echoes these sentiments when he states that “Values and beliefs are the most fundamental of the three elements of vision... Values precede mission and goals in logic and reality. Consequently, primacy in the corporate vision is shifting from corporate mission to corporate values.” (1993, p. 15).

Jim Collins, a leading researcher and thinker on change, actually incorporates values into his model of vision and underscores their primacy in vision

when he writes,

Vision is simply a combination of three basic elements: (1) an organization’s fundamental reason for existence beyond just making money (often called its mission or purpose), (2) its timeless unchanging core values, and (3) huge and audacious — but ultimately achievable — aspirations for its own future (I like to call these BHAGs, or Big Hairy Audacious Goals). Of these, the most important to great, enduring organizations are its core values. (1996, p. 19).

Thus, greatly simplifying what can obviously be complex issues and dynamics, we can reduce the issues of mission, vision and values to *Why?* (mission), *Where?* (vision), and *What?* (i.e., what’s really important to us, or our values) *behind* the Why and Where.

By way of review, we have seen that the awareness of and engagement with our deepest values constitute at least part of the soil out of which vision — given the right seeds and environment — can blossom. But what is this process, and how well is it understood?

Although research over the last two decades has done much to enhance our understanding of the elements of vision and provide us with insights into the visioning process, it seems clear that this process is not yet well understood. Burt Nanus speaks to the inherent messi-

ness in this process when he writes,

We mustn't pretend that vision is always the result of an orderly process. It often entails a messy, introspective process difficult to explain even to the person who conceives the vision. Vision formation is not a task for those who shun complexity or who are uncomfortable with ambiguity. Still, there are some basic elements that are part of all attempts to formulate vision... they are information, values, frameworks, and insight.

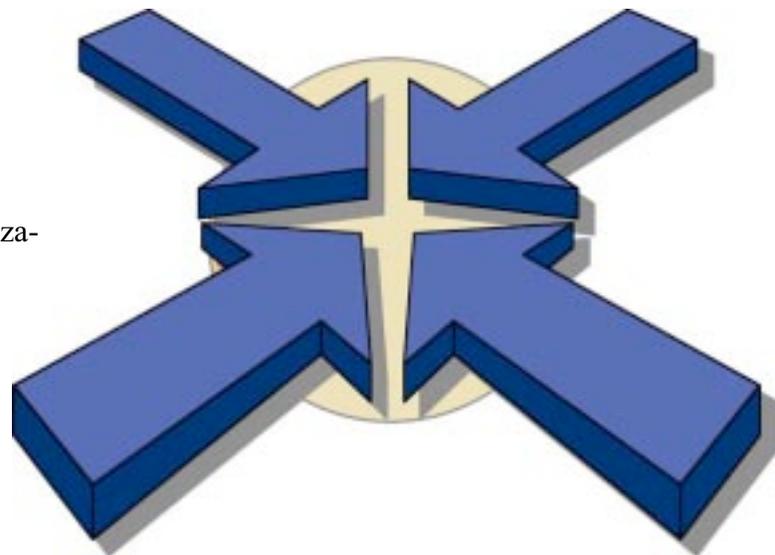
While vision is in a very real sense a dream, it is a special kind of dream built on information and knowledge. The art of developing an effective vision starts with asking the right questions — and asking lots of them. (1992, p. 34).

Having led a number of organizations through the visioning process in the context of strategic planning, I resonate with the insightful term Nanus uses elsewhere, “structured intuition.” Clearly, the visioning process is a whole-brain process and “dichotomaniacs” who suggest that vision is entirely a right-brain process are simply unburdened by the facts (either the facts of brain research or the observation of how vision actually emerges).

I have found it personally helpful in my visioning work with groups to focus on four different but related ways of seeing:<sup>2</sup> foresight, hindsight, insight,

and oversight. The notion of foresight suggests at one level the ability to make sense of emerging trends in the marketplace and to see the implications of where these trends appear to be headed.<sup>3</sup>

At another highly intuitive level, it entails the ability to “see over the horizon,” or to see things before others see them. In a more left-brain mode, it also entails understanding what Epictetus meant when he said that “Most of the misery in life can easily be avoided by simply thinking of what is about to happen as though it already had,” or, in more conventional strategic planning parlance,



the ability to make “impact statements” by testing the probable outcomes of multiple scenarios while still in the planning stage.

The notion of hindsight gets at what Santayana no doubt had in mind when he said that “Those who fail to learn from the errors of history are

condemned to relive them.” This hindsight eventually brings the critical faculty of rational judgment to bear on the opportunities and alternatives that might be suggested in more right-brain dominant visioning exercises. The notion of insight, or what I am inclined to call “inner sight,” entails the ability both to very clearly understand the context in which one is working (e.g., the realities inside the organization) and the capacity to see beyond the surface of things; to understand as Peter Senge has said commenting on the existence of systems archetypes, that “structures of which we are unaware hold us prisoner.” At another level, inner sight means not being duped by the mere appearance of things, and it suggests the need for a more penetrating gaze to understand what is happening at a deeper level inside people, teams, systems, etc. Outsight, for me, suggests the need for a passionate focus on the customer, client, or other external stakeholders, as well as STEEP factors (social, technological, economic, environmental, and political) that characterize the external environment in which one operates.

## **Mental Models, Force and Field**

John Locke was cited earlier for this powerful insight that “the ideas and images in men’s minds are the invisible powers that govern them.” This statement gets at another dynamic attribute of

visions: the way in which visions “program” the mind. Like paradigms, visions often become mindsets or mental models that are powerful in shaping what we *do* because they shape what we *see*. When internalized, these visions (as cathected mental images) actually influence the brain’s reticular activating system which in turn actively (if only subconsciously) shapes our perception of data, phenomena, behavior, etc., as to “fit” with the vision. Those perceptions and actions that align with vision will receive preferential attention, while those that fail to align with vision will tend (appropriately, in most cases) to be victims of planned neglect. Thus, even more than most goals, *vision possesses the vital power to focus energy on productivity*. Because the goal of leadership and management is fundamentally one of focusing energy on productivity, the power of a vision to both release and amplify energy while focusing it on desired outcomes makes it one of the organization’s most valuable assets, one never reflected on the balance sheet.

***“Vision is the force that invents the future.”***

So far, we have touched briefly on the force that vision releases in individuals and organizations, a force which, in part by virtue of constructing shared mental models, shapes what individuals and organizations *do* because it shapes what individuals *see*. Metaphorically

speaking, the right brain contributes the “artist’s rendering” of the desired future state, while the left brain contributes the “blueprint.” Other meaningful metaphors include the role of vision as a “compass that points to magnetic north” (Nanus), and the function of vision in “focusing the projector” (Kouzes and Posner). On this point, Kouzes and Posner note insightfully that “The most important role of visions in organizational life is to give focus to human energy. Visions are like lenses. They focus unrefracted rays of light. They enable everyone concerned with an enterprise to see more clearly what is ahead of them.” (1987, p. 98).

The role of visions as mental models is fairly well understood, as are the forces that powerful visions unleash<sup>4</sup>. Yet few have considered the notion of vision as a “field.” In *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret Wheatley addresses an entire chapter — “Space Is Not Empty: Invisible Fields that Shape Behavior” — to the notion of invisible fields. Reflecting on the work of Rupert Sheldrake, Gary Zukav and others, helps to understand this concept:

Something strange has happened to space in the quantum world. No longer is there a lonely void. Space everywhere is now thought to be filled with fields, invisible, non-material structures that are the basic substance of the universe. We cannot see these fields, but we do observe their effects. They have

become a useful construct for explaining action-at-a-distance, for helping us understand why change occurs without the direct exertion of material “shoving” across space.<sup>5</sup>

To grasp the invisible power of fields, a moment’s reflection on Einstein’s view of the gravitational field may be helpful. In relativity theory, Einstein posited, gravity acts to structure space. Thus, objects are drawn to earth because space-time is bent or curved in response to matter. In this light, as Wheatley points out, “Rather than a force, gravity is understood as a medium, an invisible geometry of space.”<sup>6</sup>

Whether the issue is gravitational fields, electromagnetic fields, or quantum fields, in each of these theories fields are unseen structures, occupying space and becoming known to us through their effects. Like Wheatley, I am inclined to believe that there are invisible fields in organizations that can often be sensed and felt through their effects. In fact, the energy released in visionary organizations often creates a palpable force that members can sense in a galvanizing, and sometimes electrifying way. Thus, while admittedly somewhat esoteric, rather than merely a linear direction or destination, as important as those are, I think there is merit to conceiving of vision as a field permeating organizational space and shaping the perceptions and behaviors of organizational members.

## The Role of Temperament in Vision

Clearly, an in-depth consideration of the role of temperament in vision is well beyond the scope of this paper. Because of the attention given to intuition and right brain functioning in vision, however, it may serve to briefly consider how the function of intuition can distinguish between managers and leaders. Based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Craig Hickman (1992) provides a type table in which the dividing line between managers and leaders is based on the S/N distinction, *sensing* versus *intuition*. Managers, the S types, are situated to the left of center, while Leaders, the N types, are located to the right of the table. (Because much of the

recent literature on leadership has unwisely exalted leaders and made managers appear to be mere “leaders in waiting,” I will state my deep personal conviction that *managers are every bit as essential as leaders*. Arguing which is the more important of the two is ultimately a bit like arguing which of a bird’s two wings is most important.)

As it relates to *visionary* leaders, Kouzes and Posner would apparently agree. They write,

Intuition is the wellspring of vision. In fact, by definition, intuition and vision are directly connected. Intuition has as its root the Latin word meaning “to look at.” Intuition, like vision, is a “see” word. It has to do with our ability to picture and to imagine. (1987, p. 93)

**Management / Leadership Type Table**

ISTJ <b>RESPONSIBLE MANAGER</b> <i>DOES THINGS RIGHT.</i>	ISFJ <b>ACCOMMODATING MANAGER</b> <i>SERVES PEOPLE</i>	INFJ <b>INSPIRATIONAL LEADER</b> <i>INSPIRES OTHERS</i>	INTJ <b>PERFECTING LEADER</b> <i>IMPROVES EVERYTHING</i>
ISTP <b>SOLUTION MANAGER</b> <i>ADDRESSES EXPEDIENT NEEDS</i>	ISFP <b>OBSERVANT MANAGER</b> <i>IS SENSITIVE TO ALL</i>	INFP <b>IDEALISTIC LEADER</b> <i>SEEKS TO TRANSFORM SOCIETY</i>	INTP <b>HOLISTIC LEADER</b> <i>PURSUES LOGICAL PURITY</i>
ESTP <b>REALISTIC MANAGER</b> <i>GETS THINGS DONE</i>	ESFP <b>ENTHUSIASTIC MANAGER</b> <i>MAKES WORK ENJOYABLE</i>	ENFP <b>OPPORTUNISTIC LEADER</b> <i>DISCOVERS POSSIBILITIES</i>	ENTP <b>INVENTIVE LEADER</b> <i>FINDS NEW INSIGHTS</i>
ESTJ <b>ACHIEVING MANAGER</b> <i>ACCOMPLISHES OBJECTIVES</i>	ESFJ <b>FACILITATING MANAGER</b> <i>PROVIDES HELP</i>	ENFJ <b>PERSUASIVE LEADER</b> <i>ARTICULATES VALUES</i>	ENTJ <b>CONQUERING LEADER</b> <i>DRIVES TOWARD GOALS</i>

From *Mind of a Manager, Soul of a Leader*, Craig Hickman. p. 268

Although he speaks from the framework of “managerial” rather than “leadership” processes, Mintzberg echoes similar convictions regarding the role of intuition in this complex process:

One fact recurs repeatedly in all of this research: the key managerial processes are enormously complex and mysterious (to me as a researcher, as well as to the managers who carry them out), drawing on the vaguest of information and using the least articulated of mental processes. *These processes seem to be more relational and holistic than ordered and sequential, and more intuitive than intellectual; they seem to be most characteristic of right-hemispheric activity.*” (1976, p. 57, quoted in Kouzes and Posner, 1987, p. 93; my italics).

Thus, while visioning is clearly a whole-brain process, the dominance of the right-brained intuitive function appears to be the domain of leaders rather than managers, at least as understood in the context of Hickman’s type table.

### III. From Vision to Shared Vision: How Visionary Leaders Create Visionary Organizations

Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a

moment and think of it. And then he feels perhaps there isn’t...

**Winnie the Pooh, A.A. Milne**

There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared.

**Burt Nanus**

Up to this point we have considered the need for visionary leaders, what vision is, and how it can be a powerful tool for transformation, individually and corporately, by serving as a mental model, a force, and even an invisible “field” that shapes focus and performance. We also looked at the sources of vision — including foresight, hindsight, insight and oversight — emphasizing that while visioning is a whole-brain process, the dominance of the right hemisphere in a highly intuitive process cannot be overlooked. But does organizational vision always come from a visionary leader at the top? And what of the all-important process by which individual vision becomes shared vision? And how does an organization become “visionary”?

A number of researchers and writers provide us with models for this process, and in the pages that follow we will look briefly at two of these models, one in the form of a three-act drama, the

other presenting a model of bio-reengineering. But first, let's begin by considering how shared vision is *not* developed.

The opening paragraph of Winnie the Pooh provides us with a setting that many organizational members can unfortunately relate to. CEOs and senior executives, much like Christopher Robin, head off to a retreat center, often with a consultant, to spend days laboriously wordcrafting a vision "statement." They then return to the organization, have their wordsmithery proudly framed and placed on walls throughout the organization, and then become perplexed when nothing happens. The staff, meanwhile, feels much like Edward Bear, going bump, bump, bump down the stairs behind Christopher Robin, sensing that there really is another way, if only they could stop bumping long enough to think of it. And then, with the passage of time, they begin to feel that perhaps there isn't.

The great folly here is obviously not the intent to develop a vision. That is

clearly laudable. The folly consists in failing to understand that people support what they help to create, and that a virtually infallible formula is "No involvement, no ownership; no ownership, no commitment." The folly of a select group developing a vision statement in isolation is compounded by failing to honor the voices, the perspectives, the values, the hopes and the dreams (not to mention the vast experience and expertise) of those within the organization who would, almost without exception, improve not only the quality of the vision but certainly the likelihood of its successful realization.

The leader must *own* the vision and must be its primary spokesperson and modeler. But all members of the organization should have an opportunity for meaningful input into the organization's vision.

### **Always from the top?**

A prevalent and dangerous myth, perhaps the pervasive remnant of heroic notions of leadership, is that "the leader" must be the source of an organization's vision. While this is frequently the case, this clearly need not be so. What is unquestionable is that the leader, typically the CEO, must *own* the vision and must be the primary spokesperson and modeler of the vision. But increasingly,

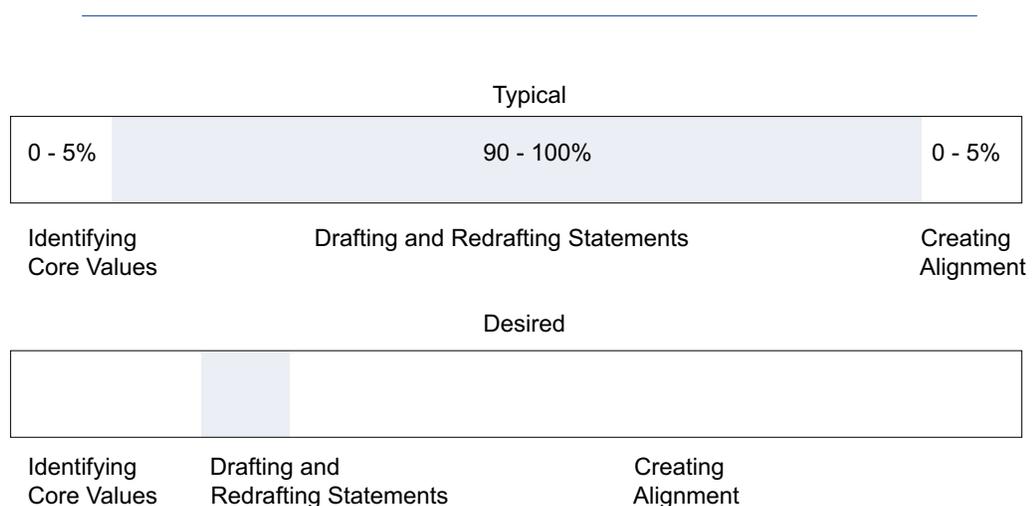
visioning and strategic planning processes are being designed that provide all members of the organization with an opportunity for meaningful input into the organization's vision. Revisiting an earlier metaphor, it is the leader's job to focus the projector, not to be the sole source of light.

In an article titled "Aligning Action and Values," Jim Collins contrasts the *typical* allocation of time for creating organizational alignment around vision with the desired allocation of time.

What the figure below demonstrates in reality is that while vision "statements" are fine, a vision without organizational alignment is simply an idle wish. This alignment process actually begins with a means for involving members of the organization in identifying organizational core values, recognizing

ing, as stated earlier, that values are not only a primary source of vision but also the sustainers of peak performance. I often tell clients at the inception of a visioning and strategic planning process that if given the choice to have the very popular vision "statement" with no truly shared vision in the organization, or having a genuinely shared vision but no vision "statement," I would not hesitate for a moment to choose the latter. While this seems self-evident, it is clear that thousands of organizations "just don't get it." For visions to become truly shared, people should have a meaningful role in the process. For visions to be successfully realized, organizations must be "aligned" around the vision<sup>7</sup>.

In their book *Transformational Leadership*, Tichy and Devanna outline a transformational process in three acts. The Prologue of this drama consists of

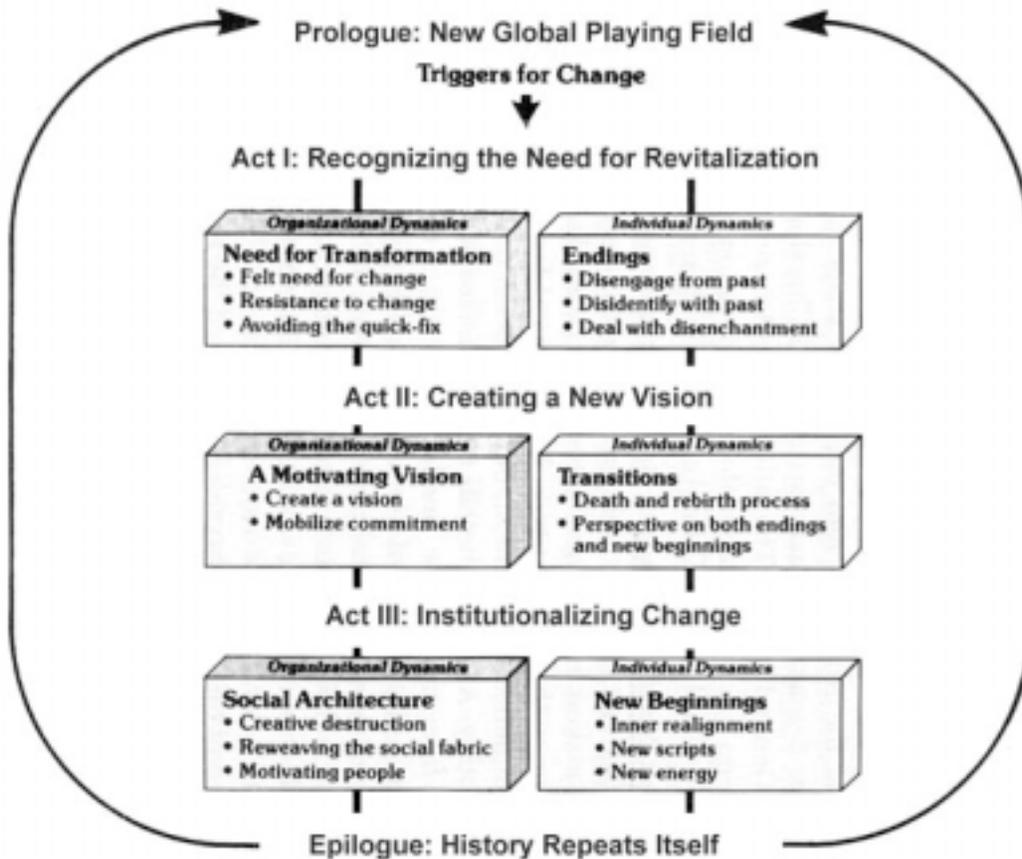


From "Aligning Action and Values," *Leader to Leader*, Premier Issue, 1996. Page 24.

the new global playing field, a setting of intensive global competition that is providing hundreds of thousands of organizations with ample “triggers for change.” Act I begins with recognizing the need for revitalization, which for many organizations means a change in their basic way of doing business just to survive. This need for revitalization follows two paths, one of organizational dynamics and one of individual dynamics. In a nutshell, the need for transformation organizationally leads to the need for individuals to experience “endings,”<sup>8</sup> or closure that enables them to move to the next stage.

Most relevant to the purposes of this paper is “Act II: Creating A New Vision.” It is in this stage that a vision is created and commitment is mobilized to aggressively pursue it.

It is in “Act III: Institutionalizing Change,” however, that we begin to address the question posed earlier, How do *organizations* become visionary? Putting a very complex issue and process very succinctly, organizations become “visionary” when the social architecture or organizational culture is transformed to consistently reinforce the pursuit of vision. This alignment process, which



From *The Transformational Leader*,  
Tichy and Devanna, p. 29.

typically takes a minimum of several years to accomplish, entails the identification and “creative destruction” of misalignments, those aspects of the present organizational culture — values, behaviors, mindsets, strategies, structures, systems — that fail to support the progressive realization of the organization’s new vision. In the diagram, the Epilogue bears the words, “History Repeats Itself,” reminding us that the process of alignment perpetual, and is never a *fait accompli*.

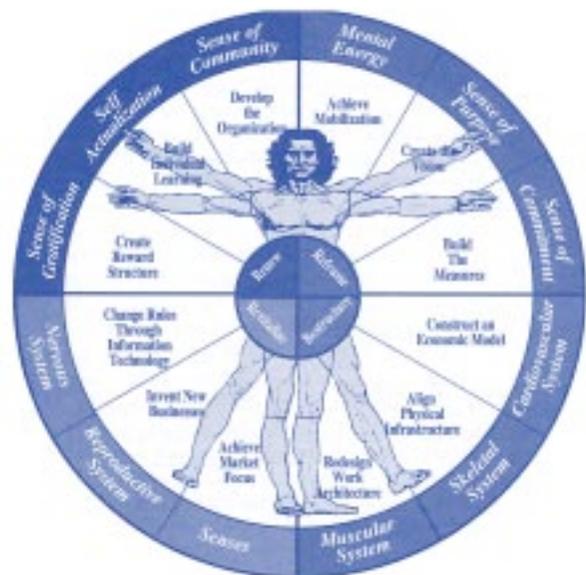
## Bio-Reengineering

In *Transforming the Organization*, Gouillart and Kelly provide an excellent model for visionary, transformative leaders. In a model that is a refreshing break from the increasingly obsolete mechanical metaphors of the industrial age, the authors suggest that the role of the CEO and leadership of the corporation is to act as “genetic architects,” programming the “code” of the corporation. They propose 12 “chromosomes” that constitute the “biocorporate genome,” three for each of the four R’s: Reframing, Restructuring, Revitalizing, and Renewing. Each chromosome, in turn, spawns a “biocorporate system.” (pp. 8-9).

From *Transforming the Organization*, Gouillart and Kelly, p. 9.

The first chromosome, achieving mobilization, corresponds to Act I of Tichy and Devanna’s model. This is the time when the organization responds to triggers for change and recognizes the need to mobilize energy to adapt and transform. The authors wisely note that for most organizations, the disequilibrium of the mobilization chromosome is frequently a precondition for a serious exploration of a new vision. For many organizations, the process of developing a vision that isn’t driven by a profoundly felt need for change is tantamount to being “all dressed up with no place to go.” More to the point, it isn’t that an organization with a vision but no mobilization doesn’t have a place to go, it simply doesn’t have the “gas” to get there.

Following the second chromosome, “Create the Vision,” the authors suggest a third chromosome, “Build the



Measures,” which begins the all important process of alignment. Reflecting the principle of inspection (“people do what we inspect, not what we expect”) that says “What gets measured gets done,” the process is initiated for building the behavioral and performance benchmarks and standards that must be met if the vision is to be realized. While space precludes any in-depth consideration of the individual chromosomes that follow, the progression from reframing through restructuring, revitalizing, and renewing provides a comprehensive and elegant model for translating individual vision into organizational vision and transforming the organization as a result.



## IV. CONCLUSION

It is precisely during these times of chaos that leaders must possess one property: the ability to develop and share a clearly defined sense of direction — a vision of the desired future.

The strength of a leader’s vision, and his or her ability to articulate that vision to employees, will be the measure of leadership in the 21st-century organization.

### ***The Visionary Leader*** **Wall, Solum & Sobol**

We began this paper by looking at the need for visionary leaders, a need that is now manifest in every sector of society. From the Presidency of the United States to local city government, from the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies to the owners of small businesses, from senior executives in industry to volunteers in nonprofit organizations, the demand for visionary leaders is increasing daily. Increased competition, heightened complexity, mounting ambiguity and occasionally paralyzing uncertainty — coupled with a deeply felt, pervasive human need for personal meaning, a sense of purpose and direction, empowerment and satisfaction — all cry out for visionary leaders who know our hearts, understand our deepest values and aspirations, and share our dreams of a better future.

We briefly considered the role

of values, what's really important to us, and how these values are the soil out of which vision typically emerges. We looked at mission, which deals primarily with *purpose*, and showed how mission is distinct from vision, which is a clear sense of destination or *direction*. In considering several definitions of vision, the common attribute of vision as something that is *seen* was underscored, emphasizing that vision is a powerful, pictorial mental image of a desired future state. A personal perspective on four different types of vision in the visioning process was shared, including foresight, hindsight, insight and outsight.

We then considered vision as a mental model that shapes what we do because it shapes what we see, and we looked at how vision functions both as a force that can invent the future and potentially as a "field" that shapes human and organizational behavior. Our attention then turned to the role of temperament in visionary leadership, noting from the research of several leading thinkers that intuition appears to be a key attribute that distinguishes leaders from managers.

The folly of leaders retreating to "wordsmith" their way into the future was touched on, and a model proposing more time focusing on values and organizational alignment rather than wordsmithing vision "statements" was presented. Recognizing that vision becomes

truly powerful in organizations only when it is a *shared* vision — and that this takes place through active participation, input, and ownership — we then reviewed two models (Tichy & Devanna and Guillard & Kelly) that highlighted the stages of the process by which vision becomes incorporated into the culture or social architecture of the organization.

In the midst of proliferating models of visionary leadership, Nanus (1992) provides a formula which summarizes the key elements of much of the current thinking on the subject. His formula states that:

**Shared Purpose**  
**+ Empowered People**  
**+ Appropriate Organizational Changes**  
**+ Strategic Thinking**  
**= Successful Visionary Leadership.**

We have already looked at shared purpose from the perspective of values and mission, and have noted that it is through involvement and ownership that a critical transition from "mission" to a personal *sense* of mission takes place, or, stated differently, a crucially important transformation from *compliance* to *commitment*. Nanus adds empowerment to the equation because in supporting the deepest psychological needs of followers — their need to be needed, to feel significant, to have meaning in their lives and to make a difference — leaders have little trouble capturing the commitment and trust of their colleagues.

We made the point, however, that vision without organizational alignment condemns visions to being little more than idle wishes. The 4 Rs of the bio-reengineering model — reframing, restructuring, revitalizing, and renewing — speak to the alignment issues that must be attended to if corporate culture is to successfully support the pursuit of vision. Nanus captures this in his reference to appropriate organizational changes. He then adds strategic thinking to his formula, a reference which, in my mind, speaks to the criticality of systems thinking as articulated by Senge, and to the relentless, disciplined pursuit of opportunities reflected in the vision and the organizational alignment necessary to achieve them.

As we ponder the chronic disempowerment and under-utilization of literally millions of workers in for-profit and nonprofit organizations alike, the needs of our world, the desperate conditions of much of humanity, and, as Pogo said, the “insurmountable opportunities” that confront us, we would do well to remember a recent Shearson/Lehman ad:

**“Vision is having an acute sense of the possible. It is seeing what others don’t see. And when those with similar vision are drawn together, something extraordinary occurs.”**

Note: Larry F. Johnston is president of McConkey/Johnston, Inc., a marketing, fundraising, management and organization development consulting firm serving nonprofit organizations. He holds a Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, California. Dr. Johnston is the developer of Donor Value Mapping<sup>sm</sup>, a process for identifying the key drivers of donor satisfaction, loyalty, retention and lifetime value. He can be reached by e-mail at [larry\\_johnston@mconkey-johnston.com](mailto:larry_johnston@mconkey-johnston.com).

## Notes

1. Having worked internationally in the nonprofit sector, I am not aware of comparable studies that have been done with nonprofit executives. I can speak from personal experience, however, in saying that a strong sense of vision would be near the top of the list in leadership attributes sought by vast numbers of nonprofits.
2. Because vision is quite literally a “see” word (“If you can’t see it, you can’t be it”), the increase of its usage — in contradistinction to a “dream” or “calling,” two notions that have been prominent for thousands of years — suggests to me the increasing dominance in contemporary culture of visualization over auditory modes of perception and comprehension, no small matter when we look at the role that visions play in shaping perception and behavior. While vision and calling are clearly not exclusive, “calling” may be, apart from its broad figurative meaning, a preferred sensory modality and a conception of purpose for auditory “types.” The continuing presence of this decidedly biblical notion over several thousand years indicates either a now popular figure of speech, or a response to a voice that is quite literally heard, whether that voice be the voice of God as recorded in the Old and New Testaments, or simply a heightened sensitivity and receptiveness to internal impulses registered in the mind as “voices.”
3. Wayne Gretzky, widely acclaimed as the greatest hockey player that has ever lived, was once asked the secret to his success. After pausing for a moment, he replied, “I make a habit of skating to where the puck is going to be, not to where it’s been.”
4. Burt Nanus provides a succinct list: The right vision attracts commitment and energizes people; it creates meaning in workers’ lives; it establishes a standard of excellence; and it bridges the present and the future. (1992, pp. 16-18).
5. P. 48, *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret Wheatley.
6. Ibid., pp. 48-49.
7. For insights into the criticality of alignment and the alignment process, readers are referred to *The Power of Alignment* by Labovitz and Rosansky, *Transforming the Organization*, by Gouillart and Kelley, and *Vision: How Leaders Develop It, Share It, & Sustain It* by Quigley, along with other books in the bibliography.
8. For a detailed treatment of the endings that must mark the beginning of change, and for a deeper understanding of the “transitions” that must accompany successful “change,” see William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*.