

SELLING AND IMPLEMENTING YOUR VISION

Developing a vision may be fairly straightforward but getting others to buy into it may be more challenging. **Siobhan Soraghan** offers some advice on how to communicate it.

A vision is a life-like description of the desired future state of an organisation. Effective implementation of the vision requires the formulation of a robust strategy, ie how the desired state will be achieved. The vision needs to be more than achieving incremental operational improvement and be about how to create superior economic performance. A strategy is a feasible plan that states what needs to change and what should be left alone in the organisation, in order to achieve the vision. Visioning and strategy formulation are an intelligent, iterative process – you may discover in your strategy formulation that there are insurmountable obstacles to implementing your vision, or you might find that you have unique untapped resources that could give you strategic advantage. You adapt your vision accordingly.

The finalised vision and strategy are often summarised in a mission statement that aids implementation by clarifying the current position, stating where management wish to go and why, how the organisation is going to get here and what will happen when it does. It gives a clear direction of travel and informs confident day-to-day decision-making.

The visioning process

Who generates the vision depends on the relative roles and dynamics between the board, the chief executive officer (CEO) and the management team. It can be decided by the board, by the CEO, or generated by a collective management team process led by the CEO. Ultimately, however, the CEO needs to own it and the Board needs to endorse it.

A robust strategy is usually the result of a formulation process that combines analysis, experience and insight. Researching and gathering the appropriate data is key – rubbish in, rubbish out. The research should provide an intelligent picture to the to the senior team of what is changing in terms of demand for the product or service, demographics, consumer trends, competitors, technology of delivery and the economy. There should be solid work on scenario planning, an honest appraisal



of organisational culture and capability, and input from clients and stakeholders.

Ultimately the whole executive needs to be behind the strategy. This is more likely if the management team members have all been involved in the process. To what degree the potential synergy of the team is harnessed in this process depends on the style of the CEO. It also depends upon the maturity and competence of the management team.

A charismatic leader will tend to generate and hold the vision, gaining buy-in through force of personality, clarity and personal conviction. Strategy formulation would serve the delivery of this vision. Such a leader tends not to avoid depth of conflict by directing strategy and is comfortable using their positional power to move things on. The upside is simplicity and speed, but possibly at the cost of strategy robustness, and of buy-in from some members of the team who may not be convinced of its virtue. This could have knock-on effects for planning and follow-through in the respective parts of the organisation. And if the leader



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lacks clarity, followers may pursue in good faith their own strategies which may conflict.

A democratic leader harnesses the synergy of the team in generating the vision and the strategy through a collaborative process. The upside is buy-in, rigour and the greater likelihood of clear translation of strategy further down through the organisation. However, it takes maturity in both the leader and the team and can take more time. Without sufficient maturity in the team and/or themselves, the leader may take the reins back when inevitable conflict arises, giving a mixed message about power, and fail to achieve healthy resolution. A mature leader can develop a team to become mature and formulate strategies of greater quality which then become a great source of competitive advantage.

Leaders are rarely just one or the other of the above types, although they may have a preference in either direction. Their approach to strategy formulation will also be influenced by their perception of the capabilities of the team. Here are some possibilities.

- **Leader as entrepreneur:** they often have a vision about which they are passionate and closely attached. They are likely to be comfortable making the strategic decisions with some independence; they may listen to views but ultimately they tell folk what will happen. Usually a naturally charismatic leader, they are afforded loyalty and power by those who choose to follow them. This is common in owner-managed firms and small businesses. It rarer in a large organisation where the management team is composed of intelligent people with strong egos of their own. As a business grows, such a leader may need to adapt their style to be more inclusive as the capabilities of their team build. Some leaders succeed at this adaptation, some don't, and become a constraint.
- **Leader with a "right-hand-man":** this dyad hatch the vision and typically the high-level strategy. If the leader is risk averse and conscious of their own weaknesses, they may be motivated to choose a complementary ally from the management team. Where the chief executive feels vulnerable, it can make his or her partner very powerful.
- **Leader with cabal:** where the leader trusts and shares with a subset of the whole team, possibly three or four. The upside is that it allows some balance of power and perspective (better with four than three)

and in large management teams this is much easier than whole-group engagement. If just the CEO and two others, one will probably not feel they have not enough power to challenge both the CEO and the other team member. A cabal also sets up a two-tier senior team, where the cabal tacitly have significantly more power than the rest. True buy-in across the team might not be achieved, and might go unnoticed.

- **Collaborative leader:** the leader has matured into the confidence and skill of conducting democratic dialogue. They are willing to take the whole team on a journey of maturation, through the 'form, storm, norm, perform' stages. They know this journey will take time, will be very tough at times, but that the fruits at the perform stage will be a higher quality strategy with optimised likelihood that it will be implemented well throughout the organisation.

Cultural context

Whichever approach is employed in strategy formulation, those involved need a deep understanding how the culture is helping and hindering current organisational performance. At the surface level there are things you can see and hear that are manifestations of the culture, eg stories that are told about heroes, villains, successes and tragedies; symbols of status; structures and processes; written missions; and stated values. At the deepest level are found the lived (not espoused) values and beliefs that really drive behaviours (the paradigm). Contradictions often exist between the surface artefacts and the core beliefs and values, which explains why performance in most organisations is sub-optimal. Achieving more congruence between the outer and the inner helps optimise performance. Understanding the relationship between them helps determine how to go about cultural change to support a new vision which may emphasise some of the core beliefs or values more than before, or indeed introduce new ones.

Communicating and selling the vision

For the vision to be implemented effectively, it must be owned by and communicated with complete conviction by the CEO.

Communicating the vision effectively requires simplicity, relevance and inspiration. Simplicity in that

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everyone in the business can understand it. Relevance in that everyone gets why it matters and sees how it affects them. And inspiration in that it has a direction of travel that is attractive and meaningful to people.

Leaders must clearly communicate the vision and sell the strategy. It requires that leaders throughout the organisation:

- translate the vision appropriately for their audience – pitching it at the right level, bringing it to life and inspiring the management/staff audience. People need to see how their work and contribution fits into the overall big picture of how to achieve the vision. And they need to understand how the values support the vision, and vice versa. Stories can be a great tool in this translation;
- involve people in developing smart feasible plans to achieve it – this ensures they understand exactly what it is they have to do differently and why;
- allow people the time required to make any strategic changes in addition to their normal delivery priorities/commitments; and
- hold people accountable – not teams or groups, but individuals, even if they delegate to someone else.

Being a visionary leader

Being a visionary leader means more than simply understanding, believing and communicating the vision. It demands being wholly committed such that one's own priorities and behaviours (despite one's preferences and habits), are aligned to support the vision. People give more credence to a leader's deeds than their words. If incongruence is obvious, the leader will lose credibility and possibly people's trust. Cynicism can easily take hold.

The leader, therefore, has to be conscious of his or her responsibility to choose to live the vision at all times. For some it is an easy choice, if their attitudes and style are naturally more aligned with the values of the vision. For others, they may have more work to do. If it is too much work, then the best answer for both the leader and the organisation may be for the leader to move to another organisation where there is a better fit.

Moving towards a more strategic approach

When the organisation has traditionally moved forward incrementally and been reactive to opportunities, to look further ahead and become more strategic can be an uncomfortable transformation. It requires a different way of thinking. This might not be a natural skill of senior leaders who may be more used to managing

operations. In a steady state market environment an evolutionary approach to strategy may suffice. However, tougher market conditions and heightened competition may force a more radical approach. A management team used to evolution may struggle to move fast enough without the CEO's sense of urgency, and without fresh blood and/or external help.

Comfort zones and external support

The strategy should link directly to the vision and deal bravely with 'wicked' issues critical to success of the vision, ie those issues that cross boundaries and deal with ambiguities. It is more than just about how to improve operationally. The senior team may be tempted to rely on their own knowledge and skills, and to avoid the uncomfortable dialogue necessary to support step change. External resources can be invaluable for accelerating and facilitating such dialogue, while developing both the leader and the team:

- strategy/market consultancy – expert research and advice on strategic options; and
- process facilitator – development of a step-wise process to ensure a) the researched data is assimilated by the team and b) ensures contribution by all team members; only needed while the team is developing the capability of conducting high quality dialogue without support. Sometimes used each year to catalyse and support an existing process.

Experienced and wise suppliers of such services understand and are sensitive to the significant discomfort management teams can experience when they are faced with the likely need for significant change. They have the empathy and toughness to support and challenge, the wit to avoid collusion with the fear of leaving the comfort zone, and the passionate ambition to stretch the team (and the organisation) to fulfil its potential.