



Building Shared Vision: The Third Discipline of Learning Organizations
By Marty Jacobs
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"If you don't care where you're going, then it doesn't matter which way you go."

—Lewis Carroll

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice asks the Cheshire cat to tell her which way to go, and he responds that it depends on where she wants to go. When Alice replies that she doesn't care, the cat responds with the above quote. This quote speaks volumes about the importance of creating a shared vision. It is reflective of the shortsighted focus that is all too common in organizations today. To be fair, it is exquisitely challenging to disentangle oneself enough from the grip of day-to-day operations to “see the forest for the trees.” Yet without a shared vision, the force of the status quo will prevail in an organization.

A shared vision emerges from the intersection of personal visions and helps create a sense of commitment to the long term. However, there is more to a shared vision than just this amalgamation of personal visions. Vision is only truly shared when people are committed to one another having it, not just each person individually having it. There needs to be a sense of connection and community with respect to the vision that provides the focus and energy for learning in learning organizations. It is the commitment to support each other in realizing the shared vision that gives the vision power. Furthermore, it supplies the guiding force that enables organizations to navigate difficult times and to keep the learning process on course.

Shared vision cannot exist without personal vision. An organization must start the process of building a shared vision by encouraging others to create personal visions. Everyone must see a part of his or her personal vision in the shared vision. Shared vision takes time to emerge and requires on-going dialogue where advocacy is balanced with inquiry. By sharing and listening to each other's personal visions, new insights will surface that continually shape the shared vision. Building a shared vision is a perpetual process. There is a constant need to assess both the internal and external environment.

Just as personal vision reflects individual aspirations, a shared vision must reflect organizational aspirations as well as the individual visions that form its foundation. It is not the leader's

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individual vision that has been expressed, sold, and accepted. There is a crucial element of choice and ownership in a shared vision. Without that sense of commitment to the vision, an organization is left with compliance.

Commitment vs. Compliance

It can often be difficult to distinguish between commitment and compliance. Compliance, at its best, is when someone believes in the leaders creating the vision and willingly follows the rules, working diligently to make that vision happen. At its worst, compliance creates employees who perform at the absolute minimum. Commitment, on the other hand, happens when employees take responsibility for achieving the vision and will change the rules if they become a barrier. In the world of transactional analysis, compliance would be described as a parent-child interaction where commitment would be described as an adult-adult interaction.

The differences between commitment and compliance can often be subtle, but the outcomes never are. True commitment to a vision creates a passion and energy unattainable through mere compliance. Committed people *want* the vision; compliant people *accept* the vision. Committed people *enroll* in the vision, an action that implies personal choice. Compliant people are *sold* a vision, an action that implies a form of coercion.

One of the biggest pitfalls in creating a shared vision is the belief that employees are committed when in fact they may only be compliant. How do you know? Start by asking how much you are trying to control the outcomes. Much like the difference between debate and dialogue, compliance relies on convincing someone of the rightness of a particular point of view, where commitment relies on a willingness to listen to all points of view as well as sharing your own. To create a shared vision, leaders must be willing to share their personal vision, accepting that it is not the shared vision, and ask others to share theirs. Finding the common ground in those collective visions is the beginning of a shared vision. If you find yourself doing more talking than listening, then you probably have compliance and not commitment.

Why Do Visions Die?

In the past, visioning has often suffered from a black eye in the business world. (Remember George H. W. Bush's comment about the "vision thing"?) It is frequently viewed as faddish or too "touchy-feely." Most businesses prefer to analyze hard data rather than dealing with amorphous ideas and feelings, and without the essential facilitative skill set, that discomfort is rightfully placed. It is this perception that can ultimately feed the failure of a visioning process. Here are some more common reasons why visions die:

- The organization believes employees are committed to the vision when in fact they are only compliant. The assumption that visions are dictated from on high has not been surfaced, examined, or challenged, let alone changed.

- During the process of sharing personal visions, the diversity of personal visions creates conflicting visions and polarization. The organization has not developed the capacity to harmonize these visions into something larger than just a set of individual visions.
- Employees experience the vision as unattainable. The gap between the current reality and the vision is too wide and/or employees have not developed the ability to hold the vision in face of current reality.
- The immediacy of the day-to-day demands competes with the need for long-range planning. Employees may complain that it takes too much time and/or feel unproductive.
- Organizations believe that they are done – that the vision has been created and now it's time to move on to the next thing. They do not see the visioning process as an on-going dialogue that maintains their sense of community.

Although creating a shared vision is a time-consuming process that often feels lacking in direction, it sets the stage for achieving the desired future. It is the foundation upon which all else will be constructed, and without a solid foundation, future work will be shaky at best.

What Can Organizations Do To Create Shared Vision?

As is the case with the previous disciplines, there is no set recipe or road map to creating shared vision. Each organization's process will reflect its own individuality. However, there are a number of tasks to consider:

1. As mentioned earlier, shared vision begins with employees developing their personal visions. This can be done prior to or in conjunction with developing a shared vision.
2. Organizations must determine their core values, define their core purpose, and envision the desired future by asking their employees the following questions: a) "What are our guiding principles for how we operate and work together?" b) "Why do we exist?" and c) "What do we want to create?" There are a variety of techniques that can help create an atmosphere of discovery and dialogue. Some of the better-known models are Café Conversations (<http://www.theworldcafe.com/>), Study Circles (<http://www.studyircles.org/en/index.aspx>), and Future Search (<http://www.futuresearch.net/>). Every organization will need to find a methodology that fits its own needs and culture.
3. The emerging shared vision must be consistent with the organization's core purpose and values. Likewise, it must in some way reflect the individual visions upon which it was built. This is the crucial point of creating harmony and commitment.
4. Once a shared vision is developed, it is important to set success indicators or benchmarks that mark progress toward realizing the vision. Such intermediate goals will alleviate the difficulty some experience in holding the vision in face of current reality.
5. A vision is akin to a living organism: it requires sustenance. Organizations need to continually reflect on it, test it, and reshape it. The vision will die without on-going dialogue.
6. Organizations need to view themselves as a community where people are bound to the organization by the promise of what they can contribute, not by what they can get.

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7. Leaders within the organization should begin to view themselves along the lines of the servant leader, as described by Robert Greenleaf in *Servant Leadership*. A servant leader is one who emphasizes service to others, a holistic approach to work, creating a sense of community, and shared decision-making.
8. Everyone in the organization will need to develop patience, perspective, and perseverance as you embark on this journey. Developing shared vision is a change process, and like any change process, it will be harder to manage initially than it will be further in to the process.

Creating shared vision will not happen overnight nor will it be easy, but you will reap the rewards for years to come. Inspired and energized people working in concert with each other, achieving feats never before imagined is a gift worth waiting for. The essence of creating shared vision is captured in the following quote:

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

In my next article, I will focus on the fourth discipline of learning organizations, team learning.

Resources:

“Developing Shared Vision and Values,” Anne Davidson in *The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook*, Roger Schwarz, Anne Davidson, Peg Carlson, and Sue McKinney, 2005.

The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization, Peter M. Senge, 1990.

The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Peter M. Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Ross, and Bryan J. Smith, 1994.

Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness, Robert K. Greenleaf, 1977.

Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) (<http://www.solonline.org/>).

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