



3 WAYS TO KEEP YOUR VISION ALIVE



Abstract

Share your Vision to keep it alive and relevant. The Strategic Narrative cannot be developed fully in insulation. Take advantage of the process to gain engagement.

3 Ways to Keep your Vision Alive

Against common belief and perception, studies by McKinsey's, Harvard Business Review and others state again and again that there is no consistent, detailed understanding of the current strategy throughout organizations. Even senior leaders reporting directly into the Visionary Executive fail to spell out some key strategic goals or to provide a correct strategic narrative to explain the Vision.

As if this was not enough of a concern, many organizations adopt a linear approach to Strategic Planning, like nothing is going to change over the next 3 to 5 years.

Then, the combination of complexity of the plans with burnout from too many tentative Plans that did not succeed (but requested intense efforts to be spent) and the inconsistent communication and support to the execution teams complete the perfect storm of why strategy execution often fails.

Keeping the Strategic Vision alive and well throughout the execution cycle requires some deliberate effort, which can be summarized as:

1. **Build the Vision in Layers**
2. **Storyboard including Alternative Futures**
3. **Share the narrative; let it go.**

Anatomy of a Strategic Vision

A simple definition of what is a Strategic Vision can be the description of an achievable, compelling future. An excellent book on the topic is "Visionary Leadership" by Burt Nanus, who describes the attributes of a vision as a "**realistic, credible, attractive future**", which brings the following benefits to the organization:

- Attracts commitment and energizes people with a shared goal;
- Creates meaning in lives of employees, who can relate to its momentum forward;
- Establishes a standard and culture of striving for excellence;
- Bridges the present to the future, making it achievable.

A best practice in creating a Strategic Vision is to avoid creating something that is not immediately digestible by the employees, leaders, partners and customers of a business. A Vision is a projected future, often described using images or metaphors, stating achievements which are not always feasible by the time they are stated.

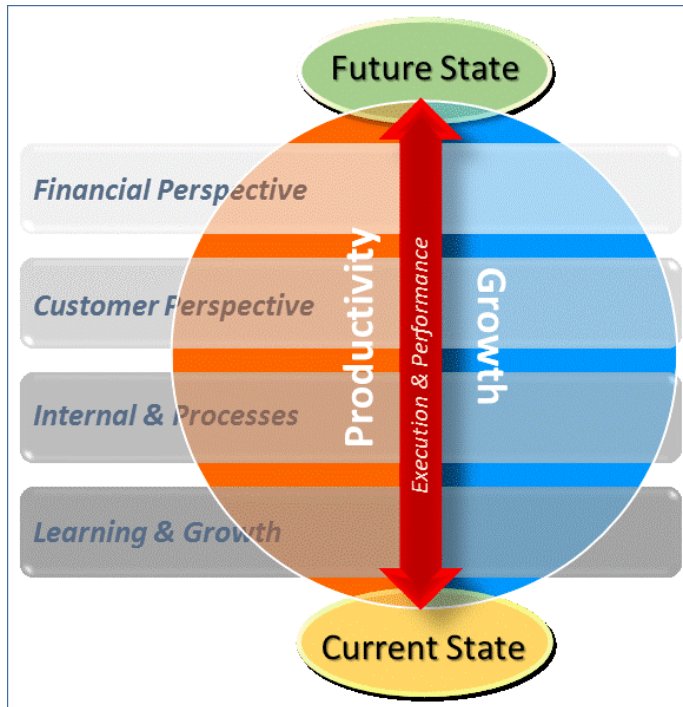
What matters is not the level of details of the future state, but to engage everybody in figuring out the Intent of the Vision. The formulation should reflect the current or desirable culture of the organization: bold, aggressive, confident, etc. Remember the quote by Lee Iacocca when he was Chairman of Chrysler: "Our goal is to be the best. What else is there? If you can find a better car, buy it!" The combination of arrogance and confidence can raise an eyebrow, but as an employee or leader in such organization, it would certainly get your attention!

Along with the Vision Statement is a description of this future, to make it real, practical and almost reachable now. Here again, the objective is not to detail the future state in 250 pages, but to provide an illustration that would capture the imagination and the will of the organization.

3 Ways to Keep your Vision Alive

Path 1: Building in layers

Concentric layers of details and understanding make it easier to build complex concepts that work together. The bottom of the onion shape structure is the Point of Origin, where we are Day Zero of the



Strategic Execution. The top of the shape is the creation of the Future Value, which can be described in Shareholder Value, Earnings, Profit and other indicators. It is a long term view, a balance between the conservative “Last year’s performance plus 5%”, and the aggressive “create leadership in new market”. The layers in between are the stages of strategic definition, using the Balanced Scorecard perspectives inspired from Kaplan & Norton, as seen in the chart on left.

The journey from the Point of Origin to the Future State is comprised of an organic driver (the Operational Excellence or Productivity) and an external driver (Growth / Value Realization).

Altogether, each layer can be defined using the organic and external drivers, describing both what the Vision means in terms of tangible achievement and which unit of measurement will allow reporting on progress and ultimately, success.

Path 2: Storyboarding Alternative Futures

A great way to build a strategic narrative is to storyboard the roadmap. There is a Point of Origin from where to start, issues and expectations stated in the Baseline, and an emerging Vision as a Point of Arrival. Crafting the story of how to get to the finish line from today, including milestones and potential twists and roadblocks is a powerful tool. Some of the details along the way will challenge the early Vision in unexpected ways, growing the cohesive fabric of the Vision.

Milestones are more than interim checkpoints: they are the true building blocks of the Future State. One depend on the previous one to be completed with specific attributes or capabilities. Looking at them from the end goal breaks down the journey in incremental blocks. If this company from Arizona aims at breaking into European market with a tailored product, the reverse path will show the Innovation milestone where new features are being created, product development where packaging takes place, product deployment and marketing, then operating performance, along the multiple other tracks required.

Storyboarding is the script that supports the future Strategic Plan.

3 Ways to Keep your Vision Alive

The future holds uncertainty, and it would be presumptuous to assume that no wrench will land into the beautiful plan over the course of multiple years. But the flip side of this softness is that there might be multiple paths to the Vision. Once an initial story has been built, the framework is in place to consider alternate future states, each adding a unique attribute to the story.

Back to the earlier example, breaking into the European market might also be done through the acquisition of a local, complementary business; through a partnership with a distributor well establish there; by developing a completely new product line. Possibilities are infinite.

A highly productive approach comprises the definition of a base-storyboard, the most likely desirable scenario. Throwing a severe market driven impact, a competitive force upset, and technology breakthrough for instance can lead to creating options to the main plan. The strategic roadmap options are not only “Plan-B ready” solutions, but they might force the thinking on potential impacts to the Plan, eventually leading to a better, more dependable solution.

Using Round Table and Workshop modalities to spin the story, and allocating a few roles to try to bring contradiction and loaded “as if” scenarios, often brings fresh creativity into the story line. The new ideas eventually might trickle to the main Vision as improvement or incremental value. The main benefit however might very well be the implicit buy-in that the process creates.

After a workshop on storyboarding the strategic journey, congruence and engagement will be at their highest.

Path 3: Sharing the Narrative - Let It Go

Once the Vision has been detailed in a structured way, it will face its first maturity challenge: being shared an expanded further within the organization.

Even the most detailed original Vision can only suffice for Governance purposes. When the description of the Future State reach the departments, Business Units, Teams and Individuals, their translation will be at their own operating level. Since it would be impossible to create a vision with such level of details, several tools can be used to develop the narrative further.

The first tool is a communication and dissemination tool: the Round Table. As a Vision cannot be executed without multiple functions and skills are involved, bringing them to the table to discuss how best execute the Vision is a successful recipe to simultaneously share the word and obtain engagement. The resulting narrative will blend the original Vision with the operational parameters and constraints, possibly an expansion of the original ideas in a novel way.

Another tool can be a Force Field Analysis based work session, where participants share the Vision and work on Helping and Hindering factors to anchor the Vision into the fabric of the Enterprise. Here again, the discussions and ideas generated are in effect the congruence at work, since ideas generated are in support of the Vision. This tool can be leveraged greatly in distributing work sessions deeper within the organization, each building on top of the previous level.

The third best practice is simply to let the process work by itself, while providing guidance and little nudges when necessary to stay focused. Expanding the narrative allows people to better visualize and

3 Ways to Keep your Vision Alive

understand the strategic intent. By adding their own layer of narrative, they also operate a seamless translation in the language and parameters of their work environment. In return, they can share this with the next level down into the organizational layers, where the same process will repeat. There is no need to reconcile all the narratives, but some level of exchange between layers is both inevitable and desirable.

Keeping control but gaining density through the expansion of the narratives can be a tough exercise. Letting your Vision, carefully crafted and painfully worded to reflect your vision forward be changed and tweaked by people who were not there at the start can be horrifying and frustrating.

But letting the Vision go, take its own flight is eventually the most rewarding process. Many contributors will add their interpretation, comments and their own spin to the original vision. This enriches the narrative, and offers a great opportunity to see how people understand and interpret the Vision, allowing slight corrections or add-ons to make sure that the translation does not distort the message. There is no better feedback loop than such a process, providing valuable pointers on how to communicate the vision in the same time it rallies people behind the strategic banner.

Functions, geographies, organizational entities will all strive to add their own touch or to make sure they can succeed with the current Vision. This process of positive appropriation would be a huge burden if executed through a top-down mandatory readout or feedback session. By giving the space to interpret, the mandate turns into an opportunity to share and build something in common.

Letting the Vision narrative go its own course is the best way to ensure it will come back stronger and with a strong, genuine support from the organization.