

Creating a Compelling Vision

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Are your people, and those with whom you deal, clear about what your organisation is endeavouring to achieve? Colin Coulson-Thomas author of a new guide to competing and winning reveals what leaders of the most successful companies do differently when setting about the strategically important task of visioning.

A stretching, distinctive and compelling vision that paints a picture of a future, desired and attainable state of affairs can engage and motivate. A clear vision is of value internally and externally. Internally it motivates people to achieve and focus their efforts, while externally the vision should differentiate a company from its competitors.

The board is primarily responsible for formulating and agreeing a company's strategic vision and ensuring its implementation. In some companies particular individuals have been given the specific task of ensuring that a corporate vision remains current and vital. These keepers of the vision attract various job titles. At USA.net someone known as the Chief Visionary undertakes the role.

A vision should capture the essence of what a company is all about. At the start of the new millennium Steve Ballmer became CEO of Microsoft. His predecessor Bill Gates a co-founder of the company assumed the title of chairman and chief software architect. The latter role allows Gates to return to his roots and the activities he most enjoys. It also reflects the importance of a strategic vision in the development of new technologies.

Some visions motivate more than others. Staff at the BBC became much more engaged when the public broadcaster's vision was changed from 'to be the best managed organisation in the public sector' and became 'to be the world's most creative organisation'. A vision and a mission statement should balance the needs of both individuals and the organisation along the lines of Amazon's 'Work Hard, Have Fun, Make History'.

Internally and externally, the common and shared element of a vision should be a unifying factor. It should hold a diverse, complex and network form of organisation together and provide its people with a sense of common purpose. Yet while a vision can inspire, it can also result in disillusionment and distrust if it is incomplete or incapable of achievement, and there is a gap between aspiration and attainment.

So what do the winners do differently in relation to visioning? To answer these questions a research programme led by the author has examined the corporate experience of over 2,000 companies. The results are summarized in: 'Transforming the Company, Manage Change, Compete and Win'*

The corporate visions of losers are often little more than words on paper. Most are instantly forgettable. A bland statement produced during an off-site 'planning day' is printed on a card and distributed to staff. Although it may make occasional appearances in corporate brochures it is rarely referred to. Whatever 'visioning exercise' was undertaken is viewed as a one-off event. The outputs may linger on in unchanged form long after they have ceased to reflect what is possible, current or desirable.

Loser companies often lack a distinctive or compelling reason for existing. They are one of a kind or breed. They are not noticeably special or unique. People find it difficult to justify why they should join it, work with it, use its services or invest in it. Perhaps the initial underlying business concept lacked originality. Maybe it simply mirrored what competitors were already doing.

The wider world tends not to care when losers falter. External parties may have little interest in keeping such an enterprise alive. The corporate herd continues as individual stragglers fall by the wayside. Even failure may go largely unnoticed. While employees lose their jobs customers may be able to obtain very similar products and services from other suppliers.

Many of the key players within loser companies are uncertain and insecure. They lack self-confidence and have little self-esteem. Other people have little interest or faith in them. They themselves are not really sure what they are about. In difficult circumstances they may not have sufficient inner conviction or do enough to keep the enterprise alive. They throw in the towel and are relieved when shot of onerous responsibilities.

Losers can appear dull, resigned and subdued. They drift. They seem to lack drive, personality, heart and soul. Senior managers in corporate losers become preoccupied with 'fitting in', 'hanging onto customers', 'papering over cracks' and surviving. After a time they lose sight of corporate objectives and lose touch with past dreams and their inner selves.

In contrast, winners are confident, vibrant and driven. They fizz and are clear about what they are seeking to achieve. They are much more likely to have articulated a unique rationale. They endeavour to root their visions in real customer requirements. When it is described, people react. They usually understand it and they appreciate what is special about it.

Managers in winning companies feel important and wanted. They ensure that employees and business partners know what they have to do to bring a vision about. The vision lives and motivates because while it may be challenging it is also regarded as relevant and exciting. People are proud to be associated with it.

Winners stand out. They strive to be different. From the moment she first arrived in New York Madonna endeavoured to meet the people who mattered. She registered and was remembered. Her single-minded determination to build her personal brand has made her

a global icon. Richard Branson's ballooning exploits have helped to keep his name in front of the public and entrench his reputation as a business leader who is different from the traditional 'suit'.

Winning businesses connect. They also contribute. Their people try to make them special and unique. Customers may find it difficult to obtain similar goods and services elsewhere. They would certainly notice and be inconvenienced if the enterprise failed. Like investors they want it to do well.

When a winner stumbles other people catch their breath. They are concerned. Because it's role and contribution is important to them a variety of 'interested parties' including customers, suppliers and business partners might be willing to provide temporary support during difficult times. Because business fundamentals and the critical success factors for competitiveness are in place investors may be willing to provide additional funding to allow a winning company to ride out an occasional storm.

Winners never rest on their laurels or become complacent. Their people are restless. They search, test, learn and apply. Directors of winning companies are much more likely to regularly review their vision, purpose, key corporate goals and strategies during board meetings to ensure they are still current and relevant. If they are found wanting people throughout the organisation make whatever changes are necessary to reflect altered conditions and evolving requirements.

They are also much more confident, and less likely to 'cut and run' in crisis situations. Obstacles, difficulties and the unknown invariably confront those who venture ahead of the pack. People in winning companies derive self-worth and inner strength from the knowledge that their organisation is valued and needed. Senior managers do not need to play games or pretend the know things. They trust their instincts and are not afraid to be themselves.

Eternal parties who deal with winners know where they stand with them. While they may be flexible and prepared to bend so far in the search for accommodation they are unwilling to compromise cherished principles and core values. They also avoid promising more than they can deliver.

Winners are determined. Like a predator they play to their strengths and can also be patient when waiting for the right moment to go after an opportunity. They acknowledge and confront challenges. In difficult times they are open and honest with those whose support they seek. They tell it as it is and share rather than conceal reality as they understand it. As a consequence, they are more likely to receive help when they ask for it.