

SHARED VISION IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Shared vision is a widely practiced theory among modern organizations. The purpose of this literature review is to present different viewpoints regarding shared vision. Specifically, this paper will discuss many different definitions, theories, components of creating, and benefits of creating shared vision in organizations.

Definitions

The main idea of shared vision expressed throughout the literature is that it is the common dream or goal of individuals in an organization which inspires working to achieve the vision. Some examples include President Kennedy's vision to land a man on the moon within the decade of the 60's, Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, and Apple Computer's vision of creating an easy to use, fun computer (Senge 1990). However, many differing opinions exist on the nuances of the definition of shared vision.

Senge (1990) describes shared vision as shared pictures of the future that foster genuine commitment and enrollment, rather than compliance to organizational goals and "a force in people's hearts" that provides the focus and energy for learning (p. 206). He sees vision as the foundation for trust and commitment in the organization. The vision of the company is the driving force for improvement in Senge's model.

Peter Block (as cited in Meeker, 1995) describes shared vision as a lofty expression of deep desires that engages the spirit and provides focus for the organization. Robert Addleman (1994 a), former board chairman of Poudre Valley Hospital, Fort Collins, CO, describes visioning as a "creative, imaginative process that challenges us to create our own future, to dream about future possibilities, to envision a more perfect world" (p. 4). He believes that effective vision is "compelling, inspiring, imaginative, exhilarating, galvanizing, empowering" and it "poses a future ideal condition that may never be fully realized, but nevertheless encourages us to strive for it" (p. 4).

Jack Stack, CEO of the successful Springfield Remanufacturing Corporation, describes vision as the positive goals that management gives personnel to keep the innate anger in employees directed towards the outside enemy (Denton & Wisdom, 1989). He concludes that vision is the way that management gets people and resources pulling in the same direction.

Wilkins (1989) describes vision as a common definition of company purpose and values. He believes that the areas of the general concept of the business, sense of uniqueness or identity, philosophy about employee relationships, and an orientation to external stakeholders can be addressed by shared vision.

Whitney (1994) describes motivating visions as representative of “specific aspirations in which members deeply believe” that “come from the heart” (p. 63). Robbins and Duncan (as cited by Niehoff, Enz, & Grover, 1990) define organizational vision as “the shared aspired future state for the organization which identifies the organization’s values, sets priorities for goals and objectives, and sets the guidelines or road map by which these goals and objectives will be pursued” (p. 339).

Weisbord (1987) calls his version of shared vision “future search.” This future search builds excitement, as well as a sense of common values and purpose.

Theories of Shared Vision

Several different theories explain the various definitions of shared vision. Major contributors in the literature are Peter Senge, Peter Block, Alan Wilkins, Frankels, and Martin Weisbord.

Peter Senge. Peter Senge is arguably the most significant contributor to the idea of shared vision. In fact, much of shared vision literature is circular because Senge’s ideas are used so often in industry.

Senge (1990) says that defensive visions such as wanting to beat a competitor are extrinsic and often transitory. Once the goal is accomplished, the shared vision no longer exists. According to Senge, intrinsic motivators coinciding with personal vision of the individuals create the most long lasting and effective shared vision. These intrinsic motivators uplift individual aspirations and “create the spark that lifts organizations out of the ordinary drab existence” (p. 208). The two sources of motivational energy are the fear that underlies negative visions, and the aspiration that drives positive visions. Fear is short term and aspiration is enduring; therefore, a shared vision inducing aspiration is desired.

Senge (1990) is convinced that the gap between vision and reality causes the creative tension which drives the organization to narrow that gap by taking steps toward achieving the vision. The leader of the organization is primarily responsible for maintaining the creative tension throughout the organization.

Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross and Smith (1994) cite that five stages of creating shared vision exist on a continuum that progresses from little to much active involvement necessary on the part of the individual to formulate the vision:

- 1) Telling, where the boss tells the individuals what the vision is and demands that they follow it;

- 2) Selling, where “the ‘boss’ knows what the vision should be, but he needs the organization to ‘buy in’ before proceeding”;
- 3) Testing, where “the ‘boss’ has an idea about what the vision should be, or several ideas, and wants to know the organization’s reactions before proceeding”;
- 4) Consulting, where “the ‘boss’ is putting together a vision, and wants creative input from the organization before proceeding”;
- 5) Co-creating, where “the ‘boss’ and ‘members’ of the organization, through a collaborative process, build a shared vision together” (p. 314).

Telling requires the least amount of individual involvement and co-creating demands the most. Senge et al. assert that as organizations mature into the more involved end of this continuum, individuals in the organization become more empowered. The stage necessary for the learning organization is co-creating, because this process give individuals ownership and input into the company’s goals.

When genuine shared vision occurs, people excel and learn because they want to, not because they are forced. This results in better individuals, as well as a more productive, successful, and flexible organization. A sign of shared vision at work occurs when the language used changes from “their” to “our” company (Senge, 1990).

Peter Block. Paralleling Peter Senge, Peter Block (as cited by Meeker, 1995), author of Empowered Manager, declares that individual vision must be developed before shared vision, and the creation of vision is not leader driven. Block believes that vision should be a lofty expression of deep desires that engages the spirit while providing a focus for the organization. It should not be practical, in fact it should be more along the lines of “motherhood and apple pie.”

If articulated, vision creates accountability, because individuals internalize responsibility for moving towards the vision. The focus of the vision should be the impact on customers and the people working within the organization. Block believes that the business aspects will come along if the focus is on individuals and customers.

Alan Wilkins. Alan Wilkins (1989) supports a viewpoint similar to Senge and Block, with the exception that he believes that creation of vision should be leader driven as opposed to individual driven. He emphasizes that creation of the vision is leader driven with the input of individuals.

Wilkins (1989) advocates shared vision as a common definition of company purpose and values that inspire, integrate, and focus the individuals in the organization. The vision can address the general concept of the business, a sense of uniqueness or identity, philosophy about employee relationships, and an orientation to external stakeholders, but it must not focus on profit alone. He refers to Terence Deal and Allen Kennedy’s finding that the “most successful firms mentioned values other than profit, while the less successful focused almost entirely on profitability” (p. 73, as cited by Wilkins, 1989) to support his statement, as well as Pearce and David’s finding that top firms state human

resource philosophies, company self-concept, and desired public image in addition to profitability goals within the shared vision.

Wilkins (1989) declares that needs, goals and emotions of employees should play crucial roles in the shaping of vision. He suggests that vision depicts the good of the whole then combines with faith to direct the thoughts and ideas of employees in ways that motivate and coordinate their work.

Wilkins attests that visions can be quite idealistic yet still energize people. Often the vision reflects an idea that can only be approached and never attained because of its idealistic nature. Wilkins believes that changes occur because of changed practices attributed to the process of creating the shared vision as opposed to the outward symbols of changed rhetoric.

Frankels. Frankels (as cited by Meeker, 1995), author of Man's Search For Meaning, also believes that shared vision should be leader initiated. He expounds that vision should also be shared, supportive, and comprehensive. By comprehensive, he means that the vision must have reach and be inspiring to the individuals within the organization.

Marvin Weisbord. Marvin Weisbord (1987) has a slightly different slant on the idea of shared vision. He calls his form of shared vision "future search," referring to the idea that the organization searches for the ideal future. He bases future search on three assumptions:

- 1) Change is so rapid that we need more, not less, face-to-face discussion to make intelligent strategic decisions,
- 2) Successful strategies...come from envisioning preferred futures, and
- 3) People will commit to plans they have helped to develop (p. 285).

Weisbord and Janoff (1995) use the future search design for any type of organization, including companies and communities. The three generic uses for future search are:

- 1) To "lead stakeholders to create a shared future vision for their organization or community";
- 2) To "enable all stakeholders to discover shared intentions and take responsibility for their own plans"; and
- 3) To "help people implement a shared vision that already exists" (pp. 3-4).

For complete detail on designing a future search conference, see Weisbord and Janoff's Future Search.

Components of Creating Shared Vision

The process of creating shared vision is thought by some to be as important as the vision itself. The components of creating shared vision that are considered here are the decision of who is responsible for creating shared vision, the role of personal vision, the history and current reality of the organization, leadership, communication and dialogue, avoiding negative vision, integrating customer perspectives, and keeping the vision fluid.

Who is responsible for creating the vision? Determining who is responsible for creating the vision is important to the process that will be embarked upon for developing shared vision. If the leader creates the vision, developing personal vision is not very important. However, if individuals co-create a shared vision, then some personal vision prework should be done.

Thomas Peters and Nancy Austin (as cited by Wilkins, 1989) say that the creation of vision starts with a single individual doing soul searching and then spreading the idea to the individuals in the organization. Alan Wilkins (1989) believes that personal soul searching of the leader combined with listening to the individual visions of organizational members should be melded by the leader into a shared vision for the organization. Although Senge et al. (1994) believe that some sense of vision can be created through a leader telling, selling, testing, or consulting his or her own personal vision to the group, he asserts that the best way to create shared vision is through co-creating, where all individuals, including the leader of the group, are equal partners in creating the vision. Senge pronounces that this full participation in setting direction and priorities is essential to create the learning organization's competitive advantage.

Senge (1990) believes that the first step in creating shared vision is to give up the idea that visions are announced at the top and passed down. Sometimes this vision is not even shared; orders are given and the whole picture is never shown. When managers go off to write the vision and bring it back to announce to the troops, vision often becomes a one shot thing never to be evaluated again, it does not build on personal vision, and it sees vision as the solution to a problem instead of a long term set of guiding principles. Senge believes that the origin of vision is not as important as the sharing process.

Role of personal vision. The role of personal vision in shared vision ranges from vital to nonexistent, depending on the theory involved. If it is decided that personal vision is important to the organization, it is imperative to develop it through exercises that enlighten individuals on personal values and goals.

Senge (1990) believes that the most powerful shared vision is created from individual personal visions melded into the organizational vision. He likens the role of personal vision to shared vision with the hologram metaphor. A hologram is a three-dimensional image created by interacting light sources. No matter how small a hologram is divided, the smaller part continues to maintain a complete image of the whole. Similarly, when true shared vision is achieved, each person sees "an individual picture of the organization at its best" (p. 8). Each individual vision is different, but by achieving a picture of the organization the individual assumes responsibility for the whole instead of just one piece (Senge, 1994). Encouraging personal vision is important for shared vision because "people's capacity for caring is personal" (p.9). Therefore the best shared vision ideas reflect the personal visions of the individuals within the organization. If not connected to personal vision, shared vision is unwilling compliance, not wholehearted commitment.

Ken Whitney (1994) affirms that "at the personal level, the clearer the picture of what we want to become, the more compelling the vision" (p. 63). He believes that when the

individual personal vision is congruent to the shared vision of the organization, the individual is motivated to work towards both. Richard Ligus (1994) agrees, stating that employees with personal objectives tied to the shared vision have a personal stake in achieving the vision and are motivated to achieve both the personal and shared vision.

In contrast, Alan Wilkins (1989) espouses that vision should be leader driven, with the leader taking into account the opinions of the individual members of the organization. The role that personal vision plays in his model is the leader finding his or her own vision to tell or sell to the organization.

Ponder organizational history. Examining the collective past from the prospective of self, company, and society gets everybody participating and creates a bond between the individuals as they remember past successes (Weisbord, 1987). It also gives a sense of where the organization has been so that thinking about the future is easier. Reminding groups of past successes is a good “pat on the back” that can pick up the mood if the group is struggling when thinking about all the progress that is still left to be made (Meeker, 1995).

Examine the present reality. By examining the current situation in an organization, the group has a better sense of where to go next (Weisbord, 1987). This also creates the baseline for the creative tension that motivates individuals to improve (Senge et al., 1994).

Leadership. Visionary leaders are a vital link in creating shared vision in organizations. Successful leaders are able to communicate vision, have a strong sense of personal vision, listen and ask others, inspire confidence, and demonstrate the vision with their actions.

Communication is an important aspect of successful visionary leadership. Posner, Kouzes, and Schmidt (as cited by Niehoff et al., 1990) found that a leader who effectively communicates the shared vision for the organization has more satisfied subordinates.

Senge (1990) relates that the art of visionary leadership involves two components: the leader must develop a strong sense of personal vision; and then communicate the vision in a way that others are encouraged to share the vision or add to it. Senge (1994) adds that “leaders must be willing to share their own visions continually, rather than being the official representative of the corporate vision,” while continually evaluating if the vision is worthy of commitment from individuals.

Wilkins (1989) says that successful leaders must ask and listen as a part of creating shared vision. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus (as cited by Wilkins, 1989) studied successful Chief Operations Officers and found that speaking was not a prerequisite for creating shared vision, but listening was. Wilkins (1989) remarks that a successful leader will do some soul-searching to find personal vision but will also be grounded in reality, values, and needs of the followers of the vision. He says that a good leader melds the elements heard from listening to individuals into a shared vision, not that the shared

vision is created solely by the leader's own thoughts. Selznick (as cited by Wilkins, 1989) argues that the primary role for a visionary leader is to "promote and protect values" (p. 73).

In addition to listening, Wilkins (1989) emphasizes that visionary leaders must inspire confidence, demonstrate the vision through actions before announcing it, and exercise power in support of the vision, even if it means reprimanding individuals not supporting the shared vision.

Modeling the vision is extremely important as incongruence between words and action weaken or destroy the power of the vision (Senge et al., 1994). Niehoff et al. (1990) believes that "as top management shares and models the vision, employees begin to understand the important organizational values, as well as the efforts necessary to move the organization toward the vision" (p.341). This consistency between words and action combined with steps toward achieving the vision causes employees to internalize the values and become more committed to the vision.

Burt Nanus (as cited by Addleman, 1994 a), author of Visionary Leadership, provides a four step process for a leader to create shared vision within an organization: "a) Identify categories of future development, b) List changes for each category, c) Assign a probability to each change, and d) Write scenarios that capture the range of possible futures, then define a vision statement to encompass all eventualities" (pp. 25-26).

Communication and dialogue. Communication is vital in creating and maintaining shared vision. According to Wilkins (1989), communication is the core of the shared vision creation process. Wilkins states that listening is the essential component to gaining the viewpoints of individuals in the organization that need to be melded together by the leader to create shared vision.

An important component of communication is dialogue. Senge (1990) describes dialogue as communication where individuals express and listen to others' dreams. He affirms this as an important step in creating shared vision, because the ideas developed in dialogue reflect the personal visions necessary to create shared vision. This dialogue process often takes a long time, because one dream builds on another and touches off another and so on. The best way to facilitate dialogue is to provide ample opportunities for individuals to interact and communicate in an atmosphere of openness and willingness that entertains diversity. The number of conversations that take place correlates positively with the number of ideas created that may need to be included in the shared vision. Keeping options open for as long as possible before narrowing the choices allows for the most diversity of thought.

Selling versus enrolling. For the most powerful shared vision, enrollment and commitment are necessary (Senge, 1990). Selling often leads to unwilling compliance rather than true commitment. The difference is that commitment indicates dedication through congruent personal and shared vision, while compliance denotes going along for the sake of the team or doing it just because an authority says it is the right thing to do.

The motivator is extrinsic in compliance and intrinsic in commitment. When committed to the goal, the individual has energy and passion for it and makes the rules rather than playing by them. Compliance leads to simply playing by the rules, because the passion and energy to achieve the goal is nonexistent. According to Senge, three guidelines for enrollment and commitment exist: (a) be enrolled yourself; (b) be honest; (c) let the other person choose to accept the goal or not, because pushing causes resentment.

Avoid negative visions. Senge (1990) argues that creating visions based on what we want to avoid is limiting, because the energy that could build something new is invested in avoiding. Negative visions give a message of powerlessness, because people learn to only pull together when a threat is introduced, and progress is short-term, because the vision lasts only as long as the threat exists.

Integrate customer perspective into vision. Robert Meeker (1995) of Texas Instruments is convinced that before embarking on the process of creating shared vision, team members must get customer perspectives. He suggests that teams identify and assign customers to members, then ask the customers questions such as: “what is important for you in the future?” and “what do you want from our organization to help you achieve that future?” Meeker believes that if the vision is not in concert with customer wishes, it is probably going in the wrong direction.

Keep the vision fluid by revisiting often. Senge et al. (1994) say that the vision must be kept fluid by continually revisiting it, because “visions are always evolving. As we work toward our vision, we learn more about ourselves and other possibilities become clearer” (p. 305). Revisiting vision also helps maintain the freshness and excitement promulgated by the original development (Senge, 1994). Whitney (1994) agrees by asserting that periodic reflection and discussion of the vision between individuals in the organization keeps them motivated and focused.

Benefits of Creating Shared Vision

This review discovered environment allowing risk and experimentation, commitment, job satisfaction, lower cost, proactive environment, organizational direction and stability, inspiration, motivation, hope, and focus as benefits of creating shared vision.

Promotes courage, risk taking and experimentation. Senge (1990) asserts that creating shared vision compels courage and causes individuals to take risks to achieve the vision. It also promotes risk taking and experimentation in an effort to achieve the vision. These factors foster an environment allowing maximum creativity which is necessary to create new products and be on the cutting edge of the respective industry.

Commitment and job satisfaction. Commitment to organizational goals is important because committed employees will strive to gain these goals. According to Senge (1990), shared vision addresses long term commitment by helping to overcome shortsightedness that occurs when the overall picture of a goal does not exist. Senge likens shared vision principles to Japanese theories of organization building: like growing

a tree or parenting a child, the long term picture strongly influences the short term action, and commitment is necessary to strive for the long term picture.

Niehoff et al. (1990) found that a leader's ability to inspire shared vision correlates with commitment and job satisfaction of subordinates. Robert Meeker (1995) adds that by allowing employees to create the vision for the organization themselves, they achieve a sense of commitment and ownership of the vision, as well as a promise of the future.

Lower cost. According to Pelley (1993), creating a shared vision saves money, because less communication is necessary due to everyone being on the same page with the same overarching vision of the ideal organization. With shared vision, individuals are trusted to do the right thing without always reporting every detail to management or others concerned. This allows individuals to do their jobs with less hassle, "and less hassle means less waste of time and money" (Pelley, p. 63).

Proactive environment. According to Addleman (1994 b), creating shared vision allows a proactive rather than reactive environment, which allows energy to be spent on searching for opportunities rather than wasting energy "circling the wagons" (p. 26). This helps to remove the "day-to-day gridlock that prevents an institution from moving forward" (p. 26). Senge (1990) adds that reactive environments are wasteful of energy by trying to avoid problems rather than create solutions, deliver a message of powerlessness because individuals only pull together in the face of adversity, and short term due to the ephemeral fear underlying reactive environments.

Organizational stability. According to Addleman (1994 b), creating a shared picture of the future gives an organizational sense of stability because it helps everyone understand how the individual contributions fit into the big picture of the organization and "conditions the organization to withstand adversity and rapid change" (p. 26). In support of this idea, Niehoff et al. (1990) found that a leader's ability to inspire shared vision correlates negatively with role ambiguity in subordinates.

Organizational direction. Weisbord (1987, p.281) believes that his "future search" method, which is similar to shared vision, gives an organization direction for the future. He says that this approach is an alternative to the "rain dance" effect that most corporate planners achieve; traditional planning methods made the members feel better, but did little for actual action. Senge (1994) declares that vision combined with a current picture of reality generates creative tension that closes the gap between reality and vision. This creative tension in turn directs the organization.

Inspiration, motivation, and hope. Wilkins (1989) expresses that the benefits of creating vision are inspiration as people feel uplifted by the common purpose of the shared vision and motivation of employees to work toward the good of the whole. Senge (1994) states that shared vision and an accurate picture of reality combine to create intrinsic tension that motivates moving toward the vision.

Addleman asserts that shared vision also creates hope which “sustains the human spirit in times of uncertainty and adversity” (1994 b, p. 4). This hope is to make an impression on society that will last beyond our years, and manifests itself through inspiration and motivation toward the vision.

Integration and focus. Wilkins (1989) describes integration as a benefit of shared vision, because previously disjointed groups discover commonalities and the need to cooperate as the shared vision becomes evident. Shared vision also promotes a sense of focus that keeps the organization from drifting into wasteful activities. Senge (1990) adds that shared vision provides the focus for learning.

Discussion

Top Industry Leaders’ Opinions About Shared Vision

While shared vision in organizations looks good in theory, the reality is that top management must be proponents of it before they advocate using it in their own companies. This section reveals the opinions of shared vision of several top industry leaders. This review found the opinions to be almost equally balanced between advocating and dismissing the idea of shared vision.

The advocates of shared vision include Gordon Shaw, Jean Yves Gueguen, Robert Addleman, and Marc Porat. Gordon Shaw from 3M describes mission as defining the “scope of what you do, while the vision should be a vibrant and compelling image of the organization’s future purpose” (Simpson, 1994, p. 9). He quotes University of Michigan Professor C. K. Prahalad; “Without vision you tend to be a ‘continue-the-march’ company that manages not to lose rather than to win” (p. 9). Jean Yves Gueguen from American Express agreed that vision and mission are important in an organization, and added that a good vision must relate to the needs of the customer. Similarly, Addleman (1994 b) believes that shared vision “relates to the organization’s ultimate destination” and is “empowering and passionate” (p. 15). Marc Porat, president and chief executive of General Magic, Inc., believes that a shared vision “that is so powerful that once a person joins the family, they barely have to be reminded of what to do” is vital for an organization’s success (Rebello, 1993).

In contrast, Brian Marsh from Shell states that “often creating a vision becomes an excuse for not actually running the business” (Simpson, 1994, p. 10). Pete Schavoir from IBM agrees with Marsh describing vision and mission as having little worth, because they can not adequately describe a complex company like IBM. He favors working on strategic issues rather than vision. William Gates, founder of Microsoft Corporation, also “dismisses vision as ‘trivial’” while Louis Gerstner, Jr., chairman of IBM, says that “the last thing IBM needs right now is a vision” (Addleman, 1994 b, p. 15).

Theoretical Visions

Senge, Wilkins, Weisbord, Block, and Frankels believe that shared vision is fundamental in creating the foundation for empowered organizations.

Senge (1990) states that vision, mission and core values must be created as a set of governing ideas. The vision answers “what?”, mission answers “why?” and core values answer “how?” Together these governing ideas give a picture of what the organization believes.

The Future of Shared Vision

Although some corporate personalities believe that no value exists in creating shared vision, the trend in the literature indicates that this process will become more widespread in organizations as the paradigm shift to learning organizations continues. According to Senge (1990), shared vision is one of the five component technologies that must be developed to become a learning organization. Systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning should be developed in concert with each other to achieve the maximum potential of the learning organization.

While this review uncovered many theories and opinions on shared vision, little empirical research has been done to support it. Further empirical research would be interesting and would perhaps sway the dissenters in the corporate world. However, observationally the idea of shared vision appears to work. Based on this review, it seems that it would be advantageous for organizations with top management support for shared vision to create it, because the potential long term benefits far outweigh the short term start up time necessary to begin the process.

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