

Eight Steps to a Vision of Greatness

By Inc. Magazine

STEP 1

PICK YOUR TOPIC

It's important to start by being clear about what you're working on. Is it a vision for your organization overall? Or just for a particular piece? For today's event? Or your retirement? We do visions for all of the above and everything in between.

STEP 2

PICK YOUR TIME FRAME

How far out should you look? There's no right answer, but as a general principle, visioning works best if you go far out enough to get beyond present-day problems but not so far out that you have no sense at all of actually getting there. We have a long-term organizational vision that's set in 2020. Most organizational visions will probably be set somewhere from three to five years out—but five is a typical place to start.

STEP 3

PUT TOGETHER A LIST OF "PROUDS"

Think about the work you're embarking on, and throw down a list of past positive achievements that seem at least somewhat relevant. You might include specific contributions that you or your colleagues have made to past successes, or skills, techniques, and resources that could be assets in achieving your vision.

Anything good that comes to mind is fine. And don't stress out about it—just do it. It shouldn't take more than 10 minutes. The idea is just to create a base of positive energy and high-quality experiences on which you can build for future success. The more people focus on the positives, not on the present-day problems, the more likely you are to attain the greatness you envision.

STEP 4

WRITE THE FIRST DRAFT

Writing a vision is hugely important, but don't let its perceived weightiness work against

you. The amount of time you spend drafting is generally unrelated to the quality of the vision. Usually those who just dive in and get something down on paper almost always are the ones who emerge from this process with the most creative and inspiring visions. You can compose your vision in any style you like—prose or bullet points, by hand or on the computer. We like to draw it on a white board or a giant Post-It and then talk through what we have drafted up.

Before you start writing, let me provide a few technical tips. If you follow them, the work will be way better:

Go for something great. The work here is about writing a vision of greatness—so put something wild out there. Things that are big but also specific, scary but also exciting. Get past the 59 reasons why it won't work. If the early draft isn't kind of scaring you a bit, then you probably haven't pushed yourself hard enough.

Write from the heart. Go with your gut and put down what pours out, not what you think other people want to see. Often that means including what you've always wanted to do but have been told so many times by others that you couldn't, a notion that you've long since filed away under "impossible."

Step into the future. It works way better when you write as if you're already sitting in the future you're envisioning. This seems strange, but it really is critical. Don't write as if your vision going to happen; write as if it already has happened.

Go quickly. The visions I've been involved with turned out much better when we didn't drag out the process. Just sit down in a reasonably comfortable spot at a reasonably comfortable time and get to writing. Once you start, keep writing for 15 to 30 minutes, regardless of how silly you sound. Don't start self-editing. The most interesting and insightful elements of visions are the ones that initially you would have left out.

STEP 5

REVIEW AND REDRAFT

When you're ready to revise, read your draft through from start to finish. Don't erase anything. If you're on the computer, start the second round by copying your first file so you can edit what you wrote without losing the original version. At least 80 percent of what is in that first scary rendition is pretty right on. In any case, you'll have plenty of opportunity to edit the content and the language. As you read through, keep in the back of your mind: Does this sound inspiring? Do I get excited when I'm reading it? Note that in this context, *excited* does not preclude anxiety about the challenges of implementation.

How specific should you get? More detail is better than less—it helps make the vision more real. Stay away from vague statements like "We're busier than ever"; instead, use real sales numbers that mean something. Without definition, you will have no details on what success actually looks like. So spell it out. What are the key financial numbers that define success for you? Sales levels? Ratings? Rankings?

STEPS 6A, 6B, AND 6C

MORE REDRAFTS

If you want, you can take this second draft and make additional adjustments. But at some point, you had better get your butt in gear and move on to Step 7. Note that there is no 6D. If there were, the D would stand for *Done*. More than four drafts and you're headed down the long and unrewarding road of "I've been working on a vision for the past few years, but I still don't have it finished."

STEP 7

SOLICIT INPUT

This is where you let the cat out of the bag and get input from people you trust and respect. But remember that it's your vision, and you're not obligated to change anything. Whom should you show it to? Folks who have experience, insight, and expertise relevant to your vision. They might be your business partners, colleagues, peers in the

community, mentors, family members, close friends. Again, don't obsess. You can always get more input later if you think of other people you would like to hear from.

Inevitably, some of these advisers will shift away from talking about the vision into a discussion of all the action steps that will have to be in a strategic plan. Don't worry. Just listen carefully, and take notes—some of those ideas might come in handy later, when you begin formulating a plan to bring your vision to life.

How do you know what to add and what to set aside? Practice helps. As does learning whom you can rely on to give supportive, helpful input and to have values and views aligned with your own. I like the advice I heard from John Williams, co-founder of Frog's Leap Winery in Rutherford, California, who said, "Don't let people beat the passion out of you!"

STEP 8

SHARE THE VISION

Finally, it's time to share the vision with everyone who will be involved in implementing it. When you roll out your vision to the bigger group, it's inevitable that people will ask questions about how you intend to achieve the vision. They're asking you about the *how*. The vision, however, is the *what*. It's totally fine if you don't know how you're going to get there. Later, you will figure out the *how*.

When people disagree with your vision

Some folks who write visions are sole operators who have enough authority to put a vision in place unilaterally. But most of us work with partners, family members, or key managers who are prominent or equal players, and we need to get in alignment with them. Leaders pursuing different visions for the same project will almost always create enormous problems in an organization.

Begin the alignment process by having each of the partners in the group draft their own vision. We're careful to be sure that everyone is clear on both the time frame and the topic we've chosen. Once each person has put together his or her vision, we compare drafts, listening carefully to what each person has to say and capturing themes on a whiteboard as we go.

We then give everyone a chance to weigh in on the strength of their feelings about each theme. If there are 10 themes up on the board, we might give each participant four votes, or something along those lines. The votes help the group get clear on the top-priority items. Remembering that there aren't any right or wrong visions, we then work to identify common themes and come to agreement on a single vision that we can all work toward.

I don't want to make it seem like visioning work is always bliss and harmony. We often wind up with themes that seem totally incompatible. And though there are often ways to achieve compromise, other times there just aren't. All you can really do at that point is work toward consensus. Something has to give, or we have to come up with a different way to go forward.

On occasion, what we reach consensus on is the challenging realization that we actually have incompatible visions, and that we might need to go our separate ways. If our ideas are not compatible, then our larger vision needs to shift. It might become a positive picture of a future in which we're no longer working together, or at least not working together in the way we are now. It could mean splitting a company in two or living in different cities. It's painful but far more productive than having people passively go along toward a vision of the future that they don't really buy into. When that happens, you wind up with two things: tension and trouble. Agreeing, openly and supportively, to pursue different but positive visions allows people to go in the direction they want to go. And ultimately that's a good thing.