

The Myth of The Visionary Managing Partner

The Strategic Planning Society recently posted on their LinkedIn site the seemingly straight-forward question: “What is a good definition for vision?” Now please keep in mind that this question is being posed within the campus of those who have fostered and perpetrated the belief that every organization should have a vision and that the organization’s leader should be a “visionary” – the instigator of such a vision.

A flurry of responses came from those who held titles like Strategic Planning Manager, Senior Resource Planning Manager, Head of Planning and Control, Senior Manager Strategy Solutions, Strategy Execution Advisor, Managing Partner, CEO, University Professor and so forth and included:

The position or status a company aspires to achieve within a reasonable time frame.

The vision is a concise measurable statement that defines the mid to long -term (three to ten years) goals of an organization. The vision should be external and market oriented and should express how the organization wants to be perceived by the world.

Vision - a smart ability to look behind horizon

The ability to stay into a balloon above your business, to see beyond the operational issues

"Vision" refers to an imagined state of affairs. All else is elaboration.

Vision consists of thinking ahead and ensuring that colleagues address the right issues.

Picture-painting by the Leader: We're going [over there]. We need to be there [by this time during a reporting-period].

These responses are coming from very smart, accomplished professionals. This question generated in excess of 65 postings over a one-month period without any real consensus amongst the 6800 members of The Strategic Planning Society of what a vision really is!

I believe one aspect of this notion of “having a vision” was confirmed by the recent (one hundred and fifty managing partner) interviews conducted by my UK-based colleague Rob Lees (co-author of *When Professionals Have To Manage*) where he reported

The managing partner of one of the firms we talked to explained how he had come back from Harvard Business School’s Leading Professional Service Firms program with renewed energy and a determination to drive the firm forward. So, he outlined his vision of moving the firm from its regional base to becoming a leading national firm to his partners and talked about what they needed to do to get there. But, to his abject disappointment, nothing happened. To the partners, the vision was just too aspirational; achievable only through a merger, which they felt

they would be on the wrong side of. Concerned about the lack of action, the managing partner visited all of the offices to talk through the plans and, during these visits, the partners' concerns surfaced.

Meanwhile, in his new book *Great By Choice*, Jim Collins tells us that his findings dismiss several closely held business world beliefs, such as the notion that successful leaders are “bold, risk-seeking visionaries.” Rather, Collins concludes that the most successful leaders are “disciplined,” “empirical” and “paranoid,” building on verifiable results and constantly anticipating what could go wrong.

It is my (personal) strong belief that this constant talk about "needing to have a vision" is just NONSENSE and something that managing partners have elicited from various books on leadership! The partners definitely NEED to have some sense of shared direction (where are we going?) and that shared direction needs to be facilitated by an effective leader; but I find that this idea of successful firm leaders needing to articulate a vision is not grounded in reality.

Remember mission statements? Mission statements first came into vogue in the 1990's. A single-page document filled with more platitudes than you'd find in the average prayer book, spelling out your firm's business mission. No one remembered the darn things, it was business as usual, and the document didn't have the profound impact on the fortunes of firms that their creators had hoped for. The mission statement exercise was quickly forgotten — except at those few firms who chose to have them laminated as cards for every professional to keep in their wallet.

Then we discovered that every firm needed "a vision." It was a new name, but quickly became the same old silly exercise. All your skeptical partners exchange winks and knowing glances. The Executive Committee will have to be indulged one more time. In all cases the result was to be the same — having a vision changed nothing. I am not aware of one single firm (and certainly not among those achieving above-average performance) who has invested partner time in developing a mission or vision statement. And I have for years challenged lawyers at multiple legal conferences to please give me just one example of a law firm, anywhere, wherein a firm leader proclaimed a vision and had all of his or her partners excited, eager to move forward and behaving in concert with the articulated vision. I have not yet found one real live example.

Looked at slightly differently . . .

Visionaries tend to narrow their attention onto those phenomena that appear relevant and supportive of their visions. They can, therefore, appear impatient, dismissive and intolerant of any information or ideas that may appear to challenge or question their vision (“don't confuse me with the facts”). While having a vision may be nice - in a complex world, visions require a psychological sophistication that many of us mere mortals lack. A true vision contains a paradox in that it is not an expression of truth, nor is it necessarily right, but your vision must be treated as though “it was right.” The thing to consider is that a true vision requires that you have a view of the future that isn't supported by evidence.

(And with tongue firmly implanted in cheek): I don't know about you, but my academic education in psychology taught me that an individual having visions . . . unsupported by evidence . . . was usually a clear sign of someone who had lost touch with reality!