



Jim Channon

**Editor's note:** Academy Fellow Jim Channon posits that a strategic vision, a "clear knowing," about what a group of players agrees to achieve together "may be the single most important and necessary organizational skill-set ever created." Jim describes the principles associated with the construction of a strategic vision so the process is understood more as a craft rather than "an off-site weekend opportunity." It is noteworthy that Jim has constructed and illustrated the strategic visions of ten of the world's largest hundred companies and governmental organizations. **J.S.**

## The Strategic Vision

### It's More Than Meets the Eye

By Academy Fellow Jim Channon

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We use strategic visioning as a way to collect our ideas about the future and aim at a more desirable state together. Visioning became popular as a primary tool in the organizational world during the 1980s. This clear knowing as a group of players about what they agree to achieve together may be the single most important and necessary organizational skill-set ever created. There is a lot more to it, I have found, than one normally experiences in the fast moving corporate stream of events. It is the single piece of work that is absolutely tied to the leadership team.

After twenty-five years of experience in this world of strategic vision work, I have been able to better understand the essential dynamics of the kind of robust vision that serves to guide the long-range development process in a deliberate way. Here are some principles described so that the process can be seen more as a craft and not an off-site weekend opportunity.

#### The Dynamics

First, there is a vast difference between willing something to happen and allowing it to happen. We usually blur the distinction between what we want to have happen and what wants to happen anyway. On the ocean, as we sail forward there is the choice to select a port to sail toward. Arriving there is what we want to have occur. But, in the process of sailing there we can also experience a current that pushes us off course. That is a force that wants to happen. The wise captain uses the current and the preset course together or in alternating phases to achieve the established vision. Dee Hock, the founder of Visa, describes this play between the goal and the circumstances as chaordic, or working with chaos and order together.

Second, there are operational goals in any culture that demand attention in order to achieve excellence. Simultaneously, there are cultural realities in any organization that demand attention in order to keep the inspirational peak of performance at a high level. One is like the road map and the other like the fuel. Good visions include a real solid combination of both elements. The wise captain never lets the bottom line scorecard obscure the spirit of the marching band.

A third distinction I would offer in a mature vision is the degree to which the vision pulls the group toward the future and the degree to which the vision pushes a group toward the future. Without a higher purpose there will be little pull. Without a lofty goal there will be little pull. Without a transformational focus there will be little pull. Likewise, without precise objectives, clear images of the preferred state and periodic reviews, there will be little push. Again, some of each works best.

## **The Practice**

These three dynamic pairs just mentioned set the parameters for a robust strategic-visioning process. With these in hand an interesting set of more precise tactical elements can be clustered in the envelope just made possible. The degree to which the leadership engages the workforce with a robust vision then becomes the difference between those who just plan the work and those who also work the plan.

It is said that in tribal organizations the chief had only one real job. That job was to tell the story of the tribe at every single tribal gathering. The story usually explained the genesis of the tribe: where it came from; and the direction of the tribe: where it is going. This informed combination puts a real backbone in the body of the organization and sustains a drive to achieve the new destination. Remembering that this directional orientation is the primary job for leaders, it is far better to bore people with the destination of the organization with such reminders than to let the ship slide off course.

## **Vision Is a Muscle**

We tend as a matter of practice to vision during the season of invention and then lapse into the management of the thousand details until the next visioning season or the arrival of a new leader. A clear view of the future requires a special kind of thinking. Vision is a muscle. It gets much better with exercise. Occasionally it comes to us as individuals from places "unknown" in the form of pure inspiration. That is to be respected. More often with a group we must pound out the dough together before the bread is ready for the oven. The more we do it the better we get. If you think what your kids are doing is strange, then you are not going to school on the future.

Experience tells me that this pounding out the possibilities is something the leadership should do together, and they should allow three full work-sessions to get there. Typically, in session one, all the things we are sure we don't want to become surface for discussion and agreement. In session two, the beginnings of the new creative pieces emerge. By session three, an idea of the most synergistic mix will begin to surface. Progressively the vision elements have a chance to play as a great piece of music. Soon a map with key landmarks begins to surface. Now the vision has become a real operational tool to manage the creation of the optimum new reality while nurturing the workforce along the way.

Recognizing the elements of a new vision cannot occur if the ideas about that vision are not clearly established. To recognize something we must cognize it first. Without a sense of the kind of dinner you intend to prepare, then grocery shopping is an over-whelming chore. But once even the most unusual preferred state is imagined, then the shopping list is firmly set in place. The brain just naturally triggers the recognition of elements already imagined or accurately labeled as a category. That is why a vision done in generic and homogenized business language usually leaves the players without the imagery they need to find the new vision.

## **The Strategic Vision**

Occasionally, we can lead an organization with a lofty set of phrases. If there are some clear outcomes in the phrases, we can aim with more precision. If there is a step by step visual map to our preferred future state, we can not only see the entire idea and be pulled by it, but we can ask our workforce to attend to the imagined steps to get there in an organized way. If the organization must build or manufacture something, then the expected performance placed on a visual map is critical. What is nice with a strategic vision is that leadership can hand off the vision with a map that sets the stage for management to act out the dream.

The clear imagery takes you from vision to action without a loss of clarity. This is why this skill-set is more than a pretty speech. This is why there is a chance after the off-site weekend that there will be a Monday morning connection to the work and a real change of behavior. That is why people like using maps to get where they are going. This is also a balanced way to lead people to a place where they make their own very detailed action plans. In this way they retain the initiative on the "how" we do it, and the leadership knows that the "where" and the "when" have been established.

When I speak of a map in addition to the lofty and inspired words of the leader, I include several possibilities. There can be a very tactical map in a military style that details the objectives for a dozen or more teams. There can be other more strategic views, for example, with three large scenarios depicted as thrusts. The map can be a simple hand-drawn graphic or it can be emotionally charged with poignant symbols. In the case of a very large organization, it can be a 3-D model done in boards or even constructed in concrete like a monument. It can be a screen saver. It can be animated if the details and flows are important. It is a simple courtesy to make the steps along the way as tangible as they can possibly be made.

When a full-spectrum strategic vision map is complete, it holds a place for all that will follow. It compels action. It informs the most distant member of the workforce. It gives the leadership a storyboard that guides their speaking. It places the most important work of the organization on an altar that separates it from the thousand other PowerPoint programs presented during the year. Some things are just more important than others and have to be given the presence they deserve.

I believe that the strategic vision is the most sacred act an organization can aspire to. It can be informed by a higher purpose. But one thing is sure, it must stand out from other corporate communications. It must be an altarpiece. It should be presented in the most auspicious surroundings. It should be available in many forms and all of them should be beautiful and important. Otherwise, a vision can become no more than another routine set of instructions to be stepped upon during a busy day.

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**Editor's note:** Jim is a social architect and strategic designer presently designing a bio-region in America, a leadership development plan for Malaysia, and conceptual scenarios for the army of the future with Oak Ridge National Laboratories. You may find him landscaping his new outdoor amphitheater in Hawaii. **J.S.**

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