Your Company Vision: If It's Complicated, It Shouldn't Be

Shaun Spearmon has worked with leaders to initiate large-scale corporate strategies and helped them achieve their goals. One thing he considers key to that success is the vision statement. Here he describes the key factors that will help you create a vision statement your entire organization can get behind.

My wife and I have often observed that most of the people who select the Facebook relationship status “It’s Complicated” – well, it’s actually not. Those relationships are quite simple. The individuals involved either 1) choose to ignore or dismiss their actual relationship status or 2) label it complicated because it implies a level of depth that’s more than meets the eye. Trust me, their relationship statuses are quite simple. Yet, for some odd reason, they find comfort in “It’s Complicated.”

A cloudy or delusional view of one’s current situation (i.e. relationship status) can be quite destructive. Likewise, an organization that is dismissive and/or fails to accurately assess its current status in the marketplace is also heading down a detrimental path. For both the individual and the organization, nothing can be more damaging than a confused and cloudy picture of where they want to go or what they want to become; in short, do they know what success looks and/or feels like?

Organizations can find it tough to use words to paint a picture of success. Those that do it well devote an inordinate amount of time to getting it right. Working with my clients, it can take them hours to come up with a vision statement that amounts to 10-15 words. They throw out hundreds of words and arrange them in dozens of different combinations. Eventually, they settle on a handful of them, arranged in the perfect order, creating a crisp message – a picture of success that is NOT complicated.

Here’s a test: stop reading right now and recite your organization’s vision. If you can’t, you are in good company – 70% of people can’t. Most people either don’t know their organization’s vision, don’t understand it, or feel so disconnected from it that they can’t explain how it relates to their day job. The good news? It doesn’t have to be that way.

I have no doubt that you work in a very sophisticated organization, with sophisticated people, who create sophisticated solutions, solving very complex problems for your customers – AWESOME. The vision for your organization need not be so sophisticated. What’s the ‘golden rule’ when crafting the vision
statement? It should require effort to create, but should not require effort to understand – externally (customers) and especially internally (employees).

Here are some additional guardrails for creating a vision that meets the criteria of the golden rule:

1. **Does it describe what you do?** If so, it shouldn’t. The vision statement is not an opportunity to use creative, colorful language to describe the operations or activities of the organization. It should describe the resultant experience or outcome. Too many organizations get caught up explaining how they work. Instead, focus on the subsequent outcomes after the work is done.

2. **Has it gone beyond simple?** Is it over-engineered? Have you literally beaten all the ‘simple’ out of it with your business acumen? If so, stop. Believe it or not, there is an inverse relationship between the number of business buzzwords you use and the clarity your visions creates – a true example of less being more. Remember the company that had this one: “… a computer on every desk …”?

3. **Is it easy to recite/explain?** Can you explain it to your friend that DOESN’T work in your industry? If not, stop and re-think. For obvious reasons, it is advantageous for the vision to be easily understood by the employees charged with making it a reality. However, you’ve struck gold if those same employees have internalized the vision so much so that they can recite it on call. Even more powerful is the impression left on the friend when the vision is delivered with language they can understand. Remember complicated ≠ effective.

4. **Did you sleep on it?** Unfortunately, vision crafting is not exempt from the law of diminishing returns. If you think you’ve got the vision statement nailed, stop and sleep on it. When you come back to it, do you quickly re-connect with the same enthusiasm you had when you first read it?

I love Lewis Carroll’s quote, “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.” Visions are intended to clarify the pathway forward. When effective, the vision statement has an illuminating quality that allows organizations to move fast and with great precision. Simply stated: It’s NOT complicated.

*Shaun Spearmon is an engagement leader at Kotter International, a firm that helps leaders accelerate strategy implementation in their organizations. Follow us on @KotterIntl, Facebook, or LinkedIn. Sign up for the Kotter International Newsletter.*

---

This article is available online at: