

The Vision of an Organisation

1. Introduction

Nowadays, having a vision is a must in the management of organisations. In complex, changing environments, organisations must regularly shape and reshape their own understanding of what to aim at and how to get there. A vision is 'an image of the future'. An image that is not yet real but that we can envisage in our minds; an image of what the organisation should/could look like, partly analytical, partly emotional. An image that combines elements of the present situation with elements that can be envisaged. This definition is rather abstract. That is the problem and at the same time the challenge of creating a vision.

2. Why organisations need a vision

Why should organisations bother about having a vision? First of all, a clear and well-formulated vision gives all employees the feeling that the organisation is carrying out a meaningful task. As such, having a vision is a motivating factor: it can give people a feeling of importance no matter how small their contribution to the realisation of the task may seem. Furthermore, a vision gives the future a clearer and therefore nearly always a more positive shape. Having a vision of the future will make it easier for people to continue and to contribute positively whenever the organisation is going through hard times. Even though they have to face difficulties, they still know why it is worthwhile to keep on going. Having a vision gives an organisation the strength to withstand commotion, crises and growing complexity. If the environment becomes turbulent it helps if you are clear about the direction you go. The vision will then function as a beacon.

If people feel committed to the realisation of a vision, this vision can be the foundation of a strong corporate culture. Then the vision gives direction to people in the organisation and they will be able to recognise why certain rules and values exist to contribute to the image of the future. A strong corporate culture generates a corporate identity, a uniform image to the outside world reflecting the heart of the organisation. People can explain to others what it is they make a stand for, what people can expect from them as member of the organisation. It creates a strong feeling of solidarity that is mutually shared. This can motivate people to give really the full hundred percent of their energy.

A strong image to the outside world will help to attract clients, suppliers, potential employees, sponsors and other stakeholder. Having a well-developed vision will be beneficial in creating confidence of external parties. This is clearly seen at Wallstreet, where shareholders often let their decisions depend on clarity of visions of companies.

The vision will streamline all activities and flows in the organisation, helps dealing with doubts and uncertainties.

There is a standard you can use to measure your activities against: is this still contributing to the realisation of our vision? Similarly, a vision is a source of indicators, enabling the monitoring of the development of strategic fields of activities and potential areas of interventions.

Finally, if the development of a vision is a shared process, it enhances the mutual dialogue and cooperation in the organisation. By sharing dreams and ambitions for the future people make themselves known. This creates better mutual understanding and clearly shows the need and willingness for cooperation. So the process of developing a vision can in itself be beneficial to the organisation's wellbeing.

3. What's in a vision?

The vision of an organisation comprises the following elements:

- mission / core business
- core activities / product and clients
- working approach and core values
- long-term goal

Let us see what is behind these words and look at some concrete examples as. It is also important to know what questions to ask to clarify the different elements.

Mission/core business

The mission of an organisation is in fact the reason for its existence. The French expression *raison d'être* nicely expresses this. Why are we here? Ultimately, the organisation does not serve a purpose in itself, but a purpose in its environment. If not, in the end it is deemed to disappear.

The mission of an organisation is largely determined by its core business, its main field of activity. The organisation, is it a school, a bank, a hospital or a training centre? Still, the mission of one primary school may differ from an other one.

The mission is the answer to the question: why are we here, what purpose do we serve?

A nice example of a mission is Walt Disney's. Their mission is formulated as 'to bring happiness to millions and to keep up healthy American values'.

The mission/core business of an organisation is probably the most stable element in the vision. In contrast to the other elements it will not change much over time.

Core activities/products and clients

If you know the core activities/products and clients of an organisation, you have in fact an answer to the question: how does the organisation try to realise its mission?

For example, the core activities of a university may include:

- education of students
- post-graduate distant learning
- scientific research paid by government
- applied research paid by commercial clients

Normally, this element of the vision combines part of the actual situation with new perspectives. Regularly, organisations must rethink the way in which they want to realise their mission.

Working approach and core values

Working approach and core values go hand in hand. Core values determine how we want to carry out our work, how we deal with each other inside our organisation and how we act in relation to people outside the organisation.

For example, the working approach of a training institute may vary from offering fixed training programmes to tailor-made programmes. One of the working approaches of supermarkets is that clients serve themselves. Alternatively, lots of small shops are still based on full service by the shopkeepers.

Working approach and core values are answers on the questions: what do we find important in our work? How do we want to carry out our work and deal with our colleagues, suppliers, clients and other stakeholders?

More and more organisations emphasise core values underlying the way in which they do business. Often this is primarily done to attract customers. However, it has certainly an important impact on employees as well.

A well known example is the Body Shop, which embraces the following values:

- we are big but at the same time small-scale, offering personal attention
- we do business with head and heart and are engaged to improve conditions for people, animals and environment
- we provide honest information about products and company
- we don't test products and ingredients on animals; we require the same of our suppliers; we campaign for a ban on animal testing of cosmetics
- we aim at honest trade with small communities around the globe (we call it "community trade")
- we stand for social responsibility, both at international and local level
- we care for the environment; in everything we do we take environmental considerations as much as possible into account.

In a well-developed vision, there will be tension between actual working approach and values on the one hand, and desired, formulated ones on the other hand. If the vision is

meant to make the organisation change for the better, such tension is necessary and fruitful. However, if there is a too large discrepancy between vision and actual practice, people in and outside the organisation may become sceptical or even cynical about so-called core values and core approach. Then the formulated vision may run the risk to be seen as something artificial, irrelevant, as a cover-up.

Core values change mostly because society and societal values change.

Long-term goal

As a vision is future-oriented and somehow must direct the members of an organisation, it is good practice to define one or more long-term goals. Depending on the dynamics of the business the organisation, such long-term goals can be specified for a period between five (professional services organisation) and 30 years (oil company).

Examples of long-term goals:

the Ministry of Water Resources in a southern African country wishes to achieve full cost recovery of their non-investment expenses by the year 2010;
a sports shoe factory wants to become world leader in 5 years time;
Shell Oil company wants to be firmly positioned on the market for solar and wind energy in 20 years time;
an organic food chain wishes that 30% of food sales in Netherlands is in organic food by the year 2005;
a TACIS-office (i.e. the national office that coordinates technical and financial support from the European Union to each of the countries of the former Soviet Union) has as long-term goal that the economy is transformed into a market-economy.

It must be noticed that so-called value-oriented organisations (like NGOs, green banking institutes, organic food shops, and some government offices) have long-term goals that go beyond the interest of the organisation itself. Once their specific cause has been adopted by well-established institutions, their reason for existence may be over. A good example of this phenomenon is that once regular supermarkets have adopted organic food in their mainstream, it will become very difficult for small organic food shops to sustain.

Slogan

Finally, it is worthwhile to formulate in one sentence the heart of the vision. A so-called slogan makes it easier to explain the vision and to keep the vision alive, especially in the environment of the organisation.

Examples of slogans:

"I have a dream"
"Health for all by the year 2000"
"Though we can't make it nicer, we can make it easier" (Dutch tax office)
"Let's make things better"

4. Characteristics of a well-developed vision

Apart from the content, a well-developed vision shows a number of characteristics. It must be:

- **challenging:** the future as described in the vision should neither be too far nor too close by. In both cases the vision is not challenging. A vision must have an inherent tension between what is already there and what is not yet there.
- **inspiring:** this can partly be reached by stating the vision positively. Exclude everything the organisation does not want to be, but, on the contrary, emphasise what it aspires to be. Whether a vision is inspiring also depends on the way it has been formulated and on whether it still lives in the organisation.
- **shared:** in order to have the vision as a picture everyone can and wants to use and refer to, the vision must have been contributed to by the majority of the stakeholders. As stakeholders change, this also means that the vision has to be reviewed every three to five years. New employees also need to have the possibility to share the vision.
- **binding:** the employees or staff members should feel to be part of team. For this reason it is necessary that everyone can recognise his/her own individual vision, at least partly, in the vision of the organisation.
- **giving direction:** that means that the vision really visualises the future in a picture that is clear enough to serve as a beacon.

5. How can an organisation create a shared vision?

When the leader(s) of an organisation feel that the organisation needs a vision, either because it does not have one or because the existing one will not do anymore, the leader(s) can go through several steps to create a shared vision.

1. The first step could be that the leader(s) show their own “colour”. In meetings and in discussions and perhaps even in the New Year’s speech, the leader(s) start telling about how they see the future of the organisation. It is good to make clear that a vision is something to work on together.
2. Next, the employees should be given the time to talk about the vision and to think it over.
3. In the mean time, the leader(s) should observe the environment, inside as well as outside the organisation. What are the threats and opportunities in the environment they would like to react upon? Are there any indications that something new is going to happen and could the organisation be ahead of that? And in the organisation, what is the gap between the actual reality and the vision that once was presented? Are there possibilities and constraints that can be made use of or that can be taken into consideration?

4. The leader(s), with a team of representatives from the different levels and departments that are appointed to work on the vision, should listen. It is important to know everybody's individual vision of the organisation and everybody's future role inside or perhaps rather outside the organisation.
5. All aspects of the vision need to be brought into line. All contributions given should be taken into account. This will require dialogue, a real attempt at understanding each other's points of view, rather than trying to convince each other.
6. There needs to be close cooperation between the different listeners, in order to start formulating the vision. Everyone is important and nobody, and no department or working level should be neglected. Only when this part is completed, the vision can be formulated.
7. Finally it is essential to check whether everyone can recognise his or her own contribution. If this is not the case it is necessary to clarify or even adapt the vision. Neglecting signals at this stage will break down the value of the process.

6. Conclusions

An organisation can do without a vision, but knowing the advantages of having a vision it does not seem to be advisable. Vision development is a time and energy consuming process. At the same time, the process of creating a shared vision itself gives the organisation and its employees a lot of satisfaction and motivation which might otherwise be missing. A shared vision can be a very valuable instrument to guide an organisation.

Example of a vision:

Institutional Strengthening for Private Agriculture (ISPA) Foundation, Rumania

Mission/core business

The participants of the workshop formulated the Mission as:

“to unite and support (small?) agricultural producers to increase their income.”

Core activities/products and clients

The strategy of ISPA, its core approach, is formulated as follows:

- *facilitating supply of inputs*
- *assisting agricultural producers in selling their produce*
- *provision of information and knowledge*
- *advocacy/representing interests of agricultural producers*

- *by organising income generating activities which support non-economic activities and*
- *by organising agricultural producers groups and building the ISPA Foundation*

- *in and around Judet Iasi*

Working approach / core values

The following core values were identified as being important:

- *Farmers' participation;*
- *Reliability and mutual trust;*
- *Quality;*
- *“Business like”;*
- *Commitment.*

Long term aim (10-20 years)

The long term aim of ISPA (10-20 years) has been formulated as follows:

To build a strong, respected, reliable and financially & politically independent organisation, uniting committed ongoing agricultural producers of Judet Iasi, and if proven successful, of other Judets of Moldova region.