

Maximize your leadership potential: **CREATE & COMMUNICATE VISION**

Vision

Podcast Transcript

My name is Bob Parks. I'm the director for training and organizational development here at UF and have had the privilege of working with leaders of teams, departments, and colleges across this campus for more than a decade. Our team frequently works with leaders and teams on strategic planning—from a single planning retreat to a larger-scale full-year process. Creating or clarifying the organization's vision is often an important part of those strategic planning discussions. Vision is an interesting leadership challenge because it's a fundamental expectation of leaders—leadership texts, surveys, and competency models consistently highlight the importance of vision—yet visioning is rarely done by leaders and teams and, when it is done, it's not done very well!

In this podcast, I'd like to take a few minutes to talk about vision. Why is it important? What is it? What does a great vision look like? And, as a leader, how do I work with my team to develop a clear and compelling one?

Let's start with the first question: Why is vision important? One of my favorite quotes illustrating the importance of vision comes from noted leadership development expert Warren Bennis—who also happened to be a university president at one point in his career. In reflecting on the importance of vision in his role as president, Bennis noted, "It struck me that I was most effective when I knew what I wanted." In many respects, the power and importance of vision is really that simple—individuals and teams are better when they know what they want. If we know where we want to go as a team, if we have a clear and shared picture of what that looks like, we will make individual decisions that begin to align with the shared vision, and that therefore align with each other. We can also identify shared goals that move us toward that vision. In this respect, vision is a powerful driver of organizational alignment. Vision is also one of the tools that we as leaders can use to foster greater engagement and motivation. There are many factors that impact employee motivation, but creating and communicating a clear vision can be an important tool. Most of us are more likely to be motivated when we know we are working together with colleagues to accomplish something significant, to make things better, to improve the organization or the lives of the people we serve in meaningful ways.

Vision is also important because, as I mentioned earlier, people expect it of their leaders. In their Center for Creative Leadership study, Wilburn, Hackman, and Criswell highlight research that clearly connects employees' assessments of their leaders and organizations with the quality of their vision and their ability to communicate that vision effectively. In the *Leadership Challenge*, a classic in the field of leadership development, Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner note that the ability to "inspire a shared vision" comes up as one of the most frequently cited expectations people have of their leaders. It also was mentioned frequently when leaders described their own "personal best" leadership experiences for Kouzes and Posner.

So, we know that vision is important for our effectiveness as leaders. But what, exactly, is vision? What do we mean by vision? In simple terms, vision is a compelling picture of our future state. What could we accomplish as a team? What impact could we have on those we serve (students, customers, sponsoring agencies, etc.)? In their book, *Retreats That Work*, Sheila Campbell and Merianne Liteman provide a prompt that we often use to help teams begin a discussion of vision: "Our

future potential will be fulfilled when...” This prompt starts to get nicely at vision. In one sense, vision is your team fulfilling its potential. What would that look like in 5 or 10 years? Another helpful way of thinking about vision comes from a leadership course called *Great Leaders, Great Teams, Great Results* by the FranklinCovey company. They describe vision as “What your team’s purpose looks like when achieved with excellence.” In other words, if we consistently fulfill our mission (or strategic purpose) with excellence, where would we be in 5 or 10 years? What would we have accomplished? That is vision.

So, what does a really great vision look like? In her webcast on creating a compelling vision, Corey Criswell from the Center for Creative Leadership highlights three qualities of effective vision. Effective visions are **ideological**, **clear**, and **challenging**. First, what do we mean by **ideological**? We mean that vision has to do with big ideas. Henry Ford’s vision was a clear, simple *big* idea: “Democratize the automobile.” Ideological can also mean that there’s a narrative aspect to the vision. Perhaps taking a cue from Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, Martin Luther King incorporates a narrative into his “I Have a Dream Speech.” It’s not just a speech about one man’s dream; King is also telling the story of a nation founded on a set of ideals and in the midst of a struggle to live up to those ideals. He (just like Lincoln did) brilliantly weaves the narrative of a country into his speech in a way that includes his audience in that story. King also conveys his “big ideas” in concrete images. He describes, for example, a time when children of different races will be able to join hands and walk together as sisters and brothers, when the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. Remember, a vision is something that people can *see*, a picture that you can create to help others see what the future can look like. In addition to being ideological, a great vision is also **clear**. Again, Ford’s vision was both sweeping and crystal clear: “Democratize the automobile.” Similarly, King’s images provided clarity about what the equality he and others were fighting for looked like in practice: his children being judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. Finally, a compelling vision is **challenging**. It’s striking to me when I work with leaders or teams on vision that when people begin to really talk about what they want, what they would really love to accomplish, a hesitance often arises...a nagging little voice seems to say, “But we couldn’t really do that.” I like to tell them, at exactly that point, “Good, that probably means you’re on the right track.” Vision should be exciting and inspiring—by its very nature a great vision challenges the status quo, it articulates a state of affairs that is *different* than what we’ve got right now. Great visions must do that. So, they should make us wonder, “Can we really do that?” Jim Collins notes that you really don’t want a vision that you have a 100 percent chance of accomplishing. It’s probably not bold enough. I like to be more direct with leaders and teams: if you think you have a 90-100 percent chance of achieving your vision, you probably have a lame vision. Vision should be possible – so, 10 percent chance of achieving is probably too low – but it should also inspire effort. We can do this, but in order to make it happen we are definitely going to have to give it all we have, work hard, collaborate better, be more creative, and so on. Collins notes that a challenging vision may only have a 50 to 70 percent chance of becoming a reality. Again, that’s good because that means you and your team are going to have to get better and do some things differently to accomplish it!

So, let’s say you’re convinced and ready to get going on creating a vision for your team or organization. What do you do? First, start with yourself. Vision arises through dialogue—that’s what makes it a *shared* vision. But vision is also hard for a lot of people. Most of the people on your team probably haven’t flexed these visioning muscles before. In order to help your team, start with your own rigorous thinking. Use the questions noted above as a starting point. (“If we were truly fulfilling our potential as a team, what would that look like?” “If we really fulfill our mission (or strategic purpose) consistently with excellence, where would we be in 5 years? What would we have accomplished? What impact could we have on those we serve?”) Once you’ve begun your own thinking on these questions, *then* start to engage your team in a dialogue. What do they think? If you’ve started thinking about this, you can begin to give them a sense of where you might be headed. The ongoing conversation can build on those ideas.

Vision takes time. From my experience, most teams don’t have a fully formed vision after one retreat. Through ongoing thought and dialogue, though, teams really can start to create a compelling and clear shared sense of where they are going

together, of what they want to accomplish together. That shared vision is more than an idea, it can become a force, bringing a team together and guiding them forward.

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