

Business First of Columbus - August 27, 2007
<http://columbus.bizjournals.com/columbus/stories/2007/08/27/smallb5.html>

COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

Friday, August 24, 2007

Articulating a vision gives leaders, employees a bigger stake in company

Business First of Columbus - by [C. Eric Pennington](#) For Business First

A wise man once said that vision is the art of seeing the unseen. As contradictory as that sounds, it is true. Leaders and managers must be able to articulate what a better future looks like with authenticity. They must be able to communicate and take action with commitment.

If you're a skeptic and think vision is a soft skill, then I would recommend you look at the music business before the iPod and after it hit the market. Steve Jobs and his team started with a vision of what Apple could do to change the paradigm of how consumers purchased music. The music industry was too focused on its current state and how to protect it. There was no vision in that. It was an unwillingness to consider a new business model.

Employers feel a desire to know what's around the corner. Some desire vision in order to know what market to enter or how to retain top talent. Whatever the reason, vision is important to the health of all organizations. Nowhere is it more important than within the ranks of middle management and nonmanagement employees.

Often these are the people closest to the customer, a place where the future of an organization is deeply tied. Employers who do not include middle managers and nonmanagement employees in the process of casting a vision are leaving themselves exposed.

If you're a senior leader in your organization, the first step is asking yourself whether you can define vision. Do you spend time casting a vision? Is what you're articulating compelling? Do you speak to that better day ahead?

Consider those questions as the proverbial gut check. Remember, you cannot give your reporting line what you do not own.

It is important to teach senior leaders and managers to discover, articulate, apply and then reproduce. This should be an encompassing approach. When leaders master the following steps, they're happier and able to inspire people to follow and emulate:

- **Discovery.** Leaders should first spend time alone and then with other leaders in their organizations. During alone time, eliminate distractions from the environment - so no Blackberry or laptop.

But the leader should bring a whiteboard or a legal pad, for instance, to paint a vision, articulating what the company should look like next year, in three years and in five years. Be as detailed as possible, because it's all about ownership. The level of detail is important for the next step, articulation.

When the leaders have finished with their alone time, they should convene with their peers to share and refine the vision, preferably in a place where creativity is fostered and that encourages them to be authentic.

- **Articulation.** For people to get it, the message must be clear, so articulating your vision verbally and in writing is imperative. The senior leader must be a good communicator. He or she doesn't have to aspire to a speaking career, but must be able to convey a message that is understood at every level of the organization. There are many outlets - classes, Webinars, podcasts, coaches - that can help the senior leader learn.
- **Application.** Application can be best described as the art of doing what you say. For example, if your vision is for a business unit to be more diverse, then you need to be doing something tangible to increase diversity.

Whether you reach out to a local Hispanic advocacy group or speak to a group of minority college students about opportunities in your organization, these kind of steps will show your commitment to the vision. Don't let your vision just be rotting words on a page. Hollow words are a recipe for failure.

- **Reproduction.** The area of reproduction is where change in the organization truly sets in. When the leader reaches this point, he or she is teaching and spreading the vision to everyone in his or her sphere of influence. When your people begin to witness what you do, they will be more likely to do it as well.

Now think. What if your organization's customers encountered people with a vision? They would buy more, tell more and stay longer because they're being touched by visionary people.

As the senior leader brings vision to all employees, change will happen over time. Some change will be immediate and some will take longer. The biggest lesson is for the senior leader to model the behaviors outlined earlier. Vision can only be contagious in an organization when senior leaders come down with a case of it. The only way to do that is exposure.

More customers, retained talent, and sustained profit growth are ahead for those companies that seek to make vision a way of life for all.

C. Eric Pennington is founder of Epic Living LLC, a business coaching and leadership development company based in Central Ohio. | 614-271-0071 | epennington@epicliving.com

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.