

*Helping You to Develop  
Your Business with Free  
Hints and Tips...*

*... In This Issue*

*Visionary Thinking*



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# Visionary Thinking

⇒ *Guiding people with a practical, compelling vision*

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## Overview

**Visionary thinking means developing a coherent description of your business in the future, which should make clear the connection between your thinking and the changes that are going on in your industry and your local market. This particularly applies to senior managers and business heads within your organisation. An essential element of visionary thinking is future orientation – the ability to communicate a clear view of the future of a business area: its aims and what it is achieving. Future orientation applies to managers at all levels, whereas visionary thinking is most relevant to senior and mid-level managers.**

It is often the case that, as managers, we tend to focus on the immediate priorities of meeting customers' needs, resolving problems, managing and leading others. We are very effective at managing for today but less effective at preparing for tomorrow. A defining role of a leader is their ability to set the right course and then take people with them, with the result that the business develops, competes and succeeds. Developing visionary thinking often means changing – or transforming – the organisation so that it can move in a determined way in the right direction.

## Benefits of business vision

A clear and dynamic vision of the future is valuable because it:

- Inspires, mobilises and engages people, unlocking energy and commitment.
- Provides a clear focus for the future, guiding actions and decisions at all levels.
- Promotes confidence, determination and effectiveness.
- Helps to establish the culture of the organisation by emphasising the means as well as the ends.
- Promotes teamworking and ensures consistency, with everyone working towards the same goal.

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# Action checklist: visionary thinking

## Develop a compelling vision of the future

There is no single way to develop visionary thinking and future orientation; however, the following actions are designed to help you get started:

1. **Decide what you want** – don't just accept what other people believe. Decide for yourself what will be important in the future.
2. **Trust your intuition.** If you feel that a situation is changing and different, or if you have an idea that makes sense to you, explore it further.
3. **Test your assumptions and tap into the future.** Insights do not readily come from old information, so look for trends and try to understand *why* things are changing, not just how.
4. **Get people to understand and support the vision by:**
  - Communicating in an exciting and practical way.
  - Speaking positively so that people are intrigued, challenged and motivated.
  - Being honest and open, trusting you and the vision.
  - Bringing the vision to life, ideally with examples.
  - Listening and acting on what people say.
  - Encouraging people to see what the vision means for customers.
5. **Remember the characteristics of progressive views of the future.** They are:
  - Powerful. This has two parts: it must be imaginable and paint a clear picture of what the future will look like; it must also excite and inspire as many people as possible.
  - Communicable. It must be possible for the vision to be communicated to anyone quickly and easily.
  - Desirable and realistic. The vision needs to appeal to the long-term interests of customers, employees, shareholders and stakeholders.
  - Focused. The vision needs to be specific and 'real-world' enough to guide decision-making.
  - Adaptive. The vision needs to be general enough to accommodate individual initiatives, and flexible enough to allow for changing conditions.

*Visionary thinking (or demonstrating future orientation at the junior level) means articulating a clear view of the future, given changes in the market.*

## Understand visionary thinking

To be effective, visionary thinking needs to be:

- Actively promoted and communicated by the organisation's leadership.
- Enacted and demonstrated in practice.
- Durable and consistent – a vision can rarely change radically or frequently and still deliver success.

- Clear and understandable so that it can be directly applied and made relevant to the way people, at all levels of the organisation, operate.

## *Avoiding problems*

The vision needs to be flexible and able to cope with changing circumstances. If it is too rigid or inflexible then it will be fatally flawed and doomed to failure. You might want to consider:

- What are the weaknesses with this approach?
- What are others doing, and how is the situation likely to alter over time?
- Are the people involved prepared (in terms of attitude) and skilled (in terms of ability) to react to changing situations? How can this be measured? What remedial action might be needed?
- What is likely to prevent you and your colleagues from fulfilling your vision?
- How will you and your colleagues pre-empt these challenges, or react to any unforeseen problems?

## *Dos and don'ts*

### **Do:**

- Be clear, simple and unequivocal.
- Tap into the needs of the audience – people positively want to be led and inspired.
- Use the vision to generate confidence, both in what is said and who is saying it.
- Ensure that the vision is credible, coming from the right person at the right time.
- Appeal to universally popular characteristics such as determination, integrity, success and fairness.
- Actively promote and communicate the vision.

### **Do not:**

- Be irrelevant or unrealistic.
- Ignore people's concerns and comments.
- Be overly prescriptive, detailed, unintelligible or uninspiring.
- Display inconsistency – saying one thing but doing another or constantly changing the vision.

## *Key questions*

- Does your vision anticipate a broad range of changes in your business environment (including the market, economic, sociological, technological and regulatory environment)? Have you evaluated the impact of these factors on your business?
- Is your vision compelling and engaging?

- Is your business thinking guided by the vision, progressively shaping your view of the future given emerging trends and changing events?
- Do people 'buy in' to the vision, readily accepting it and using it to guide their actions?

## *Things you can do*

### **Create your vision**

**Conduct a SWOT analysis** (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) of your business or function. Consider what your focus is now and what it should be in the future.

**Involve team members** in a visioning session, to gain their views. Start by presenting and discussing the SWOT analysis.

**Ask team members to visualise the way your business or function will look in three to five years.** Ask them to take time individually to reflect, answering such questions as:

- What is our purpose? Why is that a worthy purpose?
- Who are our customers? What are their needs? What are the major changes taking place in our market?
- How are we meeting customer needs?
- How do we generate unique value?
- What would be the most effective, flexible and profitable direction to take?
- What is our relationship with people in our community?

Ask each team member to write down what they pictured or thought as you asked the questions, and then have individuals share their visions.

- Identify common themes, decide which factors matter most and write them into draft vision statements.
- Ask for a small group of volunteers to 'wordsmith' the draft and bring it back to the group for further input and approval.
- Share your vision with others in the organisation.
- Finally, look ahead and imagine that you have achieved the vision by bringing about the necessary transformation. What would be the most satisfactory part of that transformation?

### **Test your vision**

Test the vision for your business or function against the following characteristics of effective visions. A vision should:

- Powerfully describe a desired future state.
- Include trends in the internal and external environments, accommodating changing conditions.
- Assert what we want to create.

- Include new ideas and innovations.
- Be clear, brief and simple, using terms that are meaningful to everyone.
- Be a dynamic, living document that can be changed.
- Emphasise ambition, yet be achievable.

### **Articulate and actively communicate your vision**

For the vision to succeed it needs to be widely shared and accepted. Consensus and understanding will make progress towards achieving the vision swifter and more likely. This can be achieved by:

- Using powerful and emotive language and images to describe the vision.
- Explaining what is needed from people and what should guide their actions.
- Take care to avoid being patronising and over-simplifying or, conversely, assuming too much knowledge.
- Preparing an 'elevator' pitch – a twenty-second summary of your vision.
- Testing your vision by discussing it with friends and colleagues.
- Asking your manager for their support and ideas.

### **Use the vision**

To be fully effective, the vision needs to routinely guide actions. Leading by example will demonstrate how the vision will influence decisions and actions, and support for the vision can be gained through examples and early successes. Also, steadily reinforcing the vision with examples of successes and news of initiatives will help to develop its constant use, together with the understanding and support of managers.

### **Anticipate changes**

This can be achieved by:

- Regularly reading trade and business publications, focusing on business, politics and economics.
- Maintaining and reviewing files on economic, social, technological and government and regulatory trends.
- Joining a professional membership or trade association. These are especially valuable for networking and attending seminars.

### **Balance future thinking with routine management tasks**

- Arrange to receive weekly updates, reports and trend surveys (for example, business websites provide trend forecasts) – and allow time to read these.
- Adjust meeting agendas so they assess the impact of environmental changes on current plans and strategies.
- Set time aside each week to assess key developments with colleagues. (Consider inviting colleagues to update the team each month, perhaps by email, on the latest developments in specific areas.)
- Keep a timesheet and record how much time is spent preparing for the future and how much is spent handling routine tasks.

## *Further action*

Use the following table to identify areas for further development.

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Further Action</b>
<b>Do you know which resources result in your business's success? Are these resources strengthening or depleting?</b>		
<b>Does everyone in your organisation understand the vision – what it is and why it matters? Can you give practical examples of how the vision can guide people's work?</b>		
<b>Is your vision sufficiently different and stretching – even audacious? Is it sustainable and will it bring major success?</b>		
<b>What are the key milestones or steps that need to be taken to help people move towards the vision?</b>		

***For Further Information or to  
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