



## HOW LEADERS DEVELOP AND COMMUNICATE A VISION

By Suzanne Bates

How do leaders develop and communicate a vision? The first step is to understand what vision is, and the second step is to create a process for identifying and articulating a vision. Understanding this process will help you articulate your own vision and values, and will help you assist the leaders of your organization to do the same.

### **Developing and Communicating a Vision**

There is actually nothing mystical about vision. A vision is a picture of what an organization could and should be.

A hallmark of great leaders is that their vision includes big ideas. Big ideas get people excited. Nobody wants to do something small. Leaders want to feel motivated about coming to work, because what they do matters.

Some examples of big ideas that most of us are familiar with are Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and President John F. Kennedy's vision for the space program, "We choose to go to the moon . . . not because it is easy, but because it is hard."

Great business leaders also know how to paint a vivid picture of the future. They make it look easy. However, most of them have worked hard to develop and articulate their powerful thoughts.

The creative process of developing a visionary statement consists of four steps: Observe, Reflect, Write, and Speak. Here's what I tell my executive clients about these processes:

#### **Step One: Observe**

In order to determine a vision, you must become an astute observer of your world. You have to immerse yourself in watching, listening, and wondering. Pay attention, ask questions, probe, discuss, and gather information.

#### **Step Two: Reflect**

Now you turn inward. For example, you look at important events in the company, or important events in your life and career, and ask yourself: What did I learn? What is this telling me?



During reflection, you come up with stories and examples that form your vision and clarify your values. These stories enable you to speak authentically from your own wisdom and experience. In this reflecting stage of the process, it's better to have someone listening and asking questions. A coach or trusted advisor can help you talk through a story or idea and find the significance of it.

Personal stories are a rich source of material that can crystallize a vision. When searching for personal stories with a client, we look at broad categories, both positive and negative, that usually yield some interesting images and help to communicate the vision and values that are important to the client. These include, among others: personal challenges, major changes, new experiences, lost opportunities, awkward situations, failed attempts, turnarounds, last-minute saves, inspiring people, remarkable achievements, and memorable events that may have occurred in a client's life.

Some people are uncomfortable with the idea of talking about themselves in business speeches. However, by weaving personal stories into their speeches, leaders connect with people. Their experiences are interesting to an audience, because they say so much about the leader.

### **Step Three: Write**

Because we live in a fast-paced world, with little time for reflecting and writing, many people want to skip this step. That is a mistake. When you write, you discover how to say precisely what you mean. Many executives ask why they can't just speak off the cuff. That is an important skill. But when you are articulating a vision, writing it down is a critical step in the process.

One of my clients, the president of a college, was preparing to give his inaugural address. It had been "word-smithed" by an outstanding, talented speechwriter. But as he read the speech, we realized something was missing—himself! He had graduated from this school, worked on Wall Street, retired, and served on the college's board of directors, who then drafted him for the job. But nowhere in the speech was there any information about why he accepted the position, what made him want to do this at this stage in his career, what his education at the college meant to him, and what his vision was for the college.

As I interviewed him, we were able to identify two or three great stories that would tell people who he was and what he stood for. As he practiced the new speech, what came through was a leader and a person committed to the college's success.



#### **Step Four: Speak**

If you have followed the process, speaking and communicating your vision is a natural outcome. A leader is far more powerful and effective when he or she gets up to speak because of this process. Then, the speaking must be scheduled. It does no good to create a vision without a plan to speak about it in many venues over a period of time. It takes several repetitions for most people to truly hear and remember the message.

Speaking well requires practice. All the preparation in the world will not wow an audience if the leader cannot speak fluently and confidently. There is no magic wand that will make a speech great if the speaker has not rehearsed so that he or she looks and sounds like a leader on the platform.

The activities of observing, reflecting, writing, and practicing a speech are not usually on an executive's calendar, but they should be. A powerful vision, well articulated, attracts people to an organization, motivates them to take action toward progress, and drives business results.