How to Write a Vision Statement

A step by step guide to creating the perfect vision statement for your organization.

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In this eBook we'll be focusing on the anchor point of our strategic plan – the vision statement. This is the first step of the process of writing your strategic plan. Once done, you'll be able to move onto writing your values, focus areas and strategic objectives / organizational goals. Let's start off by reminding ourselves of what our end-game looks like in terms of our finished plan:
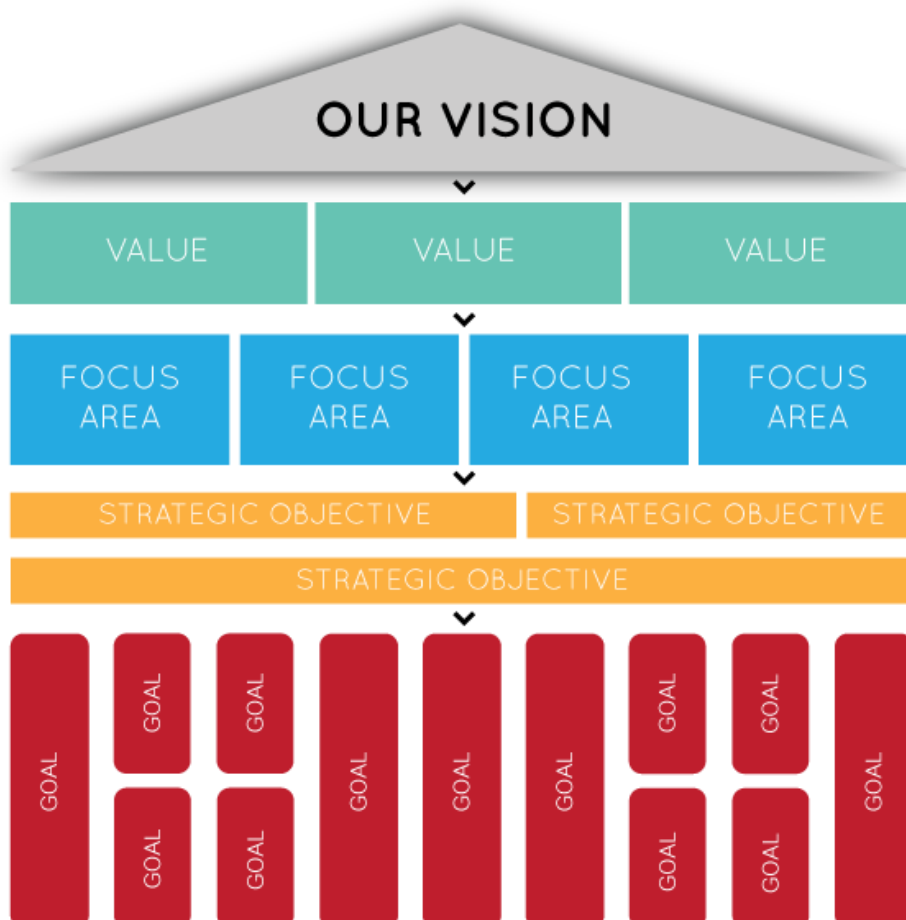
Getting Started

Here's a quick reminder of what we're trying to achieve with our vision statement (not everything will apply to every organization, but you'll get the gist…)

- Creating the pinnacle of the funnel, which every significant action we do going forward will ultimately be contributing towards.

- A memorable and inspirational summary that describes our reason for existence as an organization – one that will help to motivate existing employees and even attract high quality new ones.

- A succinct statement about what our organization is trying to achieve to help third parties such as investors or the media better understand us.

- A 'limiter' that helps us to rule out certain opportunities which do not ultimately contribute to our vision.

- Something that you and the other senior members of the organization passionately believe in and want to achieve.

There are a few common rules that pretty much all good vision statements should follow:

1. They should be short – two sentences at an absolute maximum. It's fine to expand on your vision statement with more detail, but you need a version that is punchy and easily memorable.

2. They need to be specific to your business and describe a unique outcome that only you can provide. Generic vision statements that could apply to any organization won't cut it (see our examples below for more on this point).

3. Do not use words that are open to interpretation. For example, saying you will 'maximise shareholder return' doesn't actually mean anything unless you specify what it actually looks like.

4. Keep it simple enough for people inside and outside the organization to understand. No technical jargon, no metaphors, no business buzz-words!

5. It should be ambitious enough to be exciting but not too ambitious that it seems unachievable. It's not really a matter of time-framing your vision, because that will vary by organization, but certainly anything that has a timeframe outside of 3 to 10 years should be challenged as to whether it's appropriate.

6. It needs to align to the Values that you want your people to exhibit as they perform their work. We'll talk more about Values in a future eBook – but once you've created those Values later on, revisit your vision to see how well they gel.

Following these rules should give you a pretty good starting point for creating your own vision statement. To help refine things further, we'll now look at some examples of vision statements that did not follow these rules…

Some not so Great Vision Statements (and why)

Here are some examples of real-life vision statements that in our opinion, could do with a little tweaking. For each one, we'll try to justify our thinking…

"Our company vision is to make every brand more inspiring and the world more intelligent."

Well, this one gets a tick on the 'ambitious' test if nothing else. But…..is it realistic that 'every brand' will use the services of this company? How about 'making the world more intelligent.' – let's try to quantify what that might actually look like. Or let's not. Because it's impossible. Not to be too harsh though – there are strong elements here; 'making brands more inspiring' makes a lot of sense and has some depth.

"Provide maximum value for our shareholders whilst helping our customers to fulfil their dreams."

This 'vision' could pretty much apply to any company, anywhere (it's an insurance company in this case – but would you have guessed that?). It's sort of like saying 'Our vision is to succeed as a business'. Not wrong – but certainly not inspiring or unique.

Last one…

"We are committed to achieving new standards of excellence by providing superior human capital management services and maximizing the potential of all stakeholders – clients, candidates and employees – through the delivery of the most reliable, responsive….[and it goes on, but that's probably enough]…"

It would be quite hard to write a vision statement filled with less tangibility and more subjectivity that this one. 'New standards of excellence'. 'Superior human capital management'. 'Maximising the potential'. There are simply far too many buzz words, intangibles and vaguery here for this to be either memorable or inspiring.

We are of course being rather harsh. But hopefully the above examples illustrate well some of the pitfalls to avoid when creating your own vision.
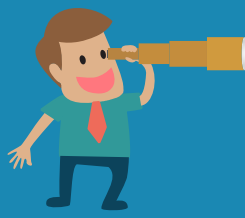
The Process

There are literally hundreds of articles out there that will give you examples of good and bad vision statements as well as a high-level overview of what to consider when creating your own. But what we noticed was lacking was a concrete process to go through to help you create one. As such, we've outlined a process that we have used with clients in Cascade that might work for you too.

Step 1: Define what you do as an output

Start by being exceptionally clear about what it is your organization actually does. Be careful to remain 'output focused' rather than 'input focused'. For example, Microsoft famously had a vision statement to *Put a Microsoft powered computer on every desk in the world* (slightly paraphrased). Strictly speaking what Microsoft 'do' is make computer software, but for the purposes of their vision, they looked forward to the actual outcome of this process – i.e. computers on desks.

- A bakery makes bread. But the outcome is consumers enjoying that bread.
- A consulting company gives advice. But the outcome is the success of others based on that advice.
- A government department does…lots of things. But the outcome is better lives for the citizens they serve.

Whilst this process may seem obvious – you would be surprised by how rarely organizations actually go through this process in a formal, written way. Doing so will take you a long way towards creating your vision statement – BUT it's not enough alone! If it was, all bakeries for example would have the same vision statement – which is hardly inspiring!

Step 2: Define what unique twist your organization brings to the outcome

Very few products or services these days are truly new – most are more like reinventions of something that exists already, but with a different approach, focus or spin.

At some point in your organization's lifespan – someone will have believed that the reason that THIS organization would be successful where others have failed, was because of………something.

You need to define that something!

Let's take our bakery example. So far, our vision statement is looking pretty generic, along the lines of customers enjoying our bread. But why will they enjoy our bread MORE than the bread from the place next door? Is it because we use centuries old traditions passed through generations of our family?

Because we only use premium grade locally sourced ingredients? Whatever your unique selling point is – let it shine through in your vision statement.

Step 3: Apply some high-level quantification

A common problem with vision statements is ironically, that they are too visionary! With no possible end in sight (or a totally unrealistic one) – the initial inspiration derived from a great vision statement can quickly turn to frustration, or even cynicism among employees and customers.

That said – don't be too specific or apply specific metrics at this stage (they will come later in our planning process).

Sticking with our bakery example – we might want to refine our target audience to 'every customer who walks through the door' – that's fine, or maybe we want to be bolder: 'every customer within walking distance of a store'.

The quantification we apply could also be industry specific if you're a B2B – are you shooting for SMEs or multinationals for example?

Step 4: Add relatable, human, 'real world' aspects

OK, your vision by this point should be getting pretty close to being finished. But one final trick you can apply to help make it even more memorable is to add a real-life aspect so that people can conjure up a solid mental image to associate with your vision statement. Let's look at an example – which of the following statements is likely to be more memorable:

a) To have every working person in the world using Microsoft product. Or…..
b) A Microsoft powered computer on every desk.

I would argue that (b) is more memorable, because as I read this, I'm actually visualising a computer (in my case) sitting on a wooden desk in a room. There's nothing wrong with (a) but it's highly conceptual and thus difficult to transform into a mental picture. Let's look at another example:

Ensure that every customer who leaves our store, does so smiling.
Here, using the word 'smiling' as apposed to 'happy' is powerful, because it conjures a mental image of a person smiling.

It won't always be possible to bring this level of tangibility to your vision statement – but if it is, I would strongly encourage doing so.

Bringing it all Together

Let's finish off with a look at what a completed vision statement could look like for our bakery, based on the above:

Producing and selling locally sourced cakes and pies that are so delicious and satisfying, that every customer who leaves our store does so with a smile.

If we deconstruct this into our various steps, we can see each at work as follows:

Producing and selling locally sourced cakes and pies that are so delicious and satisfying, that every customer who leaves our store does so with a smile.

    Step 1 – The output

    Step 2 – The twist

    Step 3 – The quantification

    Step 4 – The human connection

There are other ways to construct great vision statements – and even if yours ends up looking a little different, following this simple process will help you to create powerful, punchy vision statements that will *stand the test of time.*

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