By James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

Envisioning Your Future:

Imagining Ideal Scenarios

A leader's step-by-step guide to envisioning the future — and communicating it to others.

You feel a strong desire to go on a challenging expedition to a place you've never been. It's a desire that you can't shake, something that you think about day and night.

At first, your desire for challenge is quite vague; you don't have a specific destination in mind. But soon you feel a need to decide on the kind of challenging journey that you want for yourself. You look at some alternatives: trekking through the mountains, sailing an ocean, hiking across a desert, going on a safari. Whether through conscious thought or unfocused meditation, you discover what appeals to you the most: You decide, for example, that you've always wanted to take a trek through the Himalayas.

So what do you do now? More than likely, you consult a travel guide, study maps, look at photographs. You talk to people who have climbed the Himalayas, read adventure stories by those who have done it before. You begin to get a real sense of the place—the weather, the dress, the customs, the food, the travel conditions—all those impressions that clarify your understanding of your destination.

Not wanting your trip to be just like others you've heard about, you decide that you'll make this something special. You decide that your expedition will be unique, one that no one else has ever undertaken—perhaps even one that *National Geographic* would want to cover.

Then you set a date many months or even years in the future. You know such arduous journeys aren't done alone, so you determine who else might share your desire for challenge and how those people would benefit from the experience. You recruit some colleagues, selling them on the benefits of high adventure. Then the planning begins in earnest.

Discovering a vision for your organization is similar in many ways to these initial stages of preparing for an expedition. You feel a strong inner sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are in your community, congre-

gation, or company and have an equally strong belief that things don't have to be this way. Envisioning the future begins with a vague desire to do something that would challenge yourself and others.

Because you want what you create to be unique, you differentiate your organization or cause from others that produce the same product, provide the same service, or make the same promise. Yours is a distinctive vision, an ideal.

Visions for organizations or reformations or movements, as well as visions for journeys, are more complex than this, of course. And we don't necessarily follow such a sequential process for clarifying our visions—especially if we're attempting to achieve what no one has ever achieved before.

Four Attributes of Vision

Let's take a closer look at four attributes of vision, which we define as *an ideal and unique image of the future.*

1. Ideality: The Pursuit of Excellence

Visions are about possibilities, about desired futures. They're ideals, standards of excellence. As such, they're expressions of optimism and hope. A mode of thinking based on visions opens us up to considering possibilities, not simply probabilities.

Indeed, it is exactly this belief that sustains teacher Nolan Dishongh and helps him spark possibility thinking in students otherwise at risk. Many of the 14- to 16-year-olds in Dishongh's construction trades class at Alice Johnson Junior High, 25 miles east of Houston, have well-earned reputations as troublemakers, as students with short attention spans, low grades, and little interest in learning. Many are from broken or abusive homes; some are known gang members.

Dishongh sets the tone at the start of each school year by asking his students to lay their heads on their desks. Then, in his deep, soothing voice, he instructs them to think about their mother, about her holding them close as infants, feeding them and singing to them. He asks them to try to remember how that felt. He says, "She *loves* you, no matter what, but what makes her happy is being proud of you. I believe each and every one of you *wants* your mother to be proud of you. I know you do. And that's what we're doing here. It's not about grades. It's about your mother being proud."

The youths quickly realize that this isn't a "normal" classroom and Dishongh isn't a "normal" teacher. He cares. He believes his students can become people to be proud of—not at risk but full of possibilities.

Most success stories, like Nolan Dishongh's, are about possibilities. They are about improving upon the existing situation or creating an entirely new state of existence. Many leaders are dissatisfied with the status quo and believe that something better is attainable. Their leadership experiences are examples of possibility thinking. They represent the choice of an ideal.

Teacher Nolan Dishongh poses with students in his construction trades class. Dishongh encourages the youngsters to envision possibilities.

Ideals reveal our higher-order value preferences. They represent our ultimate economic, technological, political, social, and aesthetic priorities. The ideals of world peace, freedom, justice, a comfortable life, happiness, self-respect, and the like are among the ultimate strivings of our existence—the ones that we seek to attain over the long term. They're statements of the idealized purpose that we hope all our practical actions will enable us to attain.

2. Uniqueness: Pride in Being Different

Visions communicate what makes us singular and unequaled; they set us apart from everyone else. Visions must differentiate us from others if we're to attract and retain employees, volunteers, customers, clients, donors, or investors. There's no advantage in working for, buying from, or investing in an organization that does exactly the same thing as the one across the street or down the hall. Only when people understand how we're truly distinctive, how we stand out in the crowd, will they want to sign up with us.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF ALICE JOHNSON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL, CHANNELVIEW, TEXAS

Reaching new heights is one of Nolan Dishongh's junior-high students.

One of the best ways you can discover that uniqueness in your organiza-

Grades for Vision Statements

Visions and mission statements ideally define an organization's purpose and future direction. Several such organizational vision and mission statements are reviewed in a recent book by management consultant Karl Albrecht.

A vision is "an image of what the people of the enterprise aspire for it to be or become," Albrecht explains in *The Northbound Train*. Among the traits that make a vision effective are that it goes beyond mere platitudes, exudes a sense that the organization can make the world better in some way, and is something that people can realistically believe is attainable.

Albrecht's assessments of a few organizational visions:

- **Sabre Operations** (computerized reservation system for American Airlines): "To satisfy each external and internal customer by providing caring yet professional service that exceeds all our customers' expectations."
Grade: D *Albrecht comments:* "A generic, all-purpose statement that could apply to any business at all."

- **British Royal Mail:** "To be recognized as the best organization in the world delivering text and packages."
Grade: B+ *Comment:* "Simple and easy to grasp. However, when a vision statement talks about being the best in the world, one has to ask whether it is credible."

- **Levi Strauss & Co.:** "To sustain profitable and responsible commercial success by marketing jeans and selected casual apparel under the Levi's brand."
Grade: C *Comment:* "Doesn't dramatize a customer-need premise; doesn't convey the value premise of the product; gives no clue about how the company sustains the 100-year love affair it has had with its customers."

- **Rodale Press:** "To show people how they can use the power of their bodies and minds to make their lives better. 'You can do it,' we say on every page of our magazines and books."
Grade: A *Comment:* "Puts the customer value premise right up front. . . . Very brief and memorable, without being bland and meaningless."

- **"Po' Folks" Restaurant:** "We always want to be the friendliest place you'll ever find to bring your family for great tasting, homestyle cooking, served with care and pride in a pleasant country-home setting at reasonable prices."
Grade: A+ *Comment:* "This tells just about everything. It's also an example of a message that can be both a statement for the people of the company and an appeal to their customers. It has a clear customer-need premise, a clear value-delivery premise, and a sense of specialness."

Albrecht concludes that an effective vision or mission statement "tells the story of our way of doing business." The best are concise, memorable, and *doable*.

Source: *The Northbound Train: Finding the Purpose, Setting the Direction, Shaping the Destiny of Your Organization* by Karl Albrecht. AMACOM. 1994. 213 pages. Available from the Futurist Bookstore for $22.95 ($20.95 for Society members), cat. no. B-1959.

tion's vision is to begin by asking why your customers, internal or external, would want to buy your particular service or product, attend your program, or listen to your sermon.

One of our favorite answers to that question was this simple yet eloquent statement from the late Edward Goeppner of the Podesta Baldocchi chain of flower shops: "We don't sell flowers, we sell beauty." While customers of a florist do exchange money for a dozen roses, what they're really buying is something more than that: They want to beautify their homes, or express their love for others, or brighten the day. It doesn't take vision to sell a flower on a street corner, but it does take vision to sell beauty.

3. Future Orientation: Looking Forward

Constituents want their leaders to be "forward-looking," to have "a long-term vision or direction." Leaders need to be proactive in thinking about the future, and this imperative increases with one's scope and level of responsibility.

Visions are statements of destination, of the ends of our labor; they are therefore future-oriented and are made real over different spans of time. It may take three years from the time we decide to climb a mountain until we actually reach the summit. It may take two to three years before a new car is ready for production. It may take a decade to build a company, a century to grow a forest, and generations to set a people free. For leaders of a community who envision neighborhoods so safe from crime that little children might once again walk alone to the corner store, aspirations may take a lifetime to achieve.

The point is that leaders must occupy themselves with thinking about the future and become able to project themselves ahead in time. The result of their thinking ahead is what we call a "vision."

4. Imagery: Pictures of the Future

Leaders often talk about future issues in terms of foresight, focus, forecasts, future scenarios, points of view, and perspectives. These are all *visual* references.

Try this experiment: Think about

Paris. What immediately comes to mind? Most people think of the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Seine, Notre Dame, good food, wine, romance. These are images of real places and real sensations. You probably do *not* think of square kilometers, population, or gross domestic product of Paris. Numbers aren't what first comes to mind. Why? We recall the images of reality, not abstractions from reality.

To envision the future we must be able to draw upon that very natural mental process of creating images. When we invent the future, we need to get a mental picture of what things will be like long before we begin the journey. Images are our windows on the world of tomorrow. When talking about going places we've never been—whether to the top of an unclimbed mountain or to the pinnacle of an entirely new industry—we imagine what they'd look like. We picture the possibilities.

Visions are conceptualizations. They become real as leaders express those images in concrete terms to their constituents. Just as architects make drawings and engineers build models, leaders find ways of giving expression to their hopes for the future.

Applying Vision to the Future

The most important role of visions in organizational life is to give focus to human energy. Visions are like lenses that focus unrefracted rays of light. To enable everyone concerned with an enterprise to see more clearly what's ahead of them, leaders must have and convey a focus.

Imagine watching a slide show when the projector is out of focus. How would you feel if you had to watch blurred, vague, and indistinct images for an entire presentation? We've experimented with this in some of our leadership programs. The reaction is predictable. People express frustration, impatience, confusion, anger, even nausea. They avoid the situation by looking away. When we ask them whose responsibility it is to focus the projector, the vote is unanimous: "The leader—the person with the focus button."

The leader's job is to keep the projector focused. No matter how much involvement other people have in shaping the vision, we expect that the leader will be able to articulate it. To use another metaphor, it's easier to put a jigsaw puzzle together if you can see the picture on the box cover. The leader's job is to paint the big picture, to convey the vision, giving people a clear sense of what the puzzle will look like when everyone has put the pieces in place.

A vision is a mental picture of what tomorrow will look like. It expresses our highest standards and values. It sets us apart and makes us feel special. It spans years of time and keeps us focused on the future. And if it's to be attractive to more than an insignificant few, it must appeal to all of those who have a stake in it.

Whether you're leading a small department of 15, a large organization of 15,000, or a community of 150,000, your vision sets the agenda and gives direction and purpose to the enterprise. As a leader, you must create a vision for your organization—one based on ideal and unique images of a common future.

Eight Actions for Finding And Focusing Your Vision

The following are some practical action-steps for developing your vision and preparing to move with it into the future.

1. Think First about Your Past

Leaders with the longest time horizons are those who understand their past. Before you attempt to write your vision statement, write down significant past events of your life. A useful "lifeline" exercise was developed by Herb Shepard and Jack Hawley, authors of *Life Planning: Personal and Organizational* (National Training and Development Service Press, 1974). Here's an abbreviated version:

- Draw your lifeline as a graph, with the peaks representing the highs in your life and the valleys representing the lows. Start as far back as you can remember and stop at the present time.
- Next to each peak, write a word or two identifying the peak experience. Do the same for the valleys.
- Now go back and think about each peak, making a few notes on why each was a high point for you.
- Analyze your notes. What themes and patterns are revealed by the peaks in your life? What important personal strengths are revealed? What do these themes and patterns tell you about what you're likely to find personally compelling in the future?

You can also apply the process to your organization. By looking over the history of your organization, you begin to see its strengths and weaknesses. You can then become better informed about the foundation on which you're building the organizational future.

2. Determine What You Want

Are you in your job *to do something,* or are you in your job *for something to do?* If your answer is "to do something," take out a sheet of paper and at the top write, "What I want to accomplish." Now make a list of all the things that you want to achieve on the job. For each item, ask yourself, "Why do I want this?" Keep on asking why until you run out of reasons. By doing this exercise, you're likely to discover those few higher-order values that are the idealized ends for which you strive.

Now ask:

- How would I like to change the world for myself and my organization?
- If I could invent the future, what future would I invent for myself and

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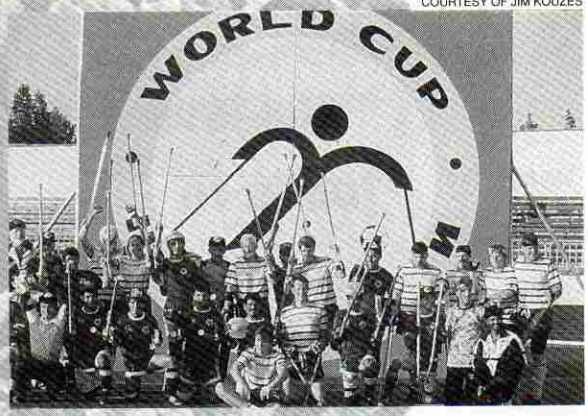

Amputee Soccer League is the brainchild of entrepreneur Don Bennett, who acted immediately on an idea. Bennett is in the back row, center, wearing jersey number 15.

"'We don't sell flowers, we sell beauty.'. . . It doesn't take vision to sell a flower on a street corner, but it does take vision to sell beauty."

PETER BLOOMFIELD, CHELSEA AMERICA FLOWER SHOWS

my organization?

- What mission in life absolutely obsesses me?
- What's my dream about my work?
- What's the distinctive role or skill of my organization (department, plant, project, company, agency, congregation, community)?
- What's my burning passion?
- What work do I find absorbing, involving, enthralling? What will happen in 10 years if I remain absorbed, involved, and enthralled in that work?
- What does my ideal organization look like?
- What's my personal agenda? What do I want to prove?

3. Write an Article about How You've Made a Difference

Your responses to the questions just posed should give you some clues to what you would like to accomplish in your life (and why). Now take it a step further. Imagine that it's the year 2005 and you've been selected to receive an award as one of the 50 people who have made a difference in this century. Imagine that a national magazine has put together an article about the difference that you've made to your organization, family, or community. Write that article.

Don't censor yourself. Allow yourself this opportunity to record your hopes and dreams even if you find the process somewhat embarrassing. The more comfortable you are in discussing your innermost wishes, the easier it will become to communicate a vision to others. In writing your article, ask yourself the following questions:

- What am I most proud of?
- What's my greatest contribution to my community's or organization's growth?

Then, once you've answered these and similar questions, project your answers into the future.

Writing such an article—and then reading it to your colleagues—is a very powerful way to clarify what's truly important to you. By looking back over your life and its potential, you come face to face with the legacy you want to leave. Your article should bring that legacy into clearer focus.

4. Write a Short Vision Statement

Take all the information you've just gathered and write your ideal and unique image of the future for yourself and for your organization. This statement should be short—you ought to be able to tell it to others in about five to seven minutes. Any longer than that, and people are likely to lose interest.

Once you've written it, try drawing it, finding a picture that resembles it, or creating a symbol that represents it. Finally, create a short slogan of five to nine words that captures the essence of your vision. Edward Goeppner's "We don't sell flowers, we sell beauty" is a good example. A brief slogan is very useful in communication. It's not a substitute for a complete statement, but it does help others to remember the essential reason for the organization's existence.

5. Act on Your Intuition

Visions often take a while to take shape in the mind. We need even longer before we can formulate them into articulate statements. Instead of struggling with words on paper, do something to act on your intuition. Do as Don Bennett did when he acted immediately on his inspiration to start the Amputee Soccer League. If you're inspired to do something, go try it. Go kick the ball around. Then you'll see whether you really believe that you're on the right track.

You'll also see whether others are as enthusiastic about the idea as you are. Visions, like objects in the dis-

tance, get clearer and clearer as we move toward them. Talk to people. Share your thoughts with others.

6. Test Your Assumptions

Our assumptions are mental screens that expand or constrain what's possible. To determine their validity in regard to your vision, take the following steps:

- Make a list of the assumptions underlying your vision.
- Flesh out each assumption: Ask yourself what you assume to be true or untrue about your constituents and your organization, about science and technology, about economics and politics, about the future itself.
- Ask a few close advisers to react to your assumptions. Do they agree or disagree with you? Why or why not?
- Ask people who you think might have different assumptions to respond to yours.
- Test your assumptions by trying an experiment or two. Don Bennett assumed that amputees could do more than they might think—like play soccer—so he tested his assumption by kicking a ball around one day. Now there's a world cup of amputee soccer each year.

7. Become a Futurist

Ask yourself what's driving your organization's agenda (or that of your congregation, community, department, or agency). Is it your own view of the future or someone else's perspective (such as the competition's)? Does the organization have a clear and shared understanding of how the field or industry will be different 10 years from now?

Set up a futures-research committee in your organization to study developing issues and potential changes in areas affecting your business. A few years ago, the American Life Insurance Council established the Trend Analysis Program. A team of more than 100 people began continually tracking more than 60 publications that represent new thoughts on trends in American society, then abstracting the articles. A smaller team then pulled the abstracts into reports for use in planning and decision making.

You could adapt this methodology, or a similar one, to your setting. Have all the people in your organization regularly clip articles from the newspapers and magazines they subscribe to. Surf the Internet. Circulate the ideas generated by this tracking and discuss trends and impacts on your product, service, technology, department, agency, company, and/or community. Use these discussions to help you and your organization develop the ability to think long term.

8. Rehearse Your Vision

Once you've clarified your vision, one of the most effective things you can do to help you realize it is mental rehearsal—the act of mentally practicing a skill, sequence of skills, or attitude using visual imagery or kinesthetic feelings.

Mental rehearsal is used extensively in sports training to improve athletic performance. By visualizing yourself doing a move perfectly or reaching a desired goal, you increase your chances of making imagination become reality. Don Bennett told us that he imagined himself on the top of Mount Rainier a thousand times a day before his climb. Adapt this technique to your situation: Imagine what it will be like when you and your organization attain your vision. Rehearse this scenario over and over again.

Another practical technique is affirmation—a positive assertion that something is already so. It's a way of making firm that which you imagine for the future. An affirmation, sometimes called positive self-talk, can be made in writing, made silently, or spoken aloud. Whatever the mode, it's most effective in the present tense, as if the desired state already existed.

Write several affirmations about the ideal and unique image of your organization. Phrase your affirmation positively in terms of what you want. Make it short, and repeat it over and over to yourself.

The Compass and the Dream

These techniques should help you focus your vision and create positive expectations about the future. These techniques, and others like them, aren't substitutes for personal conviction and a vision of substance, but they're extremely useful in keeping you focused on what you want to create. The more positive you feel about the future you envision, the better able you'll be to communicate positively with others.

Even armed with techniques, though, leaders find that there's no freeway to the future, no paved highway from here to tomorrow. Nor are there roadmaps or signposts. Instead, the explorer must rely upon a compass and a dream. The vision of an organization acts as its magnetic north. It possesses the extraordinary ability to attract human energy. It invites and draws others to it by the force of its own appeal. □

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