

The Vision Process: Seven Steps to a Better Organization

by Matthew J. Bonnot and Carey W. Walker

*Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?
That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.
I don't much care where—said Alice.
Then it doesn't matter which way you go, said the Cat.*

— Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, by Lewis Carroll

When someone mentions the need for a vision in an organization, more seasoned leaders tend to roll their eyes at the concept and snicker and with good reason. New leaders seem to publish vision statements much the same way politicians promise to balance the budget. It is done with great hoopla and noise, but nothing seems to come of it. The vision statement goes into a file until the next leader takes over and publishes a new one. This happens for a couple of reasons. Vision statements are typically long, verbose declarations written in isolation, making them about as memorable as an annual shareholder report. On the rare occasions when they do pique our interest, they provide little direction for moving the organization into the future. In other words, they have no associated implementation plan. It does not have to be this way.

Members of the military are familiar with the term “commander’s intent.”¹ It is a statement that provides the purpose and desired end state for an operation. It clearly articulates the conditions required for mission success, which increases shared understanding within the organization and drives individual initiative. Everyone in the organization is charged with understanding the commander’s intent.

Intent statements from military commanders, however, are for specific missions and operations. How can leaders capture this concept while casting a wider net and shifting the focus

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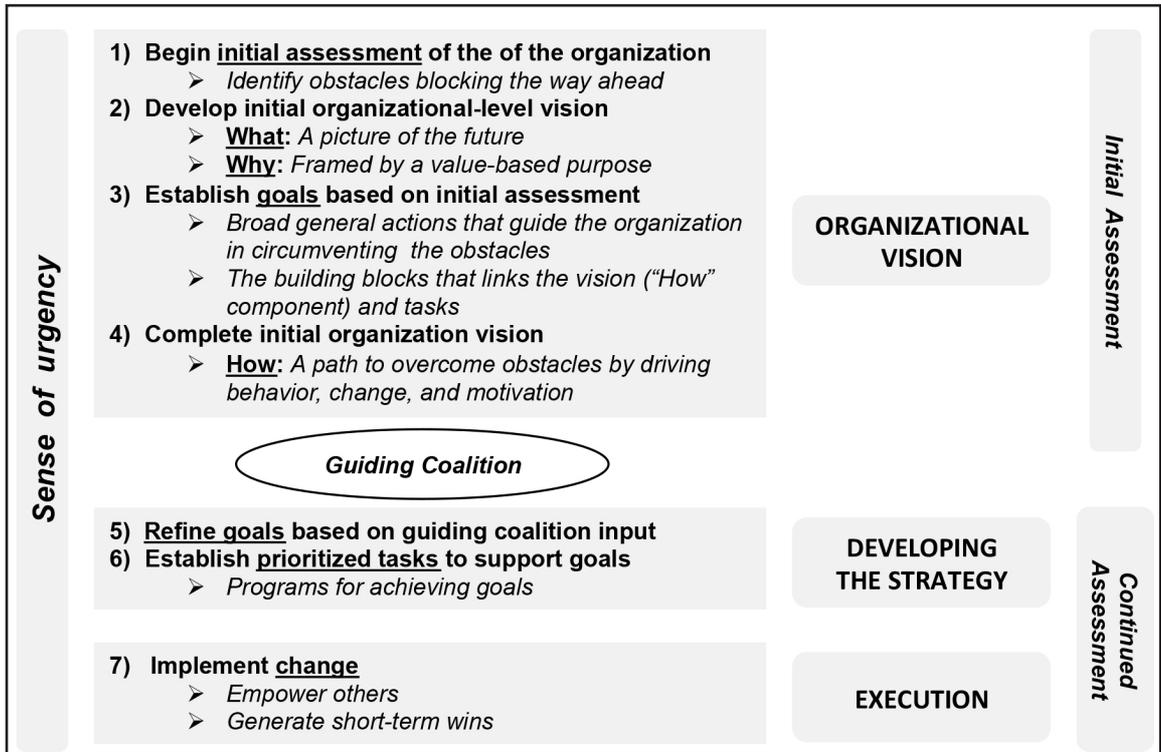


Figure 1. The Seven-Step Vision Process.

Source: Created by the authors.

to the organization as a whole? How can they improve the organization while still operating to accomplish the mission? It is through a vision process.

Books on leadership are replete with references on the importance of sharing a vision to provide organizations a sense of purpose, inspiration, long-term direction, and goals. Most come up short, however, on the mechanics of creating one, beyond the development of a short, pithy statement that will somehow catch lightning in a bottle and inspire unremittent loyalty within the organization. More significantly, these “expert” publications are deathly silent on the critical step of implementing a vision. We take a different approach. This article describes a process for creating and implementing a vision as part of a change strategy. It incorporates a seven-step methodology for tackling the very challenging—but very important—task of bringing meaning to the idea of an

organizational-level vision.

We begin with a definition. Organizational-level vision is a “picture of the future framed by a value-based purpose that creates a path to drive behavior, change, and motivation.” For ease of understanding, we can deconstruct the definition into three components using a variation of Senge’s governing ideas for a vision.²

- What: A picture of the future (i.e., “What we want”).
- Why: Framed by a value-based purpose (answers the question, “Why do we do what we do?”)
- How: Creating a path to drive behavior, change, and motivation.

The seven-step process is visually depicted in Figure 1.

The first four steps of the process cover the formulation of the organizational vision.

It is written from a leader’s perspective, since leaders are inherently responsible for the first two components of the vision, the “what” and “why.” This does not preclude collaboration by the leader, which is expected and encouraged. It simply recognizes the office of the person in charge and the associated decision-making authority that rests with the boss.

Steps five and six focus on developing the strategy for implementing the vision. At this point in the process, use of collaboration in the form of a guiding coalition is critical.³ The leader is transitioning the plan from concepts to constructive actions and needs a committed and collaborative team to formulate the effort.

The final step of the process is the execution of the plan. You cannot implement a vision without effecting change, so the fundamental ideas from Kotter’s critical work *Leading Change* are closely entwined within the discussion.

As you study the steps in the process, remember that implementing a vision is fundamentally a form of problem solving closely associated with Army design methodology.⁴ You identify your future state or objective (the “what”), explain the purpose for going there (the “why”), determine obstacles blocking the way (as part of your assessment), figure out how to take down the obstacles (the “how”), and then execute the plan. Leadership pundits tend to mystify the vision process because, typically, it is not done well. It is not rocket science. But it is hard. It takes time, persistence, and thought.

The Vision Process

Step 1: Begin an initial assessment of the organization.

New leaders usually begin assessing organizations prior to arrival based on previous knowledge, experience, reputation, research, and study. This preparation forms the foundation for the initial “what” and “why” of the vision. More

experienced leaders identify these components before setting foot within the organization. Less experienced ones, unfamiliar with the organization’s culture and operational focus, need time on the ground to gain situational understanding and uncover the shared beliefs that form the culture of the organization.⁵

Upon arrival, working with key members of the organization, new leaders continue their initial assessment. Earlier expectations are confirmed or denied based on personal impressions and continued gathering of information to form or revise a preliminary “what” and “why.” This is critical. Having a “what” and “why” allows leaders to better focus their initial assessment. If they know where they are going—unlike Alice in the opening quote—they can better determine problems that impede movement to this future state.

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Thus, a primary purpose of the initial assessment is to identify the obstacles organizations must overcome to navigate the way ahead. From a problem-solving perspective, without the “what,” the initial assessment has little focus or direction. You will identify plenty of potential problems as you analyze the organization, but true problems are the ones that block your path, not detritus on the side of the road.

Remember, the initial assessment continues throughout the first four steps of this process. It does not consist of walking around an organization for a day or two and suddenly achieving perfect understanding. Few people have a “eureka moment” when figuring out the “what” and “why” for their organization. It takes time and analysis.

Step 2: Develop an initial organizational-level vision.

As mentioned earlier, new leaders do not typically walk into organizations with preformed visions in their heads. But they should, based on their experiences and background, have some initial ideas developed on the “what” (a picture of the future) and “why” (framed by a value-based purpose) components of the vision. They then refine these ideas as discussed below during their initial assessment of the organization.

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The challenges with describing a picture of the future for an organization are twofold. The leader must first have a “picture” of a future state. “Where are we going?” “What do we want the organization to look like?” This is easier said than done. Immediate demands tend to drive thinking and overwhelm any thoughts for long-term development.

The ability to step back and reflect is a deliberate act and does not occur by happenstance. But it is what organizational-level leaders get paid to do, and it takes an incredible amount of persistence to force a separation from the here-and-now and look to the future. To do it, the leader must have a good understanding of the organization—its mission and functions, the shared beliefs (i.e., cultural norms and values) associated with the most critical functions performed by the organization, its relationship to affiliated organizations, and its interdependence with the surrounding environment—all within a future timeframe nested with the boss’s vision (if he or she has one). Gaining this situational understanding can take time. Many leaders want to formulate the initial “what” prior to arrival so they can hit the ground running. Depending on

their experience, this may be unrealistic and, as a minimum, requires validation and adjustment as they go through their initial “on-the-ground” assessment (Step 1).

The second challenge with describing a picture of the future is ensuring the “what” is meaningful. Simply stating the organization will be “the best” is equivalent to saying, “everyone is a winner.” It does little for motivation. Everyone wants to be the best or already thinks they are. The “what” should inspire others by providing an organization-specific focus that is inextricably linked to the organization’s culture (i.e., the collective learning of the group).

For example, consider this from an educator’s perspective. The authors teach in the Department of Command and Leadership (DCL) at the Army’s Command and General Staff College. Should DCL be “the best teaching department in the college” or “serve as the Army’s premier organizational-level leadership resource?” The first “what” description might provide short-term gratification for the faculty, but would not sit well with other departments in the school; plus, it has a finite end state. What do you do when you become the best? You probably spend more time worrying about the performance of other organizations than your own. The second designation casts a much wider net by focusing on the actions that make the teaching department successful; it is a very challenging but attainable objective.

The concept of “a value-based purpose” means focusing on what is of value, worth, or importance to the organization when describing why we want to achieve some future state. It answers the question, “Why do we do what we do?” For example, a teaching organization finds value in enhancing life-long learning, meaning making, and critical thinking. What an organization holds in value is inextricably linked to its culture. The collective norms and valued outcomes form the shared beliefs that drive thinking and behavior in organizations.⁶

Assessment	Goals
The school has weak professional development programs and fails to promote from within.	Growing Talent
Tendency towards group thinking and over reliance on dated curriculum.	Generating Ideas
An inability to integrate new processes and procedures into the organization.	Using Systems Approach

Figure 2. Initial Assessment and Goals.
Source: Created by the authors.

Returning to the teaching organization example, the “why” component of the vision could be “to instill a desire in others, both in an out of the schoolhouse, to be better leaders.” This directly links to the three attributes of life-long learning, meaning making, and critical thinking. The challenge in formulating the “why” is moving beyond trite, formulaic statements to something that has meaning and “sticking power” in the organization. Putting the “why” within a functional context (i.e., “why we do what we do”) helps ensure success.

Step 3: Establish goals based on the initial assessment.

Implementing a vision is grounded in the fundamentals of problem solving. The “what” provides the end state or objective, and the initial assessment identifies the obstacles blocking the path. The missing link is the goals, the broad general actions for navigating the path and circumventing the obstacles. Once identified, the goals form the foundation for the “how” component of the vision.

Most leaders fail at implementing a vision because they never get beyond Step 2. They formulate the “what” and “why” prior to arrival, publish it as a vision statement once on the ground, and then move on to more pressing issues. Some make tweaks to the “what” and “why” of the vision based on their initial assessment. Most skip the third step because they do not understand the goal-setting process or suddenly realize how hard it is. Step 3 is the

transition point from words to action. Leaders must identify goals for the organization, and these goals must address the problems that impede forward movement.

Leaders that do get this far often struggle because they make the goals too broad and not problem specific: “It’s all about taking care of our people and our interagency partners.” These might, in fact, be very good words for a vision statement, but if the leader cannot identify a cause and effect relationship between an objective, obstacles, goals, and associated tasks, the organization probably is not headed in the right direction.

For our teaching institution example, a department might identify the following three goals based on the initial assessment listed in Figure 2.

Step 4: Complete the initial organizational-level vision.

The “how” component of the vision is the path the organization must follow to achieve the picture of the future. Formulating the “how” begins with the leader’s initial assessment of the organization and the identification of organizational goals. The leader must determine where the organization is, where it needs to go, and the barriers or obstacles that must be overcome to move the organization to that future state. Overcoming these hurdles requires driving change within the organization and motivating others by providing direction, intensity, and persistence to behavior.⁷ The “how” therefore,

based on the identified goals, describes in general terms a path to drive behavior, change, and motivation.

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If the leader has done a good job identifying the goals for the organization, the major challenge with the “how” is packaging. The leader must communicate these ideas within a vision that is short, concise, and meaningful. This is more important than you might think. The primary purpose is not having a vision statement you can publish and post (though that may happen). It is having a statement people can remember, talk about, and hopefully internalize. Here is an example using the teaching organization illustration:

The Department of Command and Leadership serves as the Army’s premier organizational-level leadership resource by instilling a desire in others, both in and out of the schoolhouse, to be better leaders. We do this by growing talent, generating ideas, and using a systems approach to drive excellence in the department.

The statement is written in the present tense because the vision process is an ongoing event. It embraces the idea that the change initiative is occurring now and not in some future time frame.

Step 5: Refine the goals based on guiding coalition input.

The perception to this point is that leaders conduct the first four steps primarily on their own. That is rarely the case. Depending on the organization, leaders begin building a guiding coalition of key and influential members prior

to arrival, if possible. To affect change within an organization, leaders and a guiding coalition of key and influential members must share a vision, which requires gaining commitment from the guiding coalition that will lead the implementation plan and foster a sense of urgency in its execution.⁸

Gaining this buy-in and input means giving the members a voice in the vision process,⁹ especially in establishing the implementation strategy (Steps 5 and 6). Obviously, the coalition must be on board with the “what” and “why” of the vision—they get a voice in this as well—but their most important input is refining the goals. Members must validate cause and effect relationships to ensure the correct problems are identified and the corresponding goals move the organization on a path to overcome the identified obstacles to achieve the future state. This is a difficult task. The leader cannot do this in isolation; it requires a team effort.

An effective method for building a guiding coalition and energizing a team is to create a sense of urgency throughout the vision-implementation process. There are several ways to do this. One approach uses commitment-focused influence techniques, which requires the use of personal power, the trust-based authority given to leaders by followers because of their admiration and respect for the person. Leaders that use this effective but time-intensive approach rely on relationship building and personal appeals to establish emotional bonds with their followers to create a cohesive team.¹⁰ Alternatively, leaders with less available time can create dissatisfaction with the status quo within the organization, a powerful catalyst for overcoming resistance to change.¹¹ Leaders have to increase dissatisfaction to the point where followers are willing to take action, but not tip the organization into apathy.¹² This increase in dissatisfaction could be through awareness—the intrinsic motivation of a better future to gain commitment—but the implementation plan

Steps to Empowering Others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a supportive work environment • Demonstrating trust in subordinates to build confidence and cohesion • Sharing of power, typically in the form of position power, to allow decision making • Training to provide necessary skills • Providing resources, especially time, to foster professional development and growth • Giving feedback to improve performance through a process of meaning-making

Figure 3. Steps to Empowering Others.
Source: Created by the authors.

most likely will include extrinsic motivation techniques as well to gain compliance.

Step 6: Establish prioritized tasks to support the goals.

While goals form the building blocks of the implementation strategy, prioritized tasks represent the concrete and measurable programs and activities required to support the goals. What makes this step especially difficult is the issue of resourcing. Material, manpower, and time come at a cost, and leaders must carefully plan and prepare their strategy using a systems approach as they weigh and prioritize tasks.

How you define the terms in this step (tasks, activities, programs) is up to you. The key point is that the strategy must translate the goals into integrated actions, and in this framework, we use the term “prioritized tasks” to represent the process. As in Step 5, this step requires a collective effort and the guiding coalition must be at the heart of the action. Additionally, as discussed in Step 2, goals and prioritized tasks must be nested with the vision of the parent organization. Initiating actions that run counter to the intent of your boss is the quickest way to stop an implementation strategy in its tracks.

Step 7: Implement change.

Executing an implementation strategy for an organizational-level vision is all about leading change. Throughout this discussion, we highlight

key components of the change models (sense of urgency, guiding coalition, dissatisfaction, and resistance) that relate to implementing a vision.

Two important components remain: empowering others and generating short-term wins.¹³ These components are critical because they tie to intrinsic motivation, the engine of commitment. Three primary factors drive intrinsic motivation.¹⁴ The first is having a sense of purpose, a “big picture” idea that provides direction that is both worthwhile and satisfactory. We use the “what,” “why,” and “how” components of the vision to appeal to this factor.

The second factor is autonomy. People like being self-directed, acting on their own initiative to achieve a measurable outcome without micromanagement or excessive supervision. Empowering subordinates is an important component of execution and if done properly through a supportive command climate will greatly enhance performance, motivation, and commitment.¹⁵ But it must be done deliberately and thoughtfully to set people up for success (see Figure 3).

The third factor that drives intrinsic motivation is mastery. People like to get good at what they do; it provides a sense of pride and satisfaction. It also leads to success, a key indicator of mastery. Leaders that understand this dynamic use short-term wins during the

execution of a vision strategy to gain buy-in for the plan, build momentum, enhance self-direction, and strengthen commitment. Without short-term wins, followers become disillusioned, dissatisfaction grows, and resistance overwhelms the change effort.

A final point to consider is the importance of continued assessment. An organizational-level vision is not a static document. It is an active and dynamic process that requires continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment. As the operating environment changes, so must the strategy and execution that could require additional refinement of goals and prioritized tasks.

Conclusion

This article provides an overview and methodology to guide your thinking. You will undoubtedly revisit several steps during the process as you refine your thinking and consider recommendations from your guiding coalition.

While this article is written for new leaders arriving in organizations, the process works as well for those serving in current leadership positions. In fact, it is easier for incumbent leaders to execute the seven-step vision process because of their familiarity with the organization's culture. This could be an important selling point when you attempt to convince your boss of the need for an organizational-level vision.

Remember, the vision process takes significant time, substantial planning, and continuous assessment. Change is not easy, and performance typically decreases in the short run as people struggle with new ways of thinking. You must remain resilient, maximize short-term wins, and foster a learning environment that sets the conditions for long-term success. Improving while operating is not easy, but it is your charge as an organizational-level leader. The seven-step vision process will take you there. **IAJ**

NOTES

1 Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, May 2012, para. 2-10.

2 Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, Doubleday, New York, 2006, p. 208. Senge uses the words “what,” “why,” and “how” to describe the “governing ideas” that guide organizations. He equates the “what” to the vision, the picture of the future we seek to create. The “why” is the purpose or mission of the organization and answers the question, “Why do we exist?” The “how” are the core values of the organization and answer the question, “How do we want to act, consistent with our mission, along the path toward achieving our vision?” We have adopted Senge’s “governing ideas” and transformed them into a single concept, a seven-step vision process. While we use the same definition for the “what”—a picture of the future—we use a slightly different perspective for the “why” and “how” to better capture the nuances of military culture and the role of problem solving in implementing a vision.

3 John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 1996, p. 21. This leadership classic is a “must read” for all organizational leaders. It discusses the dynamics of change, the challenges of recognizing when change is necessary, and an eight-stage process for implementing lasting organizational change. We reference five of the eight stages in this article: 1) establishing a sense of urgency, 2) creating a guiding coalition, 3) developing a vision and strategy, 5) empowering broad-based action, and 6) generating short-term wins.

4 Department of the Army, ADRP 5-0, *The Operations Process*, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, May 2012, Figure 2-2.

- 5 Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, "Understanding Organizational Climate and Culture," *Army Press Online Journal*, July 2016, p. 2, <<http://armypress.dodlive.mil/understanding-organizational-climate-and-culture/>>, accessed on July 11, 2016.
- 6 Ibid., p. 3.
- 7 Richard L. Hughes et al., *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience*, McGraw-Hill Irwin, New York, 2006, p. 243.
- 8 Kotter, p. 36.
- 9 Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, "Improving while Operating: The Paradox of Learning," *Army Press Online Journal*, August 2016, p. 4, <<http://armypress.dodlive.mil/2016/08/29/improving-while-operating-the-paradox-of-learning/>>, accessed on October 6, 2016.
- 10 Walker and Bonnot, "Understanding Organizational Climate and Culture," p. 6.
- 11 Michael Beer, "Leading Change," *Harvard Business School Publishing*, January 2007, p. 1.
- 12 Walker and Bonnot, "Improving while Operating: The Paradox of Learning," p. 8.
- 13 Kotter, pp. 102 and 122.
- 14 Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2009, Chapters 4, 5, and 6.
- 15 Walker and Bonnot, "Understanding Organizational Climate and Culture," p. 6.



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