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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/joni/vol4/iss2/8

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A Blueprint for Future Achievements for Nonprofits

By Dr. William B. Calder, Director/Founder of the Centre for Values, Vision, and Mission Research.

Nonprofit organizations hire strong leaders to articulate a vivid and persuasive picture of how the organization will be better, in a significant way, than what currently exists. Leaders should not underestimate the use of a powerful vision, as it is needed to help define the issues and challenges for stakeholders (inside and outside the organization). Leaders need to describe what success looks like and continue to task all stakeholders to assist in building the “dream.”
Operational and staffing challenges are more difficult for NPOs without an articulated, compelling, and concise vision statement. The resultant costs of not having this statement properly defined and convincingly communicated to others divert stakeholder energies and initiatives. The absence of a statement about what success looks like diminishes the ability of stakeholders to bring about any real change and embrace an NPO’s strategic efforts. Stakeholders need to know where their organization wants to go, so they can help make it happen.

The pursuit of an image formulated by a strategic vision of success can motivate like-minded NPOs to work together toward the greater good. Undoubtedly, several benefits flow from a clear, concise, inspiring, and widely shared vision of success. Leaders must build on the high expectations and work performance of others towards a persuasive and positive future, indeed a vision of things to come.

An organization’s vision encompasses its destiny. It is a foundational pillar (along with mission and values) that is critical in a nonprofit’s long-term planning. An articulated vision can address any barriers that prevent its realization as it involves constituent groups looking beyond the present situation to a preferred and shared future. Therefore, a vision defines a blueprint for future aspirations that an organization wants to achieve better than what currently exists.

A believable vision keeps organizations moving forward, even against unfavourable odds. It is a powerful motivator; if meaningful enough, people will do extraordinary things to realize it. But if it lacks significance, no number of resources will be able to get people to move forward in positive and progressive ways.

**Working Without a Visionary Perspective**

Before exploring the relative merits of a well-articulated vision, let us first address the critical issues for leaders in a nonprofit organization that fail to develop a cogent vision statement. Great nonprofit organizations (NPOs) with a visionary perspective of their future, employ people to help build the “dream.” However, when that bold sense of the future is absent, NPOs become obsessed not with building their future, but with attacking all those who would prevent them from doing so. Obsessing an NPO’s current state adds no value toward a brighter future. Without a sense of optimism found in a well-crafted vision, NPOs may blame others for their challenging situation, sometimes attributed to poor government policies, lack of funds and funders, and human resource difficulties.

There is power in a vision only if others believe in it; otherwise, it is just “words” written down describing an empty plan. A vision connects all areas of an organization, such as Human Resources (HR), administration personnel, staff and support services. When leaders develop and articulate a compelling vision, it inspires stakeholders to achieve results they may never think possible. A working environment must have a positive connection so that all employees and volunteer stakeholders can imagine, understand, and be persuaded in every way possible within the organization to work toward a preferred future. The nonprofit vision needs to be consistently viewed in employees’ minds through every decision they make and in everything they do. If employees do not “buy” into the vision, they lose momentum and passion, and where there is no passion a culture of innovation soon ceases to exist.

A vision answers the question—“What does organizational success look like?” Effective vision statements clearly describe what is being built or at the very least define what success looks like for any nonprofit organization.

A well-crafted vision statement is a powerful piece of internal and external communication. A strong statement portrays a bold picture that creates a preferred future for a nonprofit organization and builds capacity and commitment to reach the vision. In the absence of such a statement, however, NPOs flounder and are pulled in many different directions and their energy becomes diverted and diminished over time. Therefore, for this operational tool to do its job, there must be “buy-in” and commitment, which means the
vision must be persistently used as a guide for every decision.

NPOs exist as future positive visions for individuals and the community that they serve. Visions reflect a brighter tomorrow. They are not to be confused with an NPO’s mission statement that answers the question: Why does this NPO exist? and an NPO’s values that address the question of “How does this organization behave?” A vision is what an NPO aspires to be and must be shared by all constituent groups. A vision must be a “picture” that lives in the hearts and minds of all concerned.

Effective vision statements need not be long but rather describe what success looks like. Yet its mere existence is often mired in controversy by a never-ending dialogue among stakeholders. Any disagreements can cause a vision statement to be “shelved” until further notice or portrayed with ambiguous descriptors, that adds confusion for leaders and staff charged with its implementation. Nonprofit stakeholders including staff, the Board, and the community need to know that their vision is being achieved.

From “Buy-In” to Destiny

If a vision does not “resonate” with stakeholder groups, it will not be realized and then it does not matter how well the dream was crafted. Interestingly, one method of helping others to embrace a vision is to invite them to criticize it (Gallo, 2011). The vision needs to have a consistent viewpoint for everyone, which is reflected in every decision made, and in every action taken. The cultural climate of discovery and action, which is necessary in today’s operational climate, therefore, cannot exist without a well-defined vision (Gallo, 2011). If employees are asked to use the organization’s vision to support their work, then it is clear the vision must be thoughtfully developed and communicated.

A vision is the cornerstone for crafting a strong mission statement that assists in the operational aspects of nonprofit organizations.

The vision connects all work initiatives for “when exceptional leaders paint a compelling vision of the future, it inspires people to achieve results they never thought possible” (Gallo, 2011, p. 69). Through a vision, there must be a positive connection for everyone to imagine, understand, and be persuaded in every action possible. In the article, “Don’t You See My Vision?” Harvard Business School professor John Kotter (2010) stated that the single biggest problem in trying to make big changes is simply getting people’s attention. He noted that “one of the most effective ways of doing that is to invite people to throw rocks at you” because “it causes sparks” and “sparks grab…attention” (p. 112). Is there a better way to get “buy-in” than by exposing the vision to the nuances that others offer in and outside of an organization?

Vision statements, especially visions of success, come after established organizational values have been discovered and documented in a strategic planning process; then from there the development of a mission statement usually follows a vision statement. While a vision is a concrete expression of a dream, a mission addresses the question: “What good, for whom?” Like all efforts, there must be a positive difference that a vision can make to others which will inspire higher levels of achievement and change.

The accomplishment of what an NPO claims through all its values, vision and mission (VVM) statements is a significant part of any decision-making and planning process. Their acceptance and understanding are indispensable tools in gauging progress in an organization’s success.

A vision is a powerful motivator only if it is vivid and meaningful enough to an organization’s stakeholders. It keeps organizations moving forward, even against unfavourable odds. But if it

Published by BYU Scholars Archive, 2023
June 2024, Vol 4, Iss 2
Journal of Nonprofit Innovation
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is not clearly defined, no number of resources will be able to get people or an organization to move forward toward their preferred future.

Roots of a Vision
The question of “where” a vision originated may not matter to a nonprofit organization. However, the issue to be addressed is – Can it be effectively articulated? And more importantly, can this vision be assessed? Unfortunately, well-intentioned vision statements might not grasp the huge potential it holds for others. Many visions do portray a bold picture of a preferred future, which builds organizational capacity and commitment to reaching the vision. However, with the absence of such a statement, many organizations flounder and can pull their resources in many different directions, while their energy becomes diverted and diminishes over time.

In an opinion piece, Sorenson (2016) looks at the influence that organizational “mottos” have on vision perspectives, as an example, “quality service comes first,” (sometimes the motto is written in Latin). She questions whether people pay any attention to any organization’s vision/motto statements. She emphasizes that today’s vision statements should include principles of service, which is striving to serve each other and society rather than the more common quest for what is defined as “success.” Vision statements are a way to ask others (for example, stakeholders and funders) to join in on future initiatives.

Organizations may sum up their vision with brief statements called “taglines.” A tagline is generally descriptive and used as a positioning “catchphrase” to distinguish itself from the competition and what it can deliver immediately to its stakeholders/clients. While taglines are created to be reflective of an NPO’s organizational vision, it is important to distinguish between a tagline and a well-defined vision statement.

Some taglines such as these examples “committed to your success,” “active minds changing lives,” and “invent the future” are just a few examples, which represent organizational “sound bites” and are usually used as a promotional activity, not something that is visionary. In an opinion piece, Graff (2022) noted that leaders all too frequently rely on hollow catchphrases or marketing taglines, to develop and promote an organization’s future, rather than advocating properly fashioned vision statements and practical policies that identify and lead to a dream.

While vision statements can sometimes crossover into fund-raising initiatives, their purpose is for NPO leaders to inspire and move the organization forward in positive ways. A vision, then, must be clear, concise, positive, forceful, inspiring, and be able to stretch the mental image of an NPO’s dream.

Selecting Future Achievements
While there is discussion on the virtues of a clear vision, there are limited suggestions on how to develop one. However, in crafting a vision some questions need to be asked and answered by a nonprofit organization that has embarked on a vision-defining process.

The following questions can be used to critique an existing vision or a statement that is under development. For example, “Was the current vision statement
• Based on the NPO’s stated beliefs?
• Developed collaboratively by stakeholders (inside and outside the organization)?
• A broad statement of what an NPO should look like in the future?
• Developed with a clear sense of direction for everyone?
• Inclusive and identified resources to reach the vision?
• Concisely written, and lacking jargon and slogans?

While a vision may be established by a strategic direction, the human potential to take an organization toward the dream continues to need constant assessment. Not all visions are effectively realized by leaders even after a convincing statement has been created. The gap between a preferred future and current practices challenges the capacity of the entire organization to move forward in any possible way.
A lofty NPO vision is what guides stakeholders’ dreams. However, the hard reality surrounds and often constrains NPO actions toward a preferred future. The juncture between lofty visions and hard reality is where most NPO personnel work every day. While the strategic direction may be well established, the human potential to take an NPO toward the dream is an ongoing operational issue and needs careful insight and assessment. NPO personnel, Board members, and leaders need to know that their vision of success for the future is being achieved.

NPOs are established for a brighter tomorrow. For example, a vision of success might be where an NPO states that it is “a community that transforms and enriches people’s lives;” the dream of that vision stands as a powerful ideal. Ultimately, all those individuals involved with the vision are the enablers of the dream.

Generally, a values statement addresses the one question of “How does an organization act?” while a mission answers the question – Why does this organization exist? and what are the planned results of its work? An NPO must arrive at a vision of what it aspires to be, and this image must be shared by all constituent groups (stakeholders). A hollow phrase is not enough for a vision and must be a vivid picture that lives in the hearts and minds of all concerned.

Vision statements come about after discovering an organization’s values possibly from a strategic planning process, then it follows that a mission follows a well-crafted vision.

There must be a positive difference that a vision can make to others which inspires higher levels of achievement and change. However, for such an important declaration, a vision statement may not be as prevalent as part of planning documents as one might imagine.

A vision is a powerful expression of an organization’s destiny and what this encompasses. The growing search for leaders who can voice this statement is a huge part of any human resource recruitment process. This expressed vision should put aside possible barriers, momentarily, and ask an organization’s staff, Board members, and administrative team to look beyond the present to a needed future. Effective vision statements lay out just what an NPO is building for its future. A winning vision of success inevitably channels stakeholders to stretch their work aspirations and performance. It also offers powerful internal and external communication for the future.

Here is an example of a well-written and thoughtful NPO vision:

“Our vision is to recruit, engage, and retain the best people from the nonprofit sector; deliver recognizable value for every dollar spent, and create an environment focused on teamwork and operational excellence for the improvement of our clients and the community we serve.”

The example noted above does capture what is being built at this nonprofit organization. People connect personally when they can “see” the future holds something desirable that does not currently exist. Of course, there is the question of how this “recognizable value” will be assessed as stated in this vision statement. Without a measurement system in place, how will an NPO realize its vision? Organizations must use innovative methods to assess their vision statements to achieve effective measurements. It would be important to identify those workplace practices that help it in reaching its vision.
A vision statement reflects what an NPO is building for its future (usually over several years). This statement, while an ideal, requires further clarification of several “words” used in describing its vision; however, this word explanation is not part of the vision itself (it is difficult to combine the two!). Words often used such as “innovative,” “excellence,” and “value-added” will need more clarity as to their meaning. Visioning is a great way for leaders to plan and present future achievements for various constituent groups to work on. If an NPO wants to discover the accuracy, currency, and relevancy of its vision then further interpretation will need to take place.

Here is another example of a good vision statement:

“Our nonprofit organization will be recognized as delivering innovative service opportunities and preparing our clients for future challenges.”

Certainly, words such as “recognized” and “innovative service opportunities” would need more precise clarification. While some stakeholders may argue that this vision statement may have difficulties, it does stretch the visionary initiatives offered by an NPO.

In both examples, there is a strong need to clarify exactly what some of these words mean regarding an NPO. For example, defining the word “recognized” would be an interesting assessment exercise. Clarity around this term would be required if an NPO was to assess how close or far away it was in achieving “recognition.” Who or what will be used to assess the success of this vision?

A vision is a foundational pillar in long-term planning and day-to-day operations. It is not simply a straightforward goal statement, such as “By 2035 we will grow our fund-raising efforts by $40M.” (a poor vision). While this goal may be achievable, a well-defined vision statement should offer inspiration to constituent groups throughout an NPO. A vision is a concrete expression of a dream and therefore is an incredible difference between being an NPO with a vision statement and being one who has become truly a visionary.

Here is an example of a poorly crafted vision statement:

“Our vision encompasses a change to our community built on mutual respect of one another and increasing funding for our programming.”

While this statement is commendable it fails to create a picture of what the community will look like in the future, simply said, what is the change taking place? Respectful community interaction is more of a “means” comment rather than a concrete dream. The increased funding is more of a goal to be reached.

In all these vision statements examples (good or poor) “value-added” words commonly used by service providers, would require extensive interpretation. The clarity of meaning adds to the metrics involved in a vision assessment. The identification of not only the people involved but also how the assessment of a vision would positively contribute to the success of achievement. The upfront work and analysis make the vision more relevant. Of course, the views of stakeholders including but not limited to advisory groups, employees, external funders, and community organizations provide essential insights into the critical assessment of a well-crafted vision.

The reality of any appropriate vision process must have complete ‘buy-in’ from the entire stakeholder group. This commitment will result in a greater acceptance of the vision itself. This acceptance, of course, will ensure better results.

Leaders will need to review external and internal issues (for example, the capacity of their stakeholders) in any vision development process, especially as part of a strategic planning exercise. “Capacity” assessment should include answers to these 7 questions, such as:

1. How does management help or hinder achieving the vision?
2. What collaboration is needed and with whom?
3. How do we want to be seen by stakeholders (e.g., community)?
4. How has the dream changed in the last ten years?
5. Who are the driving forces for a new vision (besides the leaders)?
6. What resources (human and financial) are needed?
7. When and how will an NPO know if it has achieved its vision?

All these questions must be addressed; however, they should not halt a visioning process. The answers can assist in adding unique perspectives to an assessment process but not in grinding the course of actions to a sudden stop. The visioning process for organizations can be a creative one, with the required “out of the box” thinking for individuals who engage in the process.

Evaluating a Vision
A vision is a guiding idea for what an NPO is trying to do and to become. A vision answers, “What will success look like (possibly three to five years from now)?” It is the direction it is headed, its focus, its position among other NPOs, the activities to be pursued, and the talents it plans to develop.

The idealism in visionary statements should not be confused with unrealistic expectations about a future state. A visionary leader, Board members and stakeholders must investigate the future as though it is filled with possibilities, not probabilities. Finally, visionary leadership is about increasing performance. Anticipating and influencing the future enables an NPO to position itself in the best possible way to achieve results (Kahan, 2002). One clear approach for vision statement assessment is deciding its accuracy, currency, and relevancy.

Once the responses from internal and external constituent groups have been analyzed, other questions could be created to explore how a vision builds on its beneficiaries' historical context, strengths, HR talents, financial resources, and assets. Also, questions would need to be explored as to how the vision statement clarifies operationally what NPO initiatives need to be pursued to achieve its vision. By using a survey approach NPOs might be more inclined to evaluate internal constituent groups’ perceptions of their vision rather than external groups. However, the views of stakeholder groups, such as funders, and other community members can provide important data. These perspectives are useful in further refining a vision.

While the 7 questions are a good starting point a retrospective approach over 5 years would yield better data for analysis. All these issues will need to be addressed; however more importantly they should not halt the visioning process itself. They can assist in adding unique perspectives to the process but not in grinding the course of actions to some sudden stop.

Conclusion
Effective leadership at all levels in an organization, demands strategic thinking, and its important core competency is that of “picturing” – seeing future states as intense visual images. For these leaders, the challenge is to have the dream vivid enough to be persuasive and to guide the efforts of others. Like a values statement, a vision is a foundational pillar and critical in long-term planning and day-to-day organizational operations.

The visioning process can be an engaging and creative one for all those involved and propose an inspiring blueprint for an NPO's future actions and achievements. The results of this process must be clearly articulated to all stakeholders, leaders and Board members who have been part of the vision development. While there are different approaches to establishing this vision of success statement, the “buy-in” by everyone in the organization is a success reality. Undeniably, any NPO will never be greater than its articulated dream.
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