

Communicating a Vision

Communicating vision is essential for effective leadership. A frequent quotation is “Where there is no vision, the people perish (Proverbs 29:18a).” However, vision is not everything or even sufficient for good leadership. Ethicist Bowen McCoy notes that a vision without a plan is a hallucination. Indeed, when Proverbs 29:18 is fully quoted, it also qualifies the central importance of vision: “Where there is no vision, the people perish (or are unrestrained), but happy is he who keeps the law.” A vision needs to be a good one, sought through a good plan. And the leader needs to communicate it well.

But how can you as a leader do so? A good answer comes from a case example I stumbled across in my research as I observed a company and its managers. The CEO’s example provides a simple, yet effective, method for communicating a vision that any leader could emulate.

The hero of this case is the CEO of a chain of food stores in the Southeast U. S., which I will designate as GoodFood (not the real name). It was clear that this leader sought to run the most profitable stores in the region, maintaining a dominant market share, but also to do so in the right way. The company had no published code of ethics or vision statement, instead the CEO communicated a rather simple set of value priorities: the company and each employee should always (1) put God first, (2) put his family second, and (3) put the company and his job third. This is not a new or unique set of priorities. Mary Kay and Coach Vince Lombardi espoused these value priorities, and so have many others. It was used by the CEO as the unifier toward the overall corporate objectives of profitability and ethical practice. It was his vision, one which he sought very deliberately and consistently to infuse into all management and employees.

As I observed GoodFood’s operations, I was rather amazed to discover that almost all of the store managers, other employees, and executives of this family-owned corporation actually knew the CEO’s set of three priorities for the company and its employees. Indeed, over one-third of those I interviewed actually volunteered this set of priorities or vision, even though I deliberately did not ask them about it. This is very unusual; studies typically find that employees, when asked, have little or no clue as to their CEO’s or company’s vision. When asked, employees often respond, “I don’t think there is one,” “I have no idea,” or “I suppose it is to make money.” At GoodFood, however, the employees did know the basic value priorities and many shared this form of vision.

How did the food chain’s managers, employees, and executives come to know the company’s vision? Primarily, it was due to the diligence of the CEO. Every time he spoke to employees, met them individually in a store, met with staff and other executives, or spoke to external groups, civic clubs, or the media, he repeated his vision, the three priorities of : (1) God first, (2) family second, and (3) the company and job third. In the company, enculturation started with new employee orientation, when the CEO introduced the vision priorities in a video. The

CEO repeated them so often, on seemingly every possible occasion, that one executive I interviewed complained about being dreadfully tired of hearing about them, that the CEO insisted on “going on and on about them at every meeting.”

Store managers in Memphis and Little Rock said that the CEO personally explained the GoodFood vision priorities to them when their stores were purchased from another firm. The CEO also “walks the talk” according to a manager with a long tenure in the company, explaining, “As long as the leader puts God first, you can be expected to be treated right and honestly, and you can trust and believe what is said to you.” Another executive observed, “In this company, if the basic beliefs of the company weren’t similar to yours, you couldn’t stay here.” Indeed, any significant value conflict in this strong culture would be unlikely as managers with opposing values tended to leave—or became rather convincing hypocrites.

The case of GoodFood and its CEO exemplifies a rather simple formula for communicating an organizational vision. The three basic components are:

1. Formulate a good vision, one that is purposeful, clear, and easy to understand. It must fit with the personal moral beliefs of the majority of the members of the organization.
2. The leader at the top must be committed to and consistently insist that planning is directed by the vision, and to live himself according to the vision. He must visibly “walk the talk” as a leader and as a person.
3. Repetition; the leaders at the top must constantly keep the vision before members of the organization.

This simple process succeeded well in GoodFood. Most of the executives, managers, and employees knew the vision set of value priorities, believed they were those of the CEO, and recognized the vision as a good, worthy one. Nor did the CEO let them forget it, repeating the vision statement at every possible opportunity.

But was this vision, or set of value priorities, the true or real ethic of GoodFood’s culture? Time in the field suggested that many believed it was not. I detected greater skepticism among executives than at the store manager level. The major source of tension was financial pressures. When top management decided to cut costs, the easiest and quickest way was to cut labor expense, or jobs. A decision may be made at the top but it has to be administered through the chain of command. The villain in the eyes of the store manager or department manager may be the district manager, who in fact has simply been ordered to cut the budget. A store manager said, “Overall, they (God first, family second, company third) are the company’s values, but when they filter down ...” An executive explained that the values of the vision fit his personal values, but people who have to get the job done can tend to be more short-term rather than long-term oriented. “The big openings (of new stores) kill people, run others off; we spend money on

facilities rather than on people.” Another executive was even more skeptical, “(The statement is) lip service....Sometimes I have to do things that I don’t think are right but the company wants you to do them. But I will not compromise my morals for any amount of money. Of course, I don’t always see the whole picture.”

Some managers also admitted that they personally struggled with the priorities. One commented, “My wife will say that I put God, work, and then family.” GoodFood’s vision priorities, while simple, easy to understand, and accepted as good ones, were not always been easy to realize.

Nevertheless, working long and hard may be a good way to serve God and one’s family, even if this requires more absence from church and family than one would prefer. Indeed, tension between potentially competing priorities can be a confirmation of their real existential meaning. Struggles or failures of managers and executives do not disprove the worth of those priorities nor the company’s true desire to achieve them.

The case of GoodFood indeed shows that people within an organization can come to know and commit to a vision, and in spite of imperfections and doubts, accept it and seek to fulfill it. In GoodFood, the vision is not “window dressing” or a hallucination but a good and credible one. You, as a leader, can communicate and establish a vision as a foundation for your organization’s moral culture if:

1. It is a good vision,
2. You, as the leader, are truly committed to plan according to the vision, and you live according to the vision, and
3. You repeat this vision continually to stress its reality and importance.

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