

4 Ways to Develop Leadership Vision

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When I last visited my ophthalmologist for a checkup, I discovered that my new contact lens prescription was lower in both eyes. To my delight, I realized that my vision is improving!

This is a big deal to me, because I still remember the fear I experienced in 2nd grade when my eyes became dramatically more near-sighted every six months. Eventually, my vision was reduced to legally blind, without glasses or contacts. I discovered then how important vision is, especially to those like me with limited vision or blindness.

In working with various organizations and their leaders over the past 30 years, I have learned anew how important vision is. Proverbs 29:18 says “Where there is no vision, the people decay.” This is true in every organization.

What is vision? Here is my definition:

Leadership vision is the capacity to accurately see the current situation of the organization, to create, through collaboration, a picture of an inspiring future state, and to develop a strategy to achieve it, with the input and commitment of the team.

I wear mono-vision contacts, where one eye is corrected to see close and the other is corrected to see far away. Seeing near and far is a core piece of leadership vision. In addition, vision includes inspiring others in a collaborative process of creating the vision and executing on the strategy to achieve it.

How can you develop it? While it is true that leadership vision is a relatively rare competence within most organizations, it can be developed. Here is an approach any leader can employ:

1. **Leverage people on your team and in your organization who have a high degree of vision.** No matter where you are in your organization or what size it is, you can identify and leverage people around you who seem to have a greater ability to think strategically. There are personality tests and strengths assessments that can help you do this, but even your day-to-day observations and discussions with others in your organization can easily illuminate those who more naturally think in future-oriented, blue-sky, visionary ways.
2. **Pull yourself out of day-to-day task execution.** The gap in strategic thinking often comes out in the results of my 360-degree feedback assessment that I use on the front end of executive coaching. Typically, people who are low on strategic, visionary thinking on their 360 results are often very strong at planning and executing tasks. As I like to say, “nobody gets everything and everybody has flat sides” in their competencies. Another truth in leadership competence is that people tend to spend most time where they are most comfortable. This means that if you are someone who is highly effective at day-to-day tasks, your schedule probably gets filled with these, leaving little or no time to focus on strategic planning. So, the more you continue to let yourself get stuck in the detailed tasks that you love doing, the less effective you will ever be at strategy and vision.
3. **Ask future-oriented, mission-based questions.** A simple way to build your vision muscle is to ask questions with your team, peers, and boss that get at underlying issues and future

direction. For example, instead of asking, “What are the tasks we still need to accomplish and how will we get them done?” ask this kind of question, “Why are we moving in this direction, how does it fit our mission, and what are we hoping to achieve in the next 3-5 years?” All three of these kinds of questions address the big picture. It is not necessary for you to have the answers to these questions. You simply need to raise them and two things will happen: others will view you as increasingly visionary in your orientation, and those around you who are more highly competent at strategic/visionary thinking will be encouraged to weigh in. From their ideas--and your own--you can then form a vision and strategy to direct your planning and execution skills.

4. **Educate yourself on how recognized visionary leaders think.** A number of books written in the past 5-10 years, as well as Harvard Business Review articles and various online white papers can provide examples of how visionary leaders approach problems they face. You do not need to be Steve Jobs to be viewed as visionary. Attending online and in-person conferences in your field often provide ideas you can bring back to your team to help spur their vision and strategy. The specific ideas and solutions they share might not be helpful to you, but their thinking process in developing vision and strategy can give you new ideas.

Use these four components to help you develop and apply your vision to your organization.