

*Your vision must be known  
and understood  
by every single person in the company,  
completely engage their hearts and minds,  
and create the hope that you,  
as their leader,  
can accomplish it.*

## **PART ONE: VISION**

In 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Monument in Washington, D.C., in front of one million people of all colors and backgrounds. They had come to hear him. In his speech, he clearly and passionately articulated why his cause was important to him. He said, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

This speech is one of the most powerful in history. And, while it is full of other memorable references to his dream, this one sentence is so clear, so powerful, and so well-articulated, you cannot escape its meaning. You cannot hear it and remain ambivalent to his vision. You must take a side.

Dr. King did not choose, nor even want, to lead the civil rights movement. He just wanted to carry on the work of his father and meet the needs of his small congregation. His followers, however, knew his sermons contained ideas whose time had come. Those ideas represented a shining hope for a better world.

Just like Dr. King, your belief, character and persistence will help those who share your vision to also believe in your ability to accomplish it.

*A great vision asks people to be great.*

Abraham Lincoln enjoyed walking to the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church on Wednesday evenings to listen to the sermons of Dr. Fins Gurley. Dr. Gurley would leave a side door open for his distin-

guished visitor so he could slip in unnoticed. On one particular evening, an aid witnessed the President sitting on the back pew and approached him after the service to ask what he thought of Dr. Gurley's sermon.

Lincoln was thoughtful in his answer, saying that Dr. Gurley made some very fine points, was eloquent as usual, and that it was clear he had put a goodly amount of work into the message. "So you thought it was an excellent sermon," said the aid. "No, I did not say that," responded the President. "Dr. Gurley left out the most important ingredient. He did not ask us to do something great."

If you own or manage a business, no doubt you hold this position as a result of what you "needed to do." You saw yourself as someone who could make a difference, and took the actions you believed had at least the potential for greatness. You saw the risks and felt the fear, but you acted anyway. Others don't see themselves as leaders, but want to contribute just the same. They want to make a difference too, but would rather follow. Unfortunately, in most cases, no one is asking them to do anything great. Since they don't have your disposition for leadership, they wait. They simply wait for you to ask.

History remembers the leaders who dared to ask. Your vision will resonate with those who are meant to play a role, and they will follow. They are like amplifiers building energy, intensity and momentum in everyone else they contact.

### *A great vision starts with identifying your company's "high concept."*

When movie executives come together to discuss the movies they could make, they must have a way to quickly get to the essence of the stories. They don't have time to hear the details of 30 different movie ideas, so they look for the "high concept." This is a single sentence stating the most significant premise of the movie. The high concept is important for a couple of reasons. First, the director will not have license to modify this premise. Second, if it cannot be stated in a single sentence, the concept might be too fuzzy or convoluted and need to be simplified so an audience can grasp it.

It is said that when the premise for a movie with great potential is well stated, there is literally a physical reaction to it. This could be a tingling of the skin, tenseness in the stomach, or moistening in the eyes. When your vision is stated, you want the same kind of physical reaction to

occur. To do this, you need to know your company's "high concept." This high concept is found in your values, therefore, no one other than you can change it.

### *Your company's high concept is found by identifying and prioritizing your values. This is the leader's job.*

There are moments in business when you make decisions from your gut. And more often than not, those gut instincts reflect your values, whether you've consciously identified them or not. These values make your company unique and establish your high concept. In the following scenario, a small business owner, Mark, is talking with his business advisor about how Mark's values influence his decisions and ultimately drive his company. This is never more obvious than in the difficult decisions regarding employees. Here's how this conversation might unfold:

**ADVISOR:** *How do you know when you should terminate someone's employment?*

**MARK:** That's tough. After getting all the details, I think I just generally know. As long as it wasn't an ethical violation, I would ask myself if it's in the company's or the employee's best interest.

**ADVISOR:** *When would terminating an employee be in his best interest?*

**MARK:** I've had situations where the position was not right for the individual, there was nowhere to move him, or he was in over his head and frustrated.

**ADVISOR:** *You were true to yourself and to the employee. What value does that represent to you?*

**MARK:** Sounds like integrity.

**ADVISOR:** *It also sounds as if you would find a new spot for the person if it were available. What value does that represent?*

**MARK:** Faithfulness. Loyalty.

**ADVISOR:** *What about when you are choosing someone to promote? What pushes someone to the top, over other qualified candidates?*

**MARK:** That can be a very intuitive process at times, especially when working with our sales staff. Although I have a list of things I grade candidates on, such as initiative, creativity and competence, sometimes it boils down to whether or not I genuinely like them,

ADVISOR: *I heard initiative. Is that a company value?*

MARK: *Actually, initiative often becomes an issue when a customer has a service problem, so I'm thinking more of customer service as the value.*

ADVISOR: *Good. You mentioned creativity. Does this sound like a company value?*

MARK: *Yes, kind of. I like it when employees come up with new ways of handling issues, or when they make suggestions.*

ADVISOR: *You also said it's important that you genuinely like the person. What value does this evoke?*

MARK: *A friendly disposition, I guess.*

ADVISOR: *Do you value friendliness in your company?*

MARK: *Of course. It's critical when you're working with customers.*

ADVISOR: *That gives us a pretty good list for now. Values are how individuals make decisions. All of your values do not have the same priority, however. It is your job, as the leader, to compare each value to the next to decide their order of priority.*

*Let's take the ones you came up with first — integrity and loyalty. Let's say I am an employee of your company. I sense that my direct superior is doing something dishonest, but since I know loyalty is valued here and nobody appears to be getting hurt, I keep my mouth shut. In fact, in an effort to be loyal, I help cover it up. This goes directly against your value of integrity. Integrity and loyalty are two great values. However, while the person who values loyalty most might end up in prison, the one who values integrity most will always know the best and proper use of loyalty.*

*Some areas might be more difficult. For instance, do you choose profitability or customer satisfaction? You might not like to think of these as opposite ends of a tug-a-war, but every day your employees must choose between them.*

*I have found that operations people tend to focus on profits, for without profits, they are right to propose, there will be no company to serve customers. Sales and marketing people, on the other hand, will make a solid case that without client satisfaction, there will be no long-term profits.*

*As the leader, it is your decision to make. Both can be justified, but like the integrity-loyalty scenario, whatever you choose charts the course for a noticeably different company culture. When a job goes bad because of a poor bid or production overages, your manager must make a decision. Does the manager continue to let costs mount, but ensure the client is happy, or will he*

*protect the company's downside while sacrificing client satisfaction? Whatever you assume is happening now is just that, an assumption, unless your training clearly states and constantly reinforces this value.*

*The bottom line is that the way you prioritize your values opens the door to a new destiny, creates a new culture, and breathes life into your "high concept."*

ADVISOR: *How might the high concepts of these two companies differ based on their values?*

*Company One: Integrity, quality, customer service, profitability, growth.*

*Company Two: Growth, profitability, customer service, quality, integrity.*

MARK: *Considering that Company One's highest value is integrity and its lowest is growth, I think they are content to be a smaller player, although very quality minded. More than likely this is a small family business serving a small local area or niche — a business typically handed down to the children to continue its legacy. It's not organized around profits, but rather around doing right by its customers. So, its high concept might be, "Our customers are why we are here. We're not the biggest, but the best."*

*Company Two looks like it's going public. It would be logical for a company that puts growth ahead of profits to be ambitious. Whatever customers they lose due to poor service or quality can be regained by allocating a large marketing budget to ensure they hit growth targets. Since integrity barely made the cut, I might be a little anxious to invest here. Its high concept might be, "Rapid growth will lead to profits and a more valuable company for our investors."*

ADVISOR: *Well done, Mark. You've got the idea. Now, given what you know about the philosophy of these two companies, which one would you rather work for?*

MARK: *Knowing only this, I can confidently say I wouldn't fit well in either company.*

ADVISOR: *By the time these values and high concepts evolve into the vision and mission, you know a great deal about the character and culture of the company. It would be nice to know this before accepting a position with either company, wouldn't it?*

**MARK:** Absolutely. It would prevent a lot of employment mistakes on both sides of the interview table. Instead of just asking questions about work habits and competency, it could help qualify candidates with far greater accuracy. It could answer the very important question of whether the company's culture and plans would provide a desirable environment given the candidate's personality and ambition.

**ADVISOR:** *Well said. It's much like a personal relationship. You want to know whether you have compatible values and similar ambitions, which identifies a healthier match.*

### *Your vision statement requires careful wording to be memorable and powerful.*

Now that you know the foundation of your vision is your company's high concept, it is important to craft the wording carefully so it can do its job. In short:

- The message must engage the hearts and minds of those who will pursue it.
- It must ask your employees to do something great.\*
- It must be consistent with the highest values of the organization.

Bring in your most creative and lucid thinkers to share in the crafting of the vision statement. You might go through many drafts over an extended period of time to get the wording just right. Once you have it, share it with your entire company and ask for feedback. Make sure that this does not become just an intellectual statement, but that it touches the core of those who hear it and creates that physical reaction that tells you this is it.

An effective vision is not about saying more, but about saying the right thing as well and succinctly as you can. This not only energizes your followers, but also enables the decision makers to easily remember it. Review the vision every day for a week to make sure it resonates regardless of your mood or the situation. When you think of your vision, it should charge you up. If it does that, it's doing what it is designed to do.

**Example of a vision statement based on the following prioritized values:**

- Making a difference
- Innovation
- Profit
- Growth
- Industry recognition

“Acme Enterprises is making a meaningful contribution to our community by growing a thriving company valued for its vision and performance. Our people, practices and accomplishments have achieved national prominence and are a model for our industry.”

This is a good example of a well-crafted vision. At 37 words, it is brief and its emphasis is memorable and motivating to its followers. While the only exact reference to a value is “growth,” the other values strongly influence the language of this vision. For instance, we used the phrase “meaningful contribution to our community” to offer more insight into the value of “making a difference.” The phrase, “vision and performance” was used to keep the company focused on the cutting edge of “innovation.” When it came time to put the final touches on the vision, we wanted to choose words that command attention. We chose “thriving” because the word “successful” tends to be overused and has lost much of its impact.

One company I worked with elected to just list their values because they were all results-oriented words. The ultimate test of a powerful vision is whether it engages the audience, requests greatness of them and mirrors the values of the organization. If your vision passes this test, you have succeeded.

### *The vision for your company is hiding in your heart right now.*

God and an angel were discussing where to hide the Secret to Life. The angel suggested it be bound up and set at the top of the tallest mountain. God replied that man would quickly climb the tallest mountains in pursuit of such a treasure. The angel, nodding in agreement, suggested, “We should bury it at the bottom of the deepest ocean.” God, once again, disapproved of the angel's idea stating that there is no depth to which man will not go to search out this Secret. Looking at the angel, God unveiled his plan. “We will put the Secret to Life in the very last place man will ever

look. We will place it in the depths of his own heart.”

Your ideal vision is hiding in your heart at this moment, but you might have lost touch with it. You had to spend your time making payroll, fending off a lawsuit and saving a lost customer, all before lunchtime. When standing in the pounding surf, we tend to focus on the next wave. And, even when our interests are piqued, we usually end up chasing a surrogate dream like growing to the next level, acquiring a competitor, or expanding into a new line. We often accomplish these while climbing the tallest mountains, but become disillusioned when we realize we didn't make the real difference we had hoped to.

Do you remember your real dream, the reason you started your business? What did you feel? What were you thinking? What was your core motivation? Starting or buying a business is full of uncertainties and great risks, so you had to be moved enough to follow through. You had to be highly motivated to improve a situation, fill a need, prove something, learn something, create something, or test your abilities. Whatever it was then, might lead you to what it is today.

Another exercise you can do to arrive at your vision is to practice on other companies. Quickly assess what you observe in another company given your values, its potential, and its perceived opportunity. Imagine its board asking you to be its CEO. What vision would you create? While it's easier to be objective with another company, this exercise will help you flex those visionary muscles and find your own.

*When you are passionate about your vision,  
you draw the resources to create it.*

There are few things more exciting than listening to someone who is passionate about a great vision. These human beings seem to possess the godlike power of speaking the future into existence. When your vision is big enough and important enough to you, you too will magically attract the people and resources you need to accomplish amazing feats.

(See the Vision Worksheet on page 29)