

## What can be achieved with visions?

### Two meanings

The bibliography for the word 'vision' is extremely comprehensive. Moreover, in day-to-day management the effect of visions is highly controversial. This is probably because the term 'vision' has two meanings, which in the debate are not sufficiently differentiated from each other.

- ⊆ 80% of all authors understand by the term vision, 'I see something you don't see. This is something which lies in the future and hence you can say I am making a prediction.' Let's call this 'a vision of the future'.
- ⊆ 20% of all authors understand by the term vision, 'I see something you don't see. This could come about today already if we had only satisfied a few conditions.' We'll call this 'a conditional vision'.

Both definitions of vision reveal quite different qualities when applied in management.

A vision of the future would be extremely helpful if it were possible to predict the development of technology and markets. In this case, setting a budget for certain innovations or market-based investments would be simple and the budget right on target. Unfortunately our ability to make accurate predictions is extremely limited. Just considering the possibility of making accurate forecasts for the following 14 days reveals this. Furthermore, detailed analyses of past predictions with respect to national, regional or global economics, as have been carried out in the past by the Club of Rome, economics institutes in

Germany or governments themselves, show us the limits of this accuracy.

Visions are not very practical in day-to-day management although, of course, they do have a certain charm.

A conditional vision is however much more practical and is eminently suitable for good leadership within organisations. It concerns naming conditions which should be tied to enable the vision to come true. It is not a matter of the future but of the present. 'If I were to take an aeroplane now, I would be in Rome within two hours.' The future aspect of this type of vision consists in the difficulty in ensuring that the conditions required for the phenomenon to happen are satisfied. 'If the last flight for Rome today has already taken off, I shall not arrive in Rome before tomorrow.'

We shall now examine why the conditional vision is invaluable and why it is relatively simple to use.

### **Who makes use of visions?**

Almost every large company has some type of vision. As it is unfortunately not always differentiated between the two meanings of the word, both types of vision arise. Is no surprise that Walt Disney has a vision: 'If you can dream it, you can make it.' But Siemens, Lufthansa, Daimler-Chrysler, General Electric etc. all use visions.

It was Plato who said that we cannot truly possess objects which cannot be described in words.

When the New Economy ran into trouble and Nemax could see it didn't have long to go, the question often arose whether the visions of the New Economy would disappear?<sup>1</sup> It was obviously a case of dreams about the future. And indeed the visions of the New Economy certainly did differ from those of the 'old economy'. Heinrich von Pierer, CEO of Siemens, speaks of 'conservative business leadership', clearly revealing himself as no stranger to visions. The difference between 'old' and 'new' often corresponds to the difference between a

vision of the future and a conditional vision. The 'old hands' recognise the difficulties in achieving certain states within the company which would bring about profits and higher market shares. The 'young bloods' on the other hand criticise the lack of visionaries who can predict the future.

Whoever talks about 'setting standards' really means conditions which have consequences for the marketplace. If he then predicts a high market share for the company setting standards, is not talking about dreams but about a situation which would already obtain if ..... yes, if the standard had been set earlier.

Consequently it is of great importance to recognise the difference in meaning between a future vision and a conditional vision.

### **Visions lead to a passive attitude**

When you talk about future visions you are preparing your staff for what is to come. This can be unfavourable or favourable. Usually in this case a visionary talks about a future situation as if it will come about without our having to do anything: it will happen in any case. 'We must pay attention to what happens in the future', is typical of what he tells his staff. Those with a particular philosophy of life will talk about fate and unavoidable situations. It sounds almost as if there were some kind of force – certainly not we ourselves – which is working towards bringing about the future and we are faced with the alternatives of jumping on the bus going in that direction or being left behind.

Many team leaders believe that pointing out an opportunity to benefit from a particular set of future circumstances is sufficient motivation for the members of their team. The team leaders underestimate the general distrust in predictions of the future – a distrust summed up by reactions like, 'what happens if we bet on the wrong horse?' The team members are sceptical of crystal ball gazing and for them future visions are just 'unrealistic waffle from the bosses'. Of course there's the more or less favourable reaction, 'it's too good to be true'. But the

prediction doesn't have any significant effect on the team members. You cannot motivate them with future visions. With this approach you can now again reach the individual but it's unfortunately not enough for genuine leadership of the great majority of employees, especially when they are distributed around the world and are working at all levels including those on the operative level.

### **Conditional visions give rise to hope**

To convince employees of your company that they are all in the same boat you should talk about what would be achievable if... Visions need to be applied in the following way:

- u The situation which will come about once the conditions have been satisfied should be defined as a 'goal'. As a rule this goal can be defined in measurable parameters, whether they be financial, a market share or connected with production.
- u This measurable situation is accompanied by many others. This could differ according to employee, e.g. you feel you're part of the most successful engineering team in the world if you have developed a mobile telephone with the highest market share. Another example: because your year-end results are world-class, you feel you're one of the most successful businessmen in the world. Finally, you manage to get a mortgage on a house with a deposit of only 10 percent because your job is seen to be safe. Others have to pay a deposit of 20 percent. What happens once the goal is reached is the crux of the vision.
- u It is necessary to recognise and target conditions which need to be satisfied in order to reach the goal and consequently enable the vision to become true.

Let's consider the following illustration of the consequences of a conditional vision. Suppose you have trapped a fly under a glass. How long does the fly try to escape? It tries as long as it has the energy to do so. However, human beings behave differently from ani-

mals. They give up as soon as they recognise that further attempts are useless even though they still have the energy to carry on.

What lessons can we draw up from this? It's a manager's job to show his staff the means, i.e. the conditions, for achieving the goals. The best illustrations are those which prove that the goal would already have been achieved if the conditions had been satisfied earlier. If satisfying these conditions is seen to be realistic – which will be the case if a competitor already has satisfied the conditions – it gives rise to hope that the goals can be reached. Even if it takes some time to fulfil the conditions, which militates against reaching the goal in the short-term, it doesn't make the goal any less realistic. It is still not a future vision but a conditional vision. How can we turn these conditional visions into reality?

### **Visions remove barriers**

Let's consider another illustration: if a young man wants to kiss a girl he certainly doesn't draw up a project plan, with the kiss to take place in five years. In fact, the more attractive the girl, the shorter the project plan. The young man's ingenuity increases with the goal's appeal. Desire rises in proportion to the probable total satisfaction once the goal has been reached.

We see that the goal itself does not describe consequences connected with it. The goals are measurable states which can be achieved. The consequences of achieving these goals are components of a vision.

It can often happen that getting to the goal is difficult. As the old saying goes, 'no gain without pain'. The culture of a company comprises more than agreeable activities – as is understood by every employee. It should be possible, however, to see (*visio* = I see) that the goals lead to situations with agreeable aspects– agreeable for customers, agreeable for shareholders and also for the company's employees.

If you set your staff tasks which seem to be more like barriers, you must draw their attention to what is behind the barriers. The readiness to remove the them increases – once again – in proportion to the

probable total satisfaction once the goal has been reached. I must emphasise it once again: the goals themselves are neither favourable nor unfavourable. They can be a set of numbers: it's only the visions connected to the goals which promise the agreeable consequences

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry recommended, 'if you're taking on men to build a ship you must first of all make them long for a life at sea'. Building the ship is the condition, the completed ship is the goal and the possibility to sail with the ship is the vision. We could have been sailing already for years but the conditions haven't yet been satisfied: a typical conditional vision.

### **The quickest way to lose the vision**

Let's look at one of the most common mistakes in day-to-day management. In order to make the correct diagnosis we have to go through it step by step.

When goals are being set, which usually happens top down, the starting point is often a vision held by senior management. Everybody can imagine what would happen if, for instance, a larger share of the market were obtained or if it would be possible to produce at lower cost than the competition. The power of these visions is evident every evening in the in the course of a cosy chat over a glass of wine... however, these chats remain at the senior level of the company – without effect anywhere else.

Members of senior management now target the goals as a set of PowerPoint transparencies. Many visions get lost this way. The visions are used as the basis of everyday numbers used to define measurable target values. These are the goals intended to bring about the consequences extensively discussed at the evening get-together; unfortunately the excitement has now disappeared.

Jack Welch was always rather sceptical about PowerPoint presentations of this type. In the end he forbade them altogether. Instead he wanted to hear 'live' what his managers had to say about business and the current strategies and goals<sup>2</sup>. He was probably one of the first to

realise that visions tend to get lost on the presentation road, where all that remains are the goals.

After senior management has had its say, the next management level is asked to break down these goals and to discuss them with their staff in further meetings.

After a while this whole process reaches the operative level and the goals are defined as specific steps.

The steps don't necessarily have much appeal but those who have to carry them out are supposed to think of nothing else but these steps, in the detailed form now to be worked out.

So we see that keeping to the project plan and achieving the goals serves its own purpose. The vision, with all its appeal evident at the beginning at the senior management level, has now been lost. As ownership comes about as a result of the vision's appeal and not as a result of the long and difficult journey to get there, the vision's ownership remains at the top level

### **Make sure you focus on solutions**

Another experiment: you are driving along a country road on the side of which is a splendid row of trees. The diameter of each is around 50 centimetres and the distance between two trees around ten metres. Suddenly you are in a dangerous situation: you have to avoid a vehicle coming towards you. As an experienced driver you don't aim of course at the next tree but at a gap between two trees. This way you have avoided an accident and end up shaken up but without injury in the field next to the road. So why do so many people in a situation like this concentrate on the tree and not on the space between the trees? The answer is that they focus on the problem and not on the solution.

It is very similar when it comes to visions.

- To make the workforce enthusiastic about the vision, show them the solutions rather than the problems.

- ⊃ If you make them concentrate on project schedules and milestones, they will concentrate on the problems, which is certainly not what you want.
- ⊃ If you regard project schedules and milestones as being the most important part of the working day you will soon lose sight of the vision.
- ⊃ Moreover if you lose sight of the vision, no one will be motivated to assume ownership for the process. Instead, your workforce will resist attempts at delegation and not show any kind of enthusiasm.
- ⊃ If the company wants to react more quickly, be able to produce more economically and have a better chance in the marketplace than its competitors, the project deadlines and milestones can only be met if they can be shown to lead to an attractive vision.

If you have ever been interested in quantum physics you may remember that in the experiment with a diffraction grating the interference pattern disappears if you determine exactly the route taken by a photon.<sup>3</sup> Anybody who concentrates too much on processes and project schedules will create a form of reality with his measuring instruments which is directly connected with the instruments. The targeted results will not be achieved. Whole armies of executives have failed to recognise this principle or are in danger of doing so. On the other hand, if you only consider goals and visions, you won't know the correct way to get there.

### **Visions create ownership**

To round up this topic let's take a look in a textbook on physiology<sup>4</sup>. Some of the reactions of our body – stomach turning, headaches, butterflies in the stomach, heart pounding, sweating hands – are determined by hormones. Whether our bodies produce adrenaline or the agreeable endorphines depends very much upon our thoughts on the future.

Every manager should know that there are synapses in our brain which pass on information chemically. If you want to have creative

people working for you, don't block their neural transmitters by causing anxiety hormones to be released in the synaptic gap. If it happens occasionally that you need a member of staff to come into the office at the weekend you should make sure in general that your staff have a chance to build up a sufficient reserve of endorphines beforehand.

What happens at work can be felt by our bodies. The way we feel is affected by what we expect to happen in the future. If these expectations are unfavourable, you will find difficulty in getting people to pull together.

Feelings develop quite differently if the co-workers concentrate solely on the process and on getting better and better at the work involved than if they think about the result of the process.

The important chain process-goal-vision is valid at all times. But processes can however either appeal to those involved or not. Goal themselves are on the whole neutral, visions on the other hand should always have genuine appeal.

You won't find out whether vision is ready understood and accepted at all levels within the company or not by studying the PowerPoint transparencies prepared by managerial staff. It is a reliable indication, however, if the team leader is discussing the vision in detail with his team. The ideal reporting ratio in this case is one to seven. Wolfgang Mayrhuber, Michael, the head of Lufthansa, cannot talk to 94,135 employees individually. This can only be done by managers and supervisors at all levels, with those reporting to them. This requires 94,135 meetings.

The more attractive the vision the better the chance that an employee will be empowered to achieve it and to remove any barriers which might stand in the way. Naturally it must be his vision just as it is his barriers which he has to remove. The distinction, 'the co-workers have the task of removing the barriers and the executives are responsible for the visions' is artificial and counter-productive. Visions are not the province of executives alone but form the basis for commitment and ownership for everybody in the company.