

The Vision Process: Seven Steps to a Better Organization¹

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where--" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll

INTRODUCTION

When someone mentions the need for a vision in an organization, more seasoned officers tend to roll their eyes at the concept and snicker. And with good reason. Senior Army leaders seem to publish vision statements much the same way politicians promise to balance the budget. It is done with great hoopla and noise but nothing seems to come of it. The vision statement goes into a file until the next commander takes over and publishes a new one.

Why does this happen? For a couple of reasons. Vision statements are typically long, verbose, and written in isolation, making them about as memorable as an annual shareholder report. On the rare occasions when they do pique our interest, they provide little direction for moving the organization into the future. In other words, they have no associated implementation plan.

It does not have to be this way.

In the military, we are familiar with the concept of *commander's intent*.² Though the definition has changed over the years, the underlying principle has not. It is a statement by the commander that provides the purpose and desired end state for an operation. It clearly articulates the conditions required for mission success, which increases shared understanding within the organization and drives individual initiative. Everyone is charged with understanding the commander's intent.

Intent statements, however, are for specific missions and operations. How can leaders cast a wider net and shift the focus to the organization as a whole? How can they improve the organization while still operating to accomplish the mission? It is through a vision process.

Army Leadership, ADRP 6-22, is replete with references on the importance of sharing a vision to provide organizations a sense of purpose, inspiration, long-term direction, and goals. It comes up short, however, on the mechanics of creating one and is deathly silent on the critical step of implementing a vision. This paper describes a process for creating and implementing a vision as part of a change strategy. It incorporates a seven-step methodology for tackling the very challenging—but very important—task of bringing meaning to the idea of an organizational-level vision.

A couple of caveats before we start. This is not written as a stand-alone document. It builds on the concepts and ideas discussed in the first eight lessons of L100. The definition for organizational-level vision comes from our first lesson: "*A picture of the future framed by a value-based purpose that creates*

¹ By Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, the Department of Command and Leadership for the CGSC - not to be further reproduced, August 2012. Revised August 2015.

² Department of the Army, ADRP 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2012), para. 2-10.

a path to drive behavior, change, and motivation.” For ease of understanding, we can deconstruct the definition into three components.³

- What: A picture of the future.
- Why: Framed by a value-based purpose (Answers the question, “What does the organization value?”)
- How: Creating a path to drive behavior, change, and motivation.



The first four steps of the process cover the formulation of the organizational vision. It is written from a leader’s perspective since leaders, especially commanders, are inherently responsible by virtue of their position for the first two components of the vision, the “what” and “why.” This does not preclude collaboration by the leader, which is expected and encouraged. It simply recognizes the office of the person in charge and the associated decision-making authority that rests with the boss.

³ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 208. Senge uses the words “what,” “why,” and “how” to describe the “governing ideas” that guide organizations. He equates the “what” to the vision, the picture of the future we seek to create. The “why” is the purpose or mission of the organization and answers the question, “Why do we exist?” The “how” are the core values of the organization and answer the question, “How do we want to act, consistent with our mission, along the path toward achieving our vision?” We have adopted Senge’s “governing ideas” and transformed them into a single concept, a seven-step vision process. While we use the same definition for the “what”—a picture of the future—we use a slightly different perspective for the “why” and “how” to better capture the nuances of military culture and the role of problem solving in implementing a vision.

Steps five and six focus on developing the strategy for implementing the vision. At this point in the process, use of collaboration in the form of a guiding coalition is critical.⁴ The leader is transitioning the plan from concepts to constructive actions and needs a committed and collaborative team to formulate the plan.

The final step of the process is the execution of the plan. You will see a number of references to our class on *Leading Organizations in Change*. You cannot implement a vision without effecting change, so the fundamental ideas from that lesson are closely entwined within the discussion.

One final point. As you study the steps in the process, remember that implementing a vision is fundamentally a form of problem solving closely associated with Army design methodology.⁵ You identify your future state or objective (the “what”), explain the purpose for going there (the “why”), determine obstacles blocking the way (as part of your assessment), figure out how to take down the obstacles (the “how”), and then execute the plan. We tend to mystify the vision process because, typically, it is not done well. It is not rocket science. But it is hard. It takes time, persistence, and thought.

STEP 1: BEGIN AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF THE ORGANIZATION

Organizational-level leaders usually begin assessing organizations prior to arrival based on previous knowledge, experience, unit reputation, research, and study. This preparation forms the foundation for the initial “what” and “why” of the vision. More experienced leaders identify these components before setting foot within the organization. Less experienced ones, unfamiliar with the organization’s culture and operational focus, need time on the ground to gain situational understanding and uncover the shared beliefs that form the cultural frame of the organization.⁶

Upon arrival, working with key members of the organization, leaders continue their initial assessment. Earlier expectations are confirmed or denied based on personal impressions and continued gathering of information to form or revise a preliminary “what” and “why.” This is critical. Having a “what” and “why” allows leaders to better focus their initial assessment. If they know where they are going—unlike Alice in the opening quote—they can better determine problems that impede movement to this future state.

Thus, a primary purpose of the initial assessment is to identify the obstacles, the “bumps in the road,” which organizations must overcome to navigate the way ahead. From a problem-solving perspective, without the “what,” the initial assessment has little focus or direction. You will identify plenty of potential problems as you analyze the organization but true problems are the ones that block your path, not detritus on the side of the road.

Remember, the initial assessment continues throughout the first four steps of this process. It does not consist of walking around an organization for a day or two and suddenly seeing the light. Few people have a “eureka moment” when figuring out the “what” and “why” for their organization. It takes time and analysis, as we will discuss in the next step.

⁴ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 21. This leadership classic is a “must read” for all organizational leaders. It discusses the dynamics of change, the challenges of recognizing when change is necessary, and an eight-stage process for implementing lasting organizational change. We reference five of the eight stages in this paper: 1) Establishing a sense of urgency, 2) Creating a guiding coalition, 3) Developing a vision and strategy, 5) Empowering broad-based action, and 6) Generating short-term wins.

⁵ Department of the Army, ADRP 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2012), fig. 2-2.

⁶ Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, “Myth Busting: Coming to Grips with Organizational Culture and Climate,” CGSC (August 2015), 9.

STEP 2: DEVELOP AN INITIAL ORGANIZATIONAL-LEVEL VISION

As mentioned earlier, leaders do not typically walk into organizations with preformed visions in their heads. But they should, based on their experience and background, have some initial ideas developed on the “what” (*a picture of the future*) and “why” (*framed by a value-based purpose*) components of the vision. They then refine these ideas as discussed below during their initial assessment of the organization.

“What”

The challenges with describing a picture of the future for an organization are twofold. The leader must first have a “picture” of a future state. “Where are we going?” “What must we look like?” This is often easier said than done. Immediate demands tend to drive our thinking and overwhelm any thoughts for long-term development. The ability to step back and reflect is a deliberate act and does not occur by happenstance. But it is what organizational-level leaders get paid to do, and it takes an incredible amount of persistence to force a separation from the here-and-now and look into the future. To do it, the leader must have a good understanding of the organization—its mission and functions, the shared beliefs (i.e., norms and values) associated with the most critical functions performed by the organization, its relationship to sister and parent organizations, and how it fits within the operating environment—all within a future timeframe nested with the boss’ vision (if he or she has one). Gaining this situational understanding can take time. Many leaders want to formulate the initial “what” prior to arrival so they can hit the ground running. Depending on their experience, this may be unrealistic and, as a minimum, requires validation and adjustment as they go through their initial “on-the-ground” assessment (step one).

The second challenge with describing a picture of the future is ensuring the “what” is meaningful. Simply stating the organization will be “the best” is equivalent to saying “everyone is a winner.” It does little for motivation. Everyone wants to be the best or already thinks they are. The “what” should inspire others by providing an organization-specific focus that ideally ties to the operating environment.

For example, should an organization be the “best infantry battalion” in the division or the division’s “911 Force” for operational missions? They both have the same end state but “911 Force” is more memorable and provides an emotional tie or hook for the organization.

For an example closer to home (at least from the authors’ perspective), should the Department of Command and Leadership be “the best teaching department in CGSC” or “serve as the Army’s premier organizational-level leadership resource?” The first one might provide short-term gratification for instructors, but it would not sit well with other departments in the school; plus, it has a finite end state. What do you do when you become the best? You probably spend more time worrying about the performance of other organizations than your own. The second designation casts a much wider net; it is very challenging but still attainable.

“Why”

The concept of “a value-based purpose” means focusing on what is of value, worth, or importance to the organization when describing why we want to achieve some future state. It answers the question, “What does the organization value?” For example, a teaching organization finds value in life-long learning and critical thinking. An artillery battalion finds value in effects on target in support of maneuver forces. What an organization holds in value is inextricably linked to its culture. The collective norms and valued outcomes form the shared beliefs that drive thinking and behavior in organizations.⁷

⁷ Ibid, 2.

Army values are critical touchstones in ensuring an ethically aligned organization but they typically do not tie to the *purpose* of an organization. Ethical behavior describes how we want people to act as they navigate the path to a future state; therefore, Army values are better addressed in the “how” component of the vision.

A “value-based purpose” usually centers on the operational focus of the organization. Returning to the teaching organization example, the “why” component of the vision could be: “To instill a desire in others, both in and out of the schoolhouse, to be better leaders.” This directly links to the two aforementioned attributes of critical thinking and life-long learning.

The challenge in formulating the “why” is moving beyond trite, formulaic statements (“*accomplish all assigned missions*”) to something that has meaning and “sticking power” in the organization. Putting the “why” within a specific operational context (future deployments for example) helps do that.

STEP 3: ESTABLISH GOALS BASED ON THE INITIAL ASSESSMENT

As you should see now, implementing a vision is grounded in the fundamentals of problem solving. The “what” provides the end state or objective and the initial assessment identifies the obstacles blocking the path. The missing link is the goals, the broad general actions for navigating the path and circumventing the obstacles. Once identified, the goals form the foundation for the “how” component of the vision.

Most leaders fail at implementing a vision because they never get beyond step two. They formulate the “what” and “why” prior to arrival, publish it as a vision statement once on the ground, and then move on to more pressing issues. Some make tweaks to the “what” and “why” of the vision based on their initial assessment. Most skip the third step because they do not understand the goal-setting process or suddenly realize how hard it is. Step three is the transition point from words to action. Leaders must identify goals for the organization, and these goals must address the problems that impede forward movement.

Leaders that do get this far often struggle because they make the goals too broad and not problem specific. “*It’s all about training, maintaining, and taking care of people.*” These might, in fact, be very good words for a vision statement but if the leader cannot identify a cause and effect relationship between an objective, obstacles, goals, and associated tasks, the unit probably is not headed in the right direction.

For our teaching institution example, a school might identify the following three goals based on the initial assessment listed below:

Initial Assessment

The school has weak professional development programs and fails to promote from within.

Tendency towards group thinking and over reliance on dated curriculum.

An inability to integrate new processes and procedures into the organization.

Goals

Growing talent

Generating ideas

Using systems thinking

STEP 4: COMPLETE THE INITIAL ORGANIZATIONAL-LEVEL VISION

“How”

The “how” is the path people must follow in achieving the picture of the future in the organization. As we just discussed, formulating the “how” begins with the leader’s initial assessment of the organization and the identification of organizational goals. Simply put, the leader must determine where the organization is, where it needs to go, and the barriers or obstacles that must be overcome to move the organization to that future state. Overcoming these hurdles requires driving change within the organization and motivating others by providing direction, intensity, and persistence to behavior.⁸ The “how” therefore, based on the identified goals, describes in general terms “...a path for driving behavior, change, and motivation.”

If the leader has done a good job identifying the goals for the organization, the major challenge with the “how” is packaging. The leader must communicate these ideas within a vision that is short, concise, and meaningful. This is more important than you might think. The primary purpose is not having a vision statement you can publish and post (though that may happen). It is having a statement people can remember, talk about, and hopefully internalize. Here is an example using the teaching organization illustration:

Serve as the Army’s premier organizational-level leadership resource by instilling a desire in others, both in and out of the schoolhouse, to be better leaders. We do this by growing talent, generating ideas, and using systems thinking to drive excellence in the department.

NOTE: We will provide you an operational example in class using the *12 O’clock High* case study.

STEP 5: REFINE THE GOALS BASED ON GUIDING COALITION INPUT

The perception to this point is that leaders conduct the first four steps primarily on their own. That is rarely the case. Depending on the organization, leaders begin building a guiding coalition of key and influential members prior to arrival if possible. As discussed in class, to affect change within an organization, a vision must be shared. This requires gaining commitment from the guiding coalition, which will lead the implementation plan and foster a sense of urgency in its execution.

Gaining this buy-in means giving the members a voice in the process,⁹ especially in establishing the implementation strategy (steps five and six). Obviously, the coalition must be on board with the “what” and “why” of the vision—they get a voice in this as well—but their most important input is with refining the goals. As discussed in the team-building lesson, leaders require the skill, expertise, and experience of team members to improve problem solving. Members must validate cause and effect relationships to ensure the correct problems are identified and the corresponding goals move the organization on a path to overcome these identified obstacles to achieve the future state. This is a difficult task. As the old FM 5-0 stated, “Understanding how cause and effect works requires careful consideration and shrewd judgment.”¹⁰ The leader cannot do this in isolation; it requires a team effort.

⁸ Richard L. Hughes, Robert C. Ginnett, and Gordon J. Curphy, *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* (New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2006), 243.

⁹ Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, “Improving while Operating: The Paradox of Learning,” CGSC (August 2014), 7. Establishing a culture of learning means the following shared beliefs are part of the learning organization’s culture: 1) leaders are committed to organizational learning, and 2) all members of the organization have a voice in the learning process.

¹⁰ Department of the Army, FM 5-0, C1, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, March 2011), para. 6-6.

A sense of urgency is a condition that must exist throughout the vision implementation process. There are a number of ways to do this, as discussed in the Leading Organizations in Change lesson. One of the most viable is through the use of dissatisfaction, a powerful catalyst for overcoming resistance to change.¹¹ Leaders have to increase dissatisfaction to the point where followers are willing to take action but not tip the organization into apathy caused by a fear of unlearning old habits and relearning new ones (i.e., learning anxiety).¹² This could be through awareness—the intrinsic motivation of a better future to gain commitment—but the implementation plan most likely will include extrinsic motivation techniques as well to gain compliance.

STEP 6: ESTABLISH PRIORITIZED TASKS TO SUPPORT THE GOALS

While goals form the building blocks of the implementation strategy, prioritized tasks represent the concrete and measurable programs and activities required to support the goals. What makes this step especially difficult is the issue of resourcing. Material, manpower, and time come at a cost and leaders must carefully plan and prepare their strategy using a systems thinking perspective as they weigh and prioritize tasks.

How you define the terms in this step (*tasks, activities, programs*) is up to you. The key point is that the strategy must translate the goals into integrated actions, and in this framework we use the term “prioritized tasks” to represent the process. As in step five, this step requires a collective effort and the guiding coalition must be at the heart of the action. Additionally, as discussed in step two, these goals and prioritized tasks must be nested with the vision of higher headquarters. Initiating actions that run counter to the intent of your boss is the quickest way to stop an implementation strategy in its tracks.

STEP 7: IMPLEMENT CHANGE

Executing an implementation strategy for an organizational-level vision is all about leading change. Throughout this discussion, we highlighted key components of the change models discussed in class (sense of urgency, guiding coalition, dissatisfaction, and resistance) that relate to implementing a vision. Two important components remain: empowering others and generating short-term wins.

These components are critical because they tie to intrinsic motivation, the engine of commitment. Three primary factors drive intrinsic motivation.¹³ The first is having a sense of purpose, a “big picture” idea, that provides direction that is both worthwhile and satisfactory. We use the *what*, *why*, and *how* of the vision to appeal to this factor.

The second factor is autonomy. People like being self-directed, doing actions on their own initiative to achieve a measurable outcome without micromanagement or excessive supervision. Empowering subordinates is an important component of execution and, if done properly through a supportive command climate, will greatly enhance performance, motivation, and commitment.¹⁴ But it must be done deliberately and thoughtfully to set people up for success. The steps to empowering others include:

- Sharing of power, typically in the form of position power to allow decision making

¹¹ Michael Beer, “Leading Change,” *Harvard Business School Publishing* (January 2007): 1.

¹² Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, “Improving while Operating: The Paradox of Learning,” 8.

¹³ Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The author does an excellent job of explaining the factors that influence intrinsic motivation. You can watch an excellent summary of his book on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6XAPnuFjJc>.

¹⁴ Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, “Myth Busting: Coming to Grips with Organizational Culture and Climate,” 10. See the callout box on “Command Climate and Motivation.”

- Training to provide necessary skills
- Demonstrating trust in subordinates by leaders to build confidence
- Providing resources, especially *time*, to foster professional development and growth
- Being perceived as fair to avoid the perception of passing on work to subordinates
- Giving feedback to improve performance

The third factor that drives intrinsic motivation is mastery. People like to get good at what they do; it provides a sense of pride and satisfaction. It also leads to success, a key indicator of mastery. Leaders that understand this dynamic use short-term wins during the execution of a vision strategy to gain buy-in for the plan, build momentum, enhance self-direction, and strengthen commitment. Without short-term wins, followers become disillusioned, dissatisfaction grows, and resistance overwhelms the change effort.

A final point to consider is the importance of continued assessment. An organizational-level vision is not a static document. It is an active and dynamic process that requires continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment. As the operating environment changes, so must the strategy and execution, which could require additional refinement of goals and prioritized tasks.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides an overview and methodology to guide your thinking. You will undoubtedly revisit a number of the steps during the process as you refine your thinking and consider recommendations from your guiding coalition.

While this paper is written for new leaders arriving in organizations, the process works as well for those serving in current leadership positions. In fact, it is easier for incumbent leaders to execute the seven-step vision process because of their familiarity with the organization's shared beliefs and cultural frame. This could be an important selling point when you arrive at your next organization and attempt to convince your boss of the need for an organizational-level vision.

Remember, the vision process takes significant time, substantial planning, and continuous assessment. Change is not easy and performance typically decreases in the short run as people struggle with new ways of thinking. You must remain resilient, maximize short-term wins, and foster a learning environment that sets the conditions for long-term success. "Improving while operating" is not easy but it is your charge as an organizational-level leader. The Seven-Step Vision Process will take you there.