

## Effective Visioning

By David Osborne

*"The soul ... never thinks without a picture."*

*- Aristotle*

Visioning is a process for achieving agreement on the kind of future a community (neighborhood, town, city, county, region, state, province, or nation) wants to create for itself -- and shared commitment to create that future.

When Neil Goldschmidt ran for governor in 1986, Oregonians were very unsure of their future. For decades, they had prided themselves on their quality of life, often contrasting their pristine state with California, which seemed to be turning into one big, smog-ridden suburb. Governor Tom McCall, a popular progressive Republican who served from 1967 through 1974, is best remembered for his frequent message to the rest of the country: Come visit, "but for heaven's sake don't come live here!" The most memorable bumper sticker of the day -- "Don't Californicate Oregon" -- captured the vision of most Oregonians perfectly.

Yet by 1986 Oregon could no longer afford its insularity. A deep, painful recession in the early 1980s had made the old vision unsustainable; Oregonians now wanted jobs and growth. But how could they achieve them, without ruining what they so valued about their state? To have both, they would need a new vision.

In 1988, when Gov. Goldschmidt brought 180 leaders together to work on that vision, he gave them "a single charge: examine and recommend how Oregon should shape its economic future." They analyzed Oregon's current economy, looked at global economic trends, figured out what Oregon would need to flourish in the global economy, and articulated a new vision. While Oregonians' values would be preserved and their "quality of life would be undiminished," they said, the economy would have to diversify.

*Industries requiring skilled, knowledgeable workers would abound, and Oregon would be a noted producer of products in microelectronics, computer software, biotechnology, specialty metals, and light manufacturing. Oregon's professional*

*services would rank among the best in the country, and would be sought out by clients in other states and regions. ...The work force would be Oregon's pride. .... Quality would be the hallmark in all phases of Oregon life -- quality jobs, workers, products, attractions, communities, environment, and overall quality of life. All these hallmarks of quality would be present alongside and within a dynamic, competitive, internationally oriented economy.*

Oregon Shines then listed six broad "goals that reflect this vision" -- things like raising per capita income to the national average, stimulating job expansion, and enhancing Oregon's livability -- and six strategic priorities.

It was a classic example of visioning. It told everyone in the state where the governor and other state leaders wanted to go. And it left behind a new institution to carry the vision forward: the Oregon Progress Board.

As this example demonstrates, visioning is about far more than creating a vision statement. In their book, *The Leadership Challenge*, James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner define a vision as "an ideal and unique image of the future for the common good."

*A vision is a mental picture of what tomorrow will look like. It expresses our highest standards and values. It sets us apart and makes us feel special. ... And if it's to be attractive to more than an insignificant few, it must appeal to all of those who have a stake in it.*

This is a wonderful definition. But if community-wide visioning is about nothing more than a statement, it has little value. When focused on the future of an entire community, visioning needs to be informed by careful analysis and to involve community members, inspiring them while winning their allegiance. It should give some indication of how they can realize the vision -- what priorities they must pursue -- thus acting as a springboard for outcome goals and strategies. To have power, in other words, visioning must lead to other things. As Harrison Owen says in his eloquent book, *Leadership Is*, "The equation of vision with a vision statement is at best weak, and at worst, a total perversion of what vision is all about."

Any jurisdiction can do visioning: a neighborhood, a community, a town, a city, a county, a region, a state -- even a national government. But it is more difficult the further up this list you go, and many national governments operate in environments that are too politicized for successful visioning across party lines. Still, a number of states have done it (though none as successfully as Oregon, to my knowledge), and at the municipal and regional levels it is becoming quite common.

Visioning for a state, city, or community is different than visioning for a public organization or private corporation. (A government can do both, of course; Iowa has created vision statements for the state as a whole, for each government-wide strategy, and for each department.)

Visioning for an entire state is difficult, because many elected officials are not willing to take it seriously. Some distrust or disagree with each other too much to articulate a shared vision. Others are too focused on the parochial interests of their constituents to invest significant energy in defining the common interest. Still others are simply too cynical about all such processes. Some personality types are "allergic" to visioning, viewing it as a soft and fuzzy waste of time in a hard and cold world.

Even when elected officials participate, however, many community visioning processes fail to add much value. Too often, they are brief processes that draft plain vanilla statements acceptable to a wide variety of stakeholders. The statements may be uplifting, but they do nothing to differentiate the community from others, inspire commitment, define strategic priorities, or motivate action. Consider Minnesota's vision statement, drafted with the help of thousands of Minnesotans in 1991 and '92:

*We Minnesotans like our state. We believe Minnesota is a good place to raise a family, go to school and enjoy life. We appreciate the natural beauty, the friendliness and sense of opportunity, the good government and the diverse economic opportunities. We believe strong values are important -- spiritual values, individual responsibility, volunteering, a strong work ethic and sharing with others. We appreciate our cultural diversity. These are the personal values we cherish and want to carry forward into the next century.*

*We do not want growth and change to overpower our quality of life. We want to plan for the future. Yet we recognize that we will have to make tough choices, as we have in the past. We want to deepen the values that have guided earlier generations and made Minnesota a leader in the nation. We want to begin now to build an even better place to live, a Minnesota to pass on proudly to our children and grandchildren.*

*When we talk about our hopes for the future, we share a vision with these common themes:*

- \* Minnesota will be a community of people who respect and care for one another.*
- \* Our economic activity will create wealth and provide a good standard of living for all people.*
- \* Our citizens will be good thinkers, creative, always learning, with the skills to compete internationally.*
- \* We will protect and enjoy the natural world.*
- \* Our government will be responsive, effective and close to the people.*

What community could not endorse this vision? But ask yourself: How does it lead to action? What does it call Minnesotans to do? What strategies does it suggest?

Now contrast Minnesota's statement with this excerpt from the vision articulated by Michigan Governor Jim Blanchard's administration in 1984:

*Our vision of a prosperous future for Michigan is back at the world manufacturing frontier, this time as a leading center of durable goods complex manufacturing. It is a Michigan that will be one of those few places in the industrial world where we know how to make things better using automation and skilled labor, to offer a competitive advantage in the production of goods. It is a Michigan where high wages and incomes are not the source of a competitive disadvantage with Mississippi or Mexico but are the result of the higher productivity that comes from linking highly skilled workers with advanced technologies and large amounts of capital. It is a Michigan involved in many of the same manufacturing industries as always, autos, steel, machinery, furniture, and pharmaceuticals, but specialized in those parts of those industries that cannot be transferred to low-wage, unskilled workers elsewhere.*

This is a vision that leads straight to action. It is a vision that was informed by careful analysis and followed by clear strategic priorities.

Like many effective visions, Governor Blanchard's was born of desperation; unemployment was 17 percent when Blanchard was elected. It usually takes a crisis to force communities to do visioning with this kind of depth, unless there is extraordinary political leadership behind the effort. As Harrison Owen writes:

*It emerges when an old way of being, or doing things, is no longer appropriate, or effective, and a new one has yet to emerge. The instigating moment may be the end of a particular business or product, the exhaustion of a theoretical concept, or way of looking at things. In extremes, it may be the dissolution of a social order. In all cases, the instigating factor is the awareness of ending.*

All of this makes visioning a difficult tool to use effectively. On the rare occasions when it is used well, however, it has real power. When it works, as Peter Senge says, "Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision."

When done well, a visioning process can:

- help leaders step outside the box of their current mindset and think anew about their community's condition, potential, and strategic priorities;
- help both leaders and community members internalize a new understanding of the challenges they face, a new vision, and a new path to achieve that vision -- a new "road map;"

- help leaders from different political parties, institutions, and sectors agree on a common vision and goals;
- act as "magnets for collaboration," inspiring thousands of people to work together to achieve a common purpose;
- simplify thousands of decisions and cut through months of needless discussion by providing a guide that can help people figure out what to do and what no longer needs doing; and
- create a new vocabulary that can reshape public perceptions.

In a 1993 essay, Steven Waldhorn of the Stanford Research Institute provided a compelling example of how this can work:

*Nebraska has been a corn economy, but for the last 14 years Nebraska has not made any net income from corn, aside from federal benefits. Nebraska's small towns are being depopulated, but the idea of Nebraska as a corn economy is an icon in the state legislature. Yet, it proved possible to move the dialogue toward developing an alternative vision of what the state could be by doing an analysis of the changing role of agriculture; by getting newspapers to give the analysis publicity; by forming task forces; and by holding public meetings around Nebraska.*

*A vision sounds like something mystic, but in fact what it does is give people a logic to help them to understand themselves and their local economy in a new way. In the case of Nebraska it was understanding that it is not a corn-growing state, but the place you reach in the U.S. when somebody dials an 800 number -- an information-processing state. ...It is this blending of analysis with process to generate a new vision that can be so important in moving towards consensus.*

### **Basic Steps to Successful Visioning**

There is no model visioning process that works best; indeed, vision is idiosyncratic enough that it would be impossible to prescribe one model for all situations. The process is rarely straightforward. Rather, as John Kotter tells us in *Leading Change*, "Vision creation is almost always a messy, difficult, and sometimes emotionally charged exercise."

To succeed, it requires leadership -- a champion or champions who have political clout -- good staff support, and adequate funding. If you don't have these three things, it is not worth trying.

Though you can approach the process in many different ways, there are some potential steps that can be useful. I present the following not as a prescription, but as a guide from which you can choose the steps that work best for you.

## **1. Creating the Charge**

The call for visioning must come from people with significant power; otherwise, when the visioning is done, no participant may have enough power to launch the necessary change efforts. Often, the leader already has a fairly clear vision, which he or she wants refined and spread, so more and more people buy in. There is nothing wrong with this, but if it is the case, the leader should be honest about it.

## **2. Creating the Leadership Team**

No matter how many people take part in a visioning process -- and some have involved thousands -- it needs a leadership team. Ideally, the elected official who charges the team will participate. If not, he or she should appoint the team. It should, if possible, be broadly representative of those whose buy-in the leader hopes to secure. And it should include acknowledged leaders in the community, to build confidence in the process. Credibility comes from the involvement of institutions that have authority: chambers of commerce, universities, businesses, unions, and community organizations. Without support from some of these institutions, significant change is almost impossible -- and every potential participant knows it.

The leadership group, while often very diverse, must also function as a genuine team. "If teamwork does not exist in the guiding coalition," Kotter warns, "parochialism can turn vision creation into an endless negotiation." If the appointed group is not yet a team, the leader or his or her designee should spend time working with it to create that sense of teamwork.

## **3. Defining the Scope and Time Frame**

The first task for the team is to define the scope of the visioning effort: Is it focused on economic growth, as in Oregon? Is it focused on a particular system, such as education, criminal justice, or environmental protection? Or is it focused more broadly on the future of the entire community?

The second task is to establish the time frame for visioning. Is this an effort to envision what the community will be like in 20 years, as in Oregon? Or 30 years? Or just 10 years?

## **4. Deciding How Much Community Involvement You Want**

The wider you cast the net, the more people will share the vision and work to make it real. But the more people who are involved in creating the vision, the more danger that it will be an accumulation of typical opinions about the future, resulting in the kind of plain vanilla statement Minnesota created. If you want real research and analysis to inform the vision, a narrower group has a better chance of success.

This is an unavoidable trade-off. In Michigan in the early 1980s, Governor Blanchard chose to use a small task force, which included state policy makers, economists, and other experts. It was able to commission significant research and do in-depth analysis of the state's economy. The result was one of the best visioning reports I have seen, *The Path to Prosperity*. But the process created no buy-in, and despite strenuous efforts by his Commerce Department, the governor never succeeded in building a statewide consensus behind his new economic strategy. If you choose not to involve much of the community in creating the vision, in other words, you will need a vigorous campaign to publicize the vision and secure buy-in from stakeholders and citizens.

Minnesota used a much more inclusive approach, involving thousands of people. Oregon chose a middle ground: The governor commissioned 16 advisory committees, each made up of about a dozen business, labor, education, and government leaders and each supported by analysts from the Department of Economic Development. Half the advisory committees focused on an industry, the other half on a policy arena, such as education or international trade. Supported by research done by the analysts, each drew up a report. Using these reports as a framework, the governor's office and the Department of Economic Development then wrote *Oregon Shines*. Later, the Oregon Progress Board held a series of community meetings around the state to publicize it and solicit input on outcome goals, which became the Oregon Benchmarks.

Though every situation is different, I suggest that you consider an iterative process that ranges between two poles: a small, analytical group and a more inclusive process. For example, you might begin with a broad base, using surveys and town hall meetings to solicit input from thousands of people. A small team might then use that input to target its research and analysis, ultimately developing a first draft. That draft might then be taken back out to the public, through surveys and community meetings. Using that feedback, the small group might finalize the draft.

How you proceed will depend in part upon who you need to move the ball forward once the vision statement is completed. If you need a small group of insiders, you can use a narrow process involving those insiders. If you need a much broader swath of the community's leadership, you should involve more people.

If your political environment is heavy with conflict -- if any leader who articulates a vision immediately draws fire -- you will need a broad process of inclusion, to generate a consensus that the leadership can act upon. If your environment is more conducive to rational dialogue among leaders of different parties and perspectives, as in Oregon, you will not need to cast as broad a net. You can involve a narrower set of leaders, as Oregon did, then develop more buy-in after you have articulated your vision, goals, and strategic priorities.

If you are in the midst of a crisis, you may not have time for an inclusive process. In Michigan, Governor Blanchard needed an economic strategy that would work, and he needed it quickly. Yet most of the state was still in denial, hoping that the 150,000 auto and steel jobs that had disappeared would come back when the recession ended. Few

leaders had any idea what to do if the jobs didn't reappear, and the Commerce Department had little data about what was happening in the rest of the economy. Michigan needed in-depth research and breakthrough thinking, fast. A small task force was the only realistic option.

If an elected leader is near the end of his or her term in office, time will also be a factor. The most inclusive statewide visioning process I know of took place in Washington state, under Governor Dan Evans, from 1974 through 1976. Called "Alternatives for Washington," it used a statewide task force of 150 people, a Delphi survey that went out to 2500 citizens, 10 regional conferences, a statewide questionnaire published in most of the state's major newspapers, random sample telephone and mail surveys, seven cost/benefit study teams to analyze strategies to implement the vision, and finally, 22 town hall meetings. In total, 9,000 people participated directly in one way or another and almost 50,000 responded to surveys or questionnaires. In December 1976, Governor Evans proudly published the result of all this work: *An Agenda for the Future*. There was just one problem. Governor Evans had not run for a fourth term in 1976, and the victor, Dr. Dixie Lee Ray, had different priorities. She killed Alternatives for Washington and ignored its recommendations. (Because the process had reached so many people, however, the legislature gradually passed most of its recommendations, in one form or another.)

## **5. Analyzing the Cards You've Been Dealt**

"Although a good vision has a certain elegant simplicity," John Kotter points out, "the data and the syntheses required to produce it are usually anything but simple. A ten-foot stack of paperwork, reports, financials, and statistics are sometimes needed to help produce a one-page statement of future direction."

Though written about private businesses, this statement is just as relevant to the public sector. Both Oregon and Michigan took the time to analyze their economic bases. They did environmental scans. They examined current trends in both the state and global economies, and they looked at forecasts of where future growth might occur. To develop a credible vision, they had to marry the two, describing a feasible path from their low-tech economies to a future that embraced technology and innovation. "We couldn't suddenly say, 'let's go into aerospace, or let's go into microcomputers,'" explained Doug Ross, who led Michigan's task force and then went on to direct its Commerce Department.

*You can't do that. You have to start with what you are, and then figure out how to adapt it and build it toward what you think is happening. The report gives us an economic sense of what the future looks like, which gives some hope, and begins to send signals as to what different institutions are supposed to do. Since ultimately you can compel almost no one to do anything, you need those kinds of cues.*



The visions expressed by *The Path to Prosperity* and *Oregon Shines* were not intuitive leaps by insightful leaders. When visioning processes skip real research and analysis -- as many do -- the result is often a plain vanilla statement that motivates no one, or a vision so out of touch with reality that no one takes it seriously. Many a community has painted a rosy vision of a robust high-tech economy, without any base from which to build that economy. But a useful vision is not a fantasy. To be credible, it must be built on the cards you have been dealt.

## **6. Developing Alternative Scenarios of the Future**

The construction of alternative scenarios is optional, but when you need to help participants think outside the box it can dramatically enrich the visioning process. Scenario planning emerged out of World War II, when the U.S. Air Force tried to imagine what its enemies might do and prepare alternative strategies in response. Royal Dutch/Shell put it on the corporate map in the 1970s and '80s, when it used scenario planning to prepare itself for two events that took other oil companies by surprise: OPEC's dramatic price hikes in the 1970s and the subsequent collapse of oil prices in 1986.

Peter Schwartz, who led Royal Dutch/Shell's scenario planning group in the 1980s, describes the process in his book, *The Art of the Long View*:

*In a scenario process, managers invent and then consider, in depth, several varied stories of equally plausible futures. The stories are carefully researched, full of relevant detail, oriented toward real-life decisions, and designed (one hopes) to bring forward surprises and unexpected leaps of understanding. Together, the scenarios comprise a tool for ordering one's perceptions.*

If you develop several plausible scenarios, they can help in numerous ways. You may simply decide that one scenario is your desired future and devote your efforts to bringing it about. But you may also use the scenarios to keep your community or system prepared for any likely contingency. Indeed, you can develop indicators to watch for signals that one or another scenario is beginning to unfold. You can also use the scenarios to test and refine strategies, to make sure they take into account possible future developments.

However you use them, scenarios give you a richer understanding of the future. "What is most valuable about scenarios is that they change the way people who use them think about the future," the Council of Governors' Policy Advisers explained in a 1993 report.

*Thinking in terms of scenarios makes you aware of your own assumptions, which are highlighted in contrast to other plausible assumptions. Instead of having a single implicit image of where things are probably going, several explicit images of plausible futures are considered. This way of thinking opens your awareness and expands the range of things you pay attention to. You find yourself reviewing*

*the news and your personal experience in a new way as you constantly consider whether events appear to be moving toward one scenario or another. You see possible opportunities, as well as possible threats, that you never noticed before because they were outside your "field of view."*

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the influence of scenarios on governance occurred in South Africa during the early 1990s. In February of 1990, the government released Nelson Mandela from prison and legalized his and other political parties. Soon afterward, economist Pieter le Roux, director of the Institute for Social Development at the University of the Western Cape, organized a group of 22 leaders -- politicians, activists, academics, and businessmen from across the ideological spectrum -- to work on possible scenarios for South Africa. They held three three-day workshops at the Mont Fleur Conference Center outside Cape Town. At the first they compiled 30 possible scenarios; by the end of the second workshop, they had whittled it down to four. They gave each a name that would symbolize its content and catch the public's attention:

- "Ostrich," in which the government hardens its negotiating position, a stand-off results, and the talks break down. This leads to violence, insurrection, or ultimately a return to negotiations under dramatically worse conditions.
- "Lame Duck," in which a negotiated settlement is reached but the transition is slow and halting, with a coalition government gradually becoming incapacitated by indecisiveness, resulting in social and economic crisis.
- "Icarus," in which a settlement transfers power to a popularly elected government, which pursues populist economic policies that are unsustainable (a la the Sandinistas in Nicaragua), resulting in serious economic crisis and political chaos.
- "Flight of the Flamingos," in which a political settlement leads to a democratically elected government, which pushes through moderate economic and social reforms, creating conditions for slow but sustainable economic growth.

The Mont Fleur Scenarios, as they became known, were widely distributed as a 14-page insert in a national newspaper and a 30-minute video. They made it clear to all 22 participants, including those on the left, that "Flight of the Flamingos" was the only plausible future. "What was remarkable about the project was the heterogeneous group of important figures delivering the messages, and how this group worked together to arrive at these messages," says Adam Kahane, a scenario planner who facilitated the process, on loan from Royal Dutch/Shell. "The Mont Fleur team gave vivid, concise names to important phenomena that were not widely known, and previously could be neither discussed nor addressed. At least one political party reconsidered its approach to the constitutional negotiations in light of the scenarios."

In this instance, scenarios helped bring leaders from different sectors of society and politics to a common, shared vision -- and to agreement on the best path toward that vision. They also created a vocabulary to communicate the options to millions of people.

The Institute for Alternative Futures recommends the use of four scenarios; if you create more, it has found, the process becomes unwieldy. It suggests that one scenario represent the "official future" -- officialdom's best guess of what will happen. Another should be a "hard times" scenario. And the last two should be premised on structural changes in the environment. At least one of these, argues IAF Director Clement Bezold, should "explore what would happen if a critical mass of stakeholders became truly visionary." Visioning has the most power, he notes, when it "is an invitation to truly stretch to create the best that can be -- to ensure that our actions leave a legacy for our children and grandchildren of which we would be proud."

## **7. Soliciting Input from the Community**

Some visioning teams will want to begin by asking the public what kind of future it desires. You can use opinion surveys to do this, or the Internet, or town hall meetings, regional conferences, focus groups, and the like. One particularly useful technique is a Delphi Survey. Jerome Glenn explains the basic idea in *Anticipatory Democracy*:

*Unlike a one-shot poll, the Delphi technique consists of several rounds of questionnaires. ... The condensed response from the first questionnaire becomes the basis for response in the second round. The average Delphi has three rounds, but it might continue for as many as five.*

*This technique allows the whole group to share their thoughts, and then allows individuals the chance to revise their opinions based on the collective response. ... It tends to force consensus by returning information from the previous round that shows the views of the majority.*

Between rounds, a Delphi panel of experts or citizens analyzes the responses and prepares the next questionnaire, which can go out through the mail or as an insert in newspapers. Though useful in delving into public opinion, Delphi surveys do have several weaknesses, Glenn points out. Their primary appeal is to educated citizens. They are imprecise: In answering written questions, responders who choose the same answers may mean different things. And perhaps most important, the fact that they produce a consensus vision does not make that vision plausible. The public may prefer a future that is highly implausible -- rendering their verdict much less useful to the leadership team..

## **8. Developing a First Draft**

Sometimes, particularly in individual organizations, a vision is as much the product of intuition as of analysis. If it is driven by one leader, it makes sense for that leader to take a crack at a first draft. (Unless that leader is an exceptional writer, I recommend hiring a professional writer to help.) If you want the entire leadership team involved in the first draft, you can ask members to assume the year is 10 or 20 years hence and that they have been very successful. Then ask each of them to write a newspaper story describing the future they have created and how they did it. This can

generate numerous pictures of the future and potential strategic priorities, which can be sifted for common, useful elements.

## **9. Soliciting Feedback on the Draft**

You can go as broad and as deep as you want to at this stage. As noted above, the broader and deeper you go, the more buy-in you will generate from the public. Most of the techniques described under step seven above are appropriate here.

## **10. Finalizing the Draft**

In some ways, this is the single most important step. Whether you are drafting a long document like *Oregon Shines* or a brief vision statement, this is the first product you will present to the world. If you do it right, tens of thousands of people will read it. Hence it makes sense to invest the time necessary to get it right. I highly recommend using a professional writer to work with the group. *The Path to Prosperity* was so powerful in part because it was written by a professional.

Both *Oregon Shines* and *The Path to Prosperity* are long documents, which present an analysis, a vision, broad goals and strategic priorities. Oregon's chapter titles progress from "Where Are We?" to "What Do We Have To Work With?" to "Where Do We Want to Be?" to "How Do We Get There?" When visioning for an entire community, city, or state, rather than for one organization, your work will have more power if it touches all these bases. You can still pull out the vision statement as a separate document when necessary. But when your task is to convince thousands of citizens -- not employees -- to help shoulder the load, you will be more convincing if you present the full argument.

The more you can boil the challenges facing your community down to their essence -- and communicate that essence with a story about where you are going and where you have been -- the better you will communicate. *The Path to Prosperity* is a very sophisticated, analytical document, yet it managed to boil Michigan's future down to three memorable choices: it could "get poor," by letting manufacturing wages fall to remain competitive; it could "get out" of manufacturing; or it could "get smart," by nurturing advanced manufacturing technologies like robotics and machine vision and making Michigan the place to go for cutting-edge manufacturing technology.

Finding the right language to express your vision is critical. In most states, the exact words that politicians utter matter a great deal. They are dissected by the media. People look closely to see if they are included in the vision; many expect to be cut out of the deal, as they have been all their lives. Others look for the nonsense, their crap detectors well honed by years of political rhetoric. Hence your language needs to be chosen carefully to create a sense of inclusion, realism, and hope.

Your drafters can also benefit from the following guidelines:

- *Keep your language simple and clear.* As John Kotter advises, "All jargon and technobabble must be eliminated." Hampton, Virginia's vision statement -- "The most livable city in Virginia" -- is a model of simplicity and power.
- *Make it visual.* A picture is worth a thousand words (which explains why you may want to do a video based on your draft). A word picture may not be worth quite that many, but images are still powerful. The "slogan" sentence in *The Path to Prosperity* is: "Michigan must become America's `Factory of the Future.'" That image, and all it conveys about modern manufacturing -- robotics, machine vision, self-managed teams, and sparkling clean factories -- became the central picture that Governor Blanchard and Commerce Director Doug Ross painted for Michigan's citizens.
- *Use metaphor and analogy.* Often the best way to communicate what you mean is by reference to a parallel. Consider Barnes & Noble, which transformed itself after its CEO decided that people went to bookstores for the same reason they went to movies -- for the social experience. He began painting a vision of bookstores as theaters, and soon Barnes & Noble stores featured large, dramatic spaces, cafes, and nooks and crannies with tables and chairs.
- *Use concrete examples.* People relate better to specific examples than abstract concepts. Though a vision statement will of course contain concepts, flesh them out with examples. To illustrate the concept of a state's economic base, which produces real wealth by exporting goods and services, versus its local market economy, which simply feeds off that wealth, *The Path to Prosperity* said: "Put another way, even if McDonalds now employs more workers than U.S. Steel, no state can grow rich by selling hamburgers to its people, since it can only cook and sell as many hamburgers as its citizens can buy, and they can only buy as many hamburgers as their earnings in base industries permit."
- *Appeal to common bonds and traditional values.* People will not identify with a vision if it feels foreign. By rooting it in traditional values and bonds, you can reassure people that you do not propose to throw the baby out with the bath water. In *Oregon Shines'* vision statement, the first words, in bold type, are: "The Best Would Be Retained."
- *Tell stories.* Stories may be the most useful teaching device ever invented. They grab the reader (or listener or viewer), they entertain, and they illustrate critical concepts in concrete ways that make sense to people.
- *Reach both the head and the heart.* Your vision must make sense to people throughout the community or system. But to inspire their commitment, it must also appeal to them on an emotional level. Will it help create a legacy of which they can be proud? Does it call them to a noble quest? Few people are motivated to action if you have not touched their hearts.

### **Characteristics of an Effective Vision Statement**

- \* Outcome-based: The vision is stated in terms of end results.
- \* Inclusive: It resonates with a majority of its target community.
- \* Vivid: It creates a visual picture of the desired future.
- \* Clear: It is easily understood.
- \* Communicable: Kotter suggests a rule of thumb: it "can be successfully explained within five minutes."
- \* Unique: It differentiates you from other communities.
- \* Inspiring: It appeals to the public spirit.
- \* Challenging: It includes audacious goals with the power to motivate.
- \* Realistic: It does not require miracles; it builds on the cards you have been dealt.
- \* Credible: People believe they can bring it to life.
- \* Focused: It is specific enough to provide guidance in decision making.
- \* Widely Shared: It is embraced across party lines, in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

## **11. Choosing Broad Goals and Strategies**

The most valuable visioning in the public sector leads not only to visions, but to broad goals and strategies. This was the case in Oregon, in Michigan, and in many other successful examples. Unlike an organization, a community is not usually cohesive enough to be motivated and aligned by a vision alone. You have to start moving it toward action.

*The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* argues that this is true even for single organizations:

*In most cases, unless four or five strategically consequential "chunks of work" are defined and approached, the organization may never achieve much of its vision at all. For this reason, at the end of an intensive shared vision session, I always*

*conclude with an exercise on strategic priorities. .. I ask them to bring that capacity to bear on identifying the critical gaps they want to address first, and the milestones which will show if they are drawing close.*

### **13. Communicating the Vision**

In a community of any size, a vision is not useful unless those who fashioned it communicate it to thousands of people, growing it into a shared vision. Once you have it written down, the hard work begins. You must take every opportunity you have -- in speeches, meetings, videos, performance reviews, chance encounters, newsletters, and interviews -- to communicate your basic vision, goals, and strategic priorities. If you have boiled them down to a simple, clear message with concrete examples, vivid images, and convincing metaphors, you will find this task much easier. Still, says Kotter, "Getting a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand people to understand and accept a particular vision is usually an enormously challenging undertaking."

Tom Peters likens the job to political campaigning -- and in the public sector the analogy is quite apt. In *Thriving On Chaos*, he suggests "a three- to five-minute stump speech, with many variations.

*Use it at least a couple of times a day, almost regardless of setting. No opportunity is, in fact, inappropriate for reiterating the vision, using a pertinent detail that happens to be at hand. If possible, end the speech with a couple of examples of people in the ranks living the vision in their daily affairs.*

Effective communication is not one-way, however. "Most human beings, especially well-educated ones, buy into something only after they have had a chance to wrestle with it," Kotter points out. "Wrestling means asking questions, challenging, and arguing...." Hence leaders need to give those they are communicating with plenty of time for feedback and discussion -- even if the vision has been through a long process of citizen input.

### **14. Living the Vision**

To communicate a vision, you must also live it. As Kouzes and Posner testify, "There's absolutely no way that you can convince others, over the long term, to share a dream if you're not convinced of it yourself." And you must make that conviction obvious to people. Any inconsistency in your behavior will quickly undermine your credibility.

Living the vision, when you are trying to communicate with tens of thousands of people, means dramatizing the vision. If your vision revolves around quality, create quality. Refurbish offices, paint buildings, improve office furniture. General Bill Creech did this with such fervor at the Tactical Air Command that some of his actions became legends. You can also create symbols of your vision: new signs, new rituals, new organizational practices. Peters calls such symbols "vision made visible."

When you run across people who exemplify the vision, give them awards and publicize their work. If you can find no other way to bring your vision to life for people, send them to see a living, breathing example of it -- or do a video and show it to every group you address. Jim Rouse, the legendary developer, once explained that when his architects simply could not come up with plans that captured his vision, he would give them airplane tickets and tell them to go look at a particular building. You can do the same -- and with video you can show it to thousands.

### **15. Creating some structure to implement the vision.**

"Many community visioning efforts break down once the vision and strategic initiatives are identified," report David Chrislip and Carl Larson in their book *Collaborative Leadership*, which is based on a study of 52 examples of collaborative community leadership. To avoid this, you need to plan for further implementation. The executive or legislative body may take the lead. But often you need a structure more rooted in the community and more committed for the long haul. Perhaps the first big community visioning exercise, Goals for Dallas in the 1960s, created 12 "Goal Achievement Committees" to build public support and push both public and private institutions to work on the goals. The Phoenix Futures Forum left behind a Futures Forum Action Committee to oversee implementation for two years. It organized into six action groups to mobilize partners who could help implement the recommendations; the city council created six subcommittees to work with them; and the city manager appointed a deputy to be in charge of implementation for the city. And of course Oregon created the Progress Board.

### **16. Linking the Vision to Outcome Goals, Strategies, and Budgets**

Visioning, like most of the tools in this chapter, is far more powerful if used in combination with other tools. Once you have a vision document, move on to create outcome goals and strategies to achieve them, and link them all to the budget. As the Institute for Alternative Futures says, "If staff see the vision only as a pretty piece of prose displayed on the wall, their commitment to its achievement will waiver."

### **17. Refreshing the Vision**

Oregon discovered, seven years after *Oregon Shines* was completed, that it had to revisit its vision because conditions had changed. "The vision must act as a compass in a wild and stormy sea," Tom Peters writes, "and, like a compass, it loses its value if it's not adjusted to take account of its surroundings." Revisit your vision and goals every five to seven years. By involving many others in the process, you can bring it back to life for those who have forgotten it.

#



*David Osborne is a senior partner in the Public Strategies Group, ([www.psg.us](http://www.psg.us)). He is the author or co-author of four books: Laboratories of Democracy (1988), Reinventing Government (1992), Banishing Bureaucracy (1997), The Reinventor's Fieldbook (2000), and The Price of Government (2004).*