



Web leadertoleader.org

Mission: To strengthen the leadership of the social sector



[HOME](#) | [ABOUT THE INSTITUTE](#) | [OUR WORK](#) | [KNOWLEDGE CENTER](#) | [COLLABORATION](#) | [GET INVOLVED](#)

[\[Thought Leaders Forum\]](#) [\[Leader to Leader Journal\]](#) [\[Books and Videos\]](#) [\[Innovation Discovery Site\]](#) [\[Self-Assessment\]](#) [\[Collaboration\]](#)

## The Vision Thing: Without It You'll Never Be a World-Class Organization by Ken Blanchard and Jesse Stoner

copyright and  
permissions

Leader to Leader, No. 31 Winter 2004

**W**E'VE been studying leadership and organizations for more than thirty-five years and have come to a conclusion: All the world-class organizations we know are driven by three critical factors:

- ✦ Clear *vision and direction* championed by top management
- ✦ Trained and equipped people focused on implementation of the agreed-upon vision and direction
- ✦ Established *recognition and positive consequence systems* that sustain the behaviors and performance that the vision and direction require

Vision and direction are essential for greatness. In world-class organizations, every-one has a clear sense of where the enterprise is going. Only when the leaders of an organization know that their people understand the agreed-upon vision and direction can they attend to strengthening the organization's ability to deliver on this vision.

The second step in the process of building a world-class organization--implementation-- is training, preparing, and equipping people throughout the organization to live according to the vision and accomplish the desired goals.

If organizations do not do that, their people will never take care of their customers. And after all, profit is the applause you get for taking care of your customers and creating a motivating environment for your people.

After vision and direction get things started and people are trained, equipped, and committed to success, the question becomes, "What do you do to keep all this going?" World-class organizations establish *recognition*



**Thought Leaders Forum:**  
[Ken Blanchard](#)

**Ken Blanchard** co-chairman and chief spiritual officer of The Ken Blanchard Companies, is coauthor of "The One Minute Manager," "Gung Ho," "Whale Done," and 10 other best-sellers. He and Jesse Stoner have recently published "Full Steam Ahead: Unleash the Power of Vision in Your Company and Your Life." (1/2004)

[More on Ken Blanchard](#)



**Thought Leaders Forum:**  
[Jesse Stoner](#)

**Jesse Stoner**, is a highly regarded and experienced organizational consultant, executive coach, and author. The primary focus of her work for the past twenty years has been helping organizations create a sustaining shared vision. Her pioneering work in vision development has helped wide range of companies create a compelling vision, identify the strategies to capture it and ensure it is lived. She has

*and positive consequence systems* that fuel the implementation of the vision and direction, and they make sure those standards are met or exceeded on an ongoing basis. These practices communicate a basic understanding about people: recognition is a universal need. People everywhere want to be appreciated for their good efforts, and redirected and coached for any inappropriate behavior.

Although the greatest impact on performance--ongoing and future--comes from training and equipping people and establishing positive recognition and consequence systems, unless vision and direction are communicated and well understood by everyone, your organization won't even be in the game. Why?

Vision helps people make smart choices because their decisions are being made with the end result in mind. As goals are accomplished, the answer to "What next?" becomes clear. Vision takes into account a larger picture than the immediate goal. Martin Luther King Jr. described his vision of a world where people live together in mutual respect. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, he described a world where his children "will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." He created powerful and specific images from the values of brotherhood, respect, and freedom for all--values that resonate with the founding values of the United States. King's vision has passed a crucial test: it continues to mobilize and guide people beyond his lifetime. Vision allows for a long-term proactive stance--creating what we want--rather than a short-term reactive stance--getting rid of what we don't want.

Vision is important for leaders because leadership is about going somewhere. If you and your people don't know where you are going, your leadership doesn't matter. Ken's father, Ted Blanchard, gave a wonderful example of this. He retired from the Navy early as a captain, even though he could have stayed on and been promoted to admiral on his own merits. Ken asked, "Dad, why did you quit early?" His father answered, "Ken, I hate to say it but I liked the wartime Navy better than the peacetime Navy. Not that I liked to fight, but in wartime we knew what our purpose was and what we were trying to accomplish. The problem with the peacetime Navy is that nobody knows what we are supposed to be doing. As a result, too many leaders think their full-time job is making other people feel unimportant."

Without a clear vision, an organization becomes a self-serving bureaucracy. The top managers begin to think "the sheep are there for the benefit of the shepherd." All the money, recognition, power, and status move up the hierarchy, away from the people closest to the customers, and leadership begins to serve the leaders and not the organization's larger purpose and goals. The results of this type of behavior have been all too evident recently at Enron, World-com, and other companies.

Once the vision is clarified and shared, the leader can focus on serving and being responsive to the needs of the people. The greatest leaders have mobilized others by coalescing people around a shared vision. Sometimes leaders don't get it at first, but the great ones eventually do.

Louis Gerstner Jr. is a perfect example. When he took the helm of IBM in 1993--amid turmoil and instability as the company's annual net losses reached a record \$8 billion--he was quoted as saying, "The last thing IBM needs is a vision." However, less than a year

worked internationally in a wide range of industries including retail, hospitality, financial, manufacturing, government, and non-profit.

[More on Jesse Stoner](#)

From **Leader to Leader, No. 31 Winter 2004**



- [Table of Contents](#)
- [From the Editors](#)
- [Resources](#)

[Additional resources for this article](#)

Without a clear vision, an organization becomes a self-serving bureaucracy.

later he conceded that IBM needed to do long-range thinking. An incredible turnaround arose as a result of that long-range planning: it became clear that the focus of strength for the company would be in integrated solutions. As a result of that clarity, Gerstner resisted pressures to split the company. In 1995, delivering the keynote address at the computer industry trade show, Gerstner articulated IBM's new vision--that network computing would drive the next phase of industry growth and would be the company's overarching strategy. That year, IBM began a series of acquisitions that positioned services to become the fastest growing segment of the company, with growth at more than 20 percent per year. This extraordinary turnaround demonstrated that the most important thing IBM needed to do was have a vision--a shared vision.

Again, while training and equipping people and establishing positive recognition and consequence systems will have the greatest impact on performance, without a clear vision you're going nowhere. If an organization's vision is a compelling one, people will think their work is worthwhile and will become joyful. As wise old Texas entrepreneur Fred Smith--author of *You and Your Network*--says, "Real joy in life comes when you can get in the act of forgetfulness about yourself." A compelling vision helps people forget themselves.

If an organization's vision is a compelling one, people will think their work is worthwhile and will become joyful.

When people share and believe in a vision of what the organization can be, they generate tremendous energy, excitement, and passion. They feel they are making a difference. They build a strong reputation for excellent products and services. They know what they are doing and why. There is a strong sense of trust and respect. Managers don't try to control. They let others assume responsibility because they know everyone shares the vision and is clear about their goals and direction. Everyone assumes responsibility for their own actions. They take charge of their future rather than passively waiting for it to happen. There is room for creativity and risk taking. People can make their contributions in their own way, and their differences are respected because people know they are in the same boat together--all part of a larger whole going "full steam ahead!"



### Effective Versus Ineffective Vision Statements

**A** LOT of organizations already have vision statements, but most of these statements seem irrelevant when you look at the organization and where it's going. Are these vision statements misguided, and if so, how can they be improved?

The purpose of a vision statement is to create an aligned organization where every-one is working together toward the same desired ends. The vision provides guidance for daily decisions so that people are moving in the right direction, not working at cross-purposes with one another.

How do you know if your vision statement works? Here's the test: Is it hidden in a forgotten file or framed on a wall solely for decoration? If so, it's not working. Is it used to guide everyday decision making? If the answer is yes, your vision statement is working.



### Create a Compelling Vision

**A** REAL vision statement reveals what business a company is in. It identifies not just the products or services offered, but the company's core reason for existence--its purpose. It focuses organizational energy. A real vision statement provides broad guidelines for how to proceed in fulfilling the organization's purpose, and a real vision statement offers clear pictures of what success looks like. We have found three elements that constitute a

compelling vision:

- ≠ *Significant purpose*: What business are you in?
- ≠ *A picture of the future*: What will the future look like if you are living according to your purpose?
- ≠ *Clear values*: How do you want people to behave when they are working according to your purpose and on your picture of the future?



### Significant Purpose

**PURPOSE** is your organization's reason for existence. It answers the question "Why?" rather than just explaining what you do. It clarifies--from your customer's viewpoint--what business you are *really* in. CNN is not in the entertainment business. Their customers are busy people who need breaking news on demand. Their business is to provide hard news as it unfolds--not to provide entertainment. According to CNN, the typical family today is too busy to sit in front of the television at 7:00 P.M. Dad has a second job, Mom is working late, and the kids are involved in activities. Therefore, CNN's purpose is to provide news on demand.

Walt Disney was a genius at creating a compelling vision. When he started his theme parks, he was clear on their purpose. He said, "We're in the happiness business." That is very different from being in the theme park business. Clear purpose drives everything the cast members (employees) do with their guests (customers). Great organizations have a deep and noble sense of purpose--a *significant* purpose--that inspires excitement and commitment. When work is meaningful and connected to what we truly desire, we are able to unleash a productive and creative power we never imagined.



### Picture of the Future

**A PICTURE** of the end result should not be vague. It should be something you can actually see. CNN's picture of the future is to be viewed in every nation on the planet in English and in the language of that region. Walt Disney's picture of the future was expressed in the charge he gave every cast member: "Keep the same smile on people's faces when they leave the park as when they enter." He didn't care whether a guest was in the park two hours or ten hours. He just wanted to keep them smiling. After all, they were in the happiness business. Your picture should focus on the end result, not the process for getting there.



### Clear Values

**VALUES** provide guidelines on how you should proceed as you pursue your purpose and picture of the future. They answer the questions, "What do I want to live by?" and "How?" They need to be clearly described so you know exactly what behaviors demonstrate that the value is being lived. They need to be consistently acted on or they are only good intentions. The values of CNN are to provide accurate, responsible journalism and to be responsive to the news needs of people around the world.

Fewer than 10 percent of organizations around the world have clear, written values. Most organizations that do have values either have too many values or they are not rank ordered. Research shows that people can't focus on more than three or four values or those values will not really have an impact on behavior. Also, values must be rank ordered to be effective. Why? Because life is about value conflicts. When these conflicts arise, people

need to know which value they should focus on. Walt Disney intuitively knew this when he ranked safety ahead of other values--courtesy, the show, and efficiency. Why did he do that? Because he knew that if a guest left the park on a stretcher, that guest would not have the same smile on her face that was present when she entered the park. So, if a cast member hears a scream while being courteous to a guest, he excuses himself immediately and focuses on the number one value--safety. *A vision is compelling when it helps people understand what business they're really in, provides a picture of the desired future, and offers value guidelines that help people make daily decisions.* Once you have a compelling vision, goals can be set that help people focus their energy on a day-to-day basis. But these goals will now take on bigger meaning, because they are seen in the context of a clear vision.

For a vision to endure, you need all three elements: significant purpose, a picture of the future, and clear values. In 1960, John F. Kennedy articulated a picture of the future for the Apollo moon project: to place a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s and bring him home safely. To achieve that goal, NASA overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles. It was not an enduring vision, however, because no one had clearly articulated a significant purpose for the program, nor had they established values to guide the journey. Were we doing it to "beat the Russians," "begin the Space Defense Initiative," or--in the spirit of Star Trek--"to boldly go where no one has gone before"? Once Kennedy's picture of the future was achieved, NASA never recreated the energy of the original program.



### Make Your Vision a Reality

**I**f you are clear about your vision and honest about your present realities, you don't have to figure everything out. Things start happening of their own accord. Vision is a lot more than putting a plaque on the wall. A real vision is lived, not framed. For vision to become a reality, what's important is how it's created, how it's communicated, and how it's lived.



### How It's Created

**T**HE process of creating the vision is as important as what the vision says. Instead of simply taking the top management off on a retreat to put the vision together and then announcing the vision, encourage dialogue about the vision. Allow others to have an opportunity to help shape the vision, to put their thumbprint on it. This will deepen their understanding and commitment as well as create a better vision.



### How It's Communicated

**C**REATING a vision--for your organization or department, for your work, and for your life--is a journey, not a one-time activity.

Creating a vision is a journey, not a one-time activity.

In some organizations a vision statement may be found framed on walls but provide no guidance or, worse, have nothing to do with how things actually are. This turns people off. Visioning is an ongoing process; you need to keep it alive. It's important to keep talking about the vision and referring to it as much as possible. Max De Pree, legendary chairman of Herman Miller, said that in his visionary role he had to be like a third-grade teacher. He had to keep on saying it over and over and over again until people got it right, right, right! As chief spiritual officer of The Ken Blanchard Companies, Ken leaves an inspirational voice-mail message every morning re-minding more than 250

The more you focus on your vision, the clearer it will become and the more deeply you will understand it.



people what our vision and values are. The more you focus on your vision, the clearer it will become and the more deeply you will understand it. In fact, aspects of what you thought was the vision may change over time, but the essence of it will remain.



### How It's Lived

**T**HE moment you identify your vision, you need to behave as if it were happening right now. Your actions need to be congruent with your vision. As others see you living the vision, they will believe you are serious and it will help to deepen their understanding and commitment. Two strategies will support your efforts to live your vision:

1. *Always focus on your vision.* If an obstacle or un-foreseen event throws you off course, set a new course rather than trying to get back on the old one. Be prepared to change your goals if necessary. Change is bound to happen. Unforeseen events are bound to occur. Find a way to reframe what is happening as a challenge or opportunity.
2. *Show the courage of commitment.* True commitment begins when you take action. There will be fears; feel them and move ahead. It takes courage to create a vision and it takes courage to act on it. In the words of Goethe, "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."

While top management should involve as many people as possible in shaping and communicating vision and direction, the ultimate *responsibility* for making sure that these are done lies with the hierarchical leadership.



### Visioning Role

**P**EOPLE look to their formal leaders for vision and direction, but if an enterprise is to be effective and live its vision, people throughout the organization must be *responsive* to this vision--knowing who they are, where they are going, and what will guide their journey. To make that happen, the implementation role has to begin.

The implementation role--empowering others to live according to the organization's vision and direction--is where most organizations get into trouble. The traditional pyramid is kept alive and well, leaving customers uncared for at the bottom of the hierarchy. All the energy in the organization moves up the hierarchy as people try to please and be responsive to their bosses. Now the bureaucracy's rules and policies and procedures carry the day. This leaves un-prepared and uncommitted customer-contact people to quack like ducks: "It's our policy. I didn't make the rules--I just work here. Do you want to talk to my supervisor? Quack! Quack! Quack!"

There is a way to avoid the duck syndrome. Once the vision is set, people are committed to it, and implementation has begun, the traditional pyramidal hierarchy must be turned upside down so that the frontline people, who are closest to the customers, are at the top. Here they can be *responsible*--able to respond to their customers. In this scenario, leaders *serve* and are responsive to the needs of people, training and equipping them to accomplish goals and live according to the vision and direction of the organization.



### Implementation Role

**I**F the leaders of an organization do not resonate with and respond \_\_\_\_\_ when the front-line

to the needs and desires of their people, these individuals will not take good care of their customers. But when the front-line customer-contact people are treated as responsible owners of the vision, they can soar like eagles rather than quack like ducks. Now your vision can really take on life.

customer-contact people are treated as responsible owners of the vision, they can soar like eagles rather than quack like ducks.

While traveling one year, Ken experienced a beautiful example of the difference between a "duck pond" organization and an organization that permits people to soar like eagles. He was heading to the airport for a trip that was going to take him to four different cities in one week. As he approached the airport, he realized that he had forgotten his license and didn't have a passport either. Not having time to go back home to get them and still make the flight, he had to be creative. Ken de-scribes what happened:

"Only one of my books has my picture on the cover--*Everyone's a Coach*--which I wrote with Don Shula, the legendary NFL football coach from the Miami Dolphins. So when I got to the airport I ran into the bookstore and, luckily, they had a copy of my book. Fortunately, the first airline I had to go to was South-west Airlines. As I was checking my bag at the curb, the porter asked to see my identification. I said, 'I feel badly. I don't have a driver's license or a passport. But will this do?' And I showed him the cover of the book.

"He shouted out, 'The man knows Shula! Put him in first class!' Of course, Southwest doesn't have first class. Everybody out by the curbside check-in started to high-five me. I was like a hero."

Why did that happen? Herb Kelleher, who founded Southwest, had a clear vision when he started that company. Not only did he want to give his customers the lowest possible price, but he also wanted to give them the best possible service. He set up the whole organization (including the recognition and positive con-sequence systems) to empower everyone--right down to the frontline baggage-check folks--to make decisions and use their brains so they could create raving-fan customers.

The next airline Ken had to go to was one that has been battling financial troubles: "When I tried to check in with the same procedure as at Southwest, the guy at the curb check-in said, 'No way. Quack! Quack! I can't do that. You'd better go to the ticket counter. Quack! Quack!' When I got to the ticket counter the person there said, 'I'll have to get my supervisor. Quack! Quack!' The supervisor came over and when he saw the book I was using for an ID he essentially said, 'Let me get my supervisor. Quack! Quack!'"

It took four different people before they would consider letting Ken use a picture on a book as identification. At Southwest Airlines, that was not even a second thought. Herb Kelleher (who has recently retired and turned over the presidency to his former executive assistant) felt that policies should be followed, but that people could use their brains in interpreting them. Why do they ask for identification at the airport? To make sure that the person getting on the plane is the same person as the name on the ticket. That was an easy decision for the Southwest Airlines' frontline per-son. But in the troubled airline, the hierarchy is alive and well. All the energy is moving away from the customers and up the hierarchy--away from pleasing customers and toward serving the hierarchy and following the policies, procedures, rules, and regulations to the letter.

Do we have to say anything more about the power of having a clear vision in your organization? That vision calls an organization to be truly great, not solely to beat the competition and get big numbers. A magnificent vision articulates peoples' hopes and dreams, touches their hearts and spirits, and helps them see how they can contribute. It starts everything in the right direction and--if followed up by effective implementation, positive consequence, and sustain-ability strategies--will keep things going in that right direction. Vision is the difference between business as usual and a world-class organization.

Copyright © 2004 by Ken Blanchard and Jesse Stoner. Reprinted with permission from *Leader to Leader*, a publication of the Leader to Leader Institute and Jossey-Bass.

Print citation:

Blanchard, Ken and Stoner, Jesse. "The Vision Thing: Without It You'll Never be a World-Class Organization" *Leader to Leader*. 31 (Winter 2004): 21-28.

This article is available on the Leader to Leader Institute Web site,  
<http://leadertoleader.org/leaderbooks/L2L/winter2004/blanchardandstoner.html>.

Permission to copy:

Send a fax (+1-201-748-6008) or letter to John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Permissions Department, 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030 USA. Or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

Include: (1) The publication title, author(s) or editor(s), and pages you'd like to reprint; (2) Where you will be using the material, in the classroom, as part of a workshop, for a book, etc.; (3) When you will be using the material; (4) The number of copies you wish to make.

To subscribe to *Leader to Leader*:

Call +1-888-378-2537 (or +1-415-433-1740) and mention priority code W02DF or see additional options at <http://leadertoleader.org/leaderbooks/L2L/subscriptions.html>.



---

Copyright ©2006 Leader to Leader Institute | 320 Park Avenue, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10022  
Tel: 212.224.1174 | Fax: 212.224.2508 | Web: [leadertoleader.org](http://leadertoleader.org)  
[Contact Us](#) | [Linking Policy](#) | [Privacy Statement](#) | [Sitemap](#)