



Double Vision: TWO VIEWS OF SUCCESS

If you view your vision in only one dimension, your planning is destined to fail. Use this strategy for success.

By Joel Zimmerman

If you've ever been part of a strategic planning process or done any reading about strategic planning, you've probably come across words like these:

When you begin the process of strategic planning, visioning comes first. When visioning the change, ask yourself, "What is our preferred future?"

—Web site of the National School Boards Association, www.nsba.org

It seems like an easy enough concept. Your organization's vision is its sense of what success will look like. It's the answer to the question: "How will we know when we've become successful?"

In this day of over-simplified sound bites, many organizations believe a vision needs to be short and simple. They look for a single metric for success. Some of these vision-less visions might sound like this: Success means that we:

- are the biggest [insert category name] organization in the world, OR
- increase our profitability by 300%, OR
- eliminate the disease of [insert name] within our city.

All these wonderful aspirations belie the complexity of today's organizations. None of them is big enough to guarantee organizational

success. Having reached any one of these visionary goals, no sensible organization would declare itself a total success.

To get a sense of why such vision statements aren't enough, think about yourself. What would you need to accomplish to consider yourself a success?

Most of us fill many roles. We're children to our parents and parents to our children. We're both managers and employees. We're friends, lovers, church members, citizens, and consumers. No wonder success is so hard to find. Our visions for success are as broad as our lives, and we kid ourselves if we think, for example, "I'll be a success when I have a million dollars in the bank." The first misconception in creating a vision statement is thinking that any single outcome is enough to spell success.

Leaders must understand that

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a vision of success encompasses many aspects of organizational activity. Organizations must succeed financially, operationally, as working environments for their employees, as service providers for their customers, and in other ways as well.

Vision is important because it drives planning. Once you describe

a vision, your organization's staff can begin making plans. If you create a vision that's too narrow, you condemn your organization to a life of underachievement.

The Ins and Outs of Success

Visions aren't just multifaceted. Each part of a vision exists in two-dimensional space. We can refer to these two dimensions as the "in-out" vision and the "out-in" vision.

If you don't get this, your strategic planning may fail miserably. Let's see why.

Consider a geographic metaphor. If you live on the east coast, you can't get to Los Angeles simply by going west; you also need to move along a north-south dimension. One dimensional travel isn't likely to get you where you need to go.

In most strategic planning efforts, the staff creates an *in-out vision*, the first dimension of success. This is a vision created from inside the organization. It's an image of what people in the organization would like people on the outside to see, if the organization were a great success.

In-out vision statements might include elements like these (stated from the insider's point of view). Success means that **we**:

- are recognized as the preeminent organization in the field of disaster relief.
- spend at least 70 cents of every fundraising dollar on programs.
- maintain an elite board of di-



rectors, which is actively involved in fundraising over \$5,000,000 per year.

- retain a staff of 60 full-time professionals and 150 part-time volunteers.

The second dimension to consider is the *out-in vision*. This is a vision of the organization's success that would be created by people outside the organization, namely the organization's public, its customers and constituents, and other supporting individuals (board, donors, sponsors). It's an image that outsiders would like to communicate to the organization's insiders about what success would look like from their (outside) point of view.

Here are examples of what an out-in vision statement might include (stated from the outsider's point of view). Success means that **you**:

- have offices conveniently located where people who need them can access them easily.
- operate a flexible service delivery program that doesn't waste resources yet keeps up with services in periods of heavy demand.
- provide services to the most needy recipients.
- are totally open to communications with the public and demonstrate unquestioned integrity in responding to them.
- work cooperatively with other organizations so services can be provided most efficiently.

In short, the in-out vision ex-

presses what we want of ourselves. The out-in vision expresses what others want of us.

Anyone taking an airplane flight these days understands the difference. Consider the strategy of reducing the number of pretzels in the airline snack. From the in-out dimension, this strategy serves the vision of operating at a profit. From the out-in dimension, this strategy works *against* the vision of making flights an enjoyable passenger experience. If an airline doesn't value the out-in vision as strongly as its in-out vision, it shouldn't be surprised when it loses customers.

Creating the Vision

Again, consider yourself. Your in-out vision for success as an employee might include coming to work on time each day, putting in eight hours, following organizational rules, and so on. Your boss might have an out-in vision for you that includes providing innovative

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solutions to problems, willingly working extra hours when needed, supporting the team rather than pursuing personal goals, and more. Your clients might have yet another set of out-in vision criteria, such as going an extra mile to support their needs.

The in-out vision is more likely to be operational—to focus on what we do as individuals or as an organization. The out-in vision is more likely to be results oriented—what we accomplish on behalf of our customers and others with whom we interact, and what real-world results we bring about.

While both views are important, they're not equally easy to obtain. In strategic planning sessions, most organizations readily figure out their in-out criteria. Immersed in operations, the staff has deep insights into what's needed for the organization's success, but their

vision is constrained because they see the organization only from the inside. Generally, staff who are highest in the organization, and those who have been there the longest, wear the most restrictive blinders.

For most organizations, the out-in view is hard to get unless they involve outsiders in planning. Outsiders might be newcomers to the organization, who haven't fully assimilated the organization's culture. Or outsiders might be customers, clients, news media consultants, volunteers, donors, or members of a board of advisors.

Many organizations are loathe to include people like these in their planning and visioning processes because "they don't really understand how we do things." Sometimes, however, that naivety empowers outsiders to express a vision that eludes insiders, who are held captive to traditional thinking.

If you're going through strategic planning, you'll probably start by creating a vision statement. Whether your vision will lead you to a successful outcome depends on how well that visionary statement is constructed. A vision statement needs to be multifaceted, and it needs to include both ends of the dimension: in-out and out-in. Your vision needs to look like success both to those within the organization and to those with whom you work and provide services outside the organization. ■

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HELPFUL RESOURCES

(available at www.snpo.org/members)

Putting Vision to Powerful Use in Your Organization (Vol. 13, No. 4)

Sharing the Vision: Every Leader's Obligation (Vol. 8, No. 5)

Using a Balanced Scorecard in a Nonprofit Organization (Vol. 27, No. 3)