

Are Vision Statements Valuable or a Complete Waste of Time?

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If the purpose of vision statements is to unify and inspire an organization to work toward a desired future state. Then, most vision statements aren't worth the paper they're written on!

A great many vision statements that I have read are high minded and full of aspirational language that is only meaningful to the person who wrote it. They look good in an annual report, or on a poster in the company lobby but they don't mean a thing to the average employee.

So, why is that? Well, in my experience, the reason most vision statements fail is because they are too long, they ramble, they are full of jargon, they are cold and impersonal, they are not measurable, and they are not specific.

Do Vision Statements Matter?

You might be tempted to ask, "Does a vision statement even matter?" Good question. Why should you spend time and energy constructing a solid vision statement if it doesn't help your business?

Research by Forbes found employees who said their company's vision was meaningful have engagement levels of 68%. That is 28 points ahead of the 40% engagement level for employees who said their company's vision was average. So, companies with strong, meaningful vision statement had employee engagement 70% higher than those whose vision statement was considered average.

What's even more telling is the fact that companies with poor vision statements had employee engagement of only 16%. That means companies with strong vision statements had employee engagement of over four times the level of companies with poor vision statements!

Employees who are more engaged are more productive, and they perform at higher levels. Plus, higher employee engagement results in less absenteeism and dramatically lower employee turnover.

So, to answer the question, "Does a vision statement matter?" The obvious answer is unequivocal, "YES!"

So, now that we know a vision statement does make a difference let's begin by understanding the difference between a vision and a mission statement.

Vision versus Mission Statements

One reason there are so many poorly constructed vision statements is that people confuse the vision and the mission. Thus, for that reason, it is not unusual to see vision statements that read more like a mission statement. It's also not unusual to see vision statements that are part vision, and part mission statement thrown together in some unintelligible mess.

A vision is a forward-looking inspirational statement that paints a picture of the impact the organization will have if it succeeds. When someone reads or hears a vision statement, they should be able to picture it in their mind's eye. Vision means "to see." So, when people hear a vision statement, they must be able to "see it."

One of my favorite visionary statements came from Robert Woodruff, who was the president of Coca Cola for over three decades. Woodruff said he wanted Coke products *"to be within arm's reach of desire."* Did you just imagine a thirsty person reaching out their arm and a Coke product being within their reach wherever they are in the world? That's a visionary statement!

Another example of a visionary statement came from John F. Kennedy in the midst of a speech in 1961 to Congress. Kennedy said America *"should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth."* That's a vision!

On the one hand, a mission statement describes the organization's tangible goals. On the other hand, a mission statement tells the reader *how* the vision will be accomplished.

A great example of a mission statement comes from Southwest Airlines. Their mission statement reads, *"The mission of Southwest Airlines is dedication to the highest quality of Customer Service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and Company Spirit."* Southwest's mission is clear. They want to be known for the best customer service, and they define how that is accomplished.

Example of Vision Statements

Let's look at a few vision statements from well-known companies to see if "we see" an image of what that company wants to be by reading their vision statements.

Coca Cola

Coca Cola's vision statement is:

"Our vision serves as the framework for our Roadmap and guides every aspect of our business by describing what we need to accomplish in order to continue achieving sustainable, quality growth.

- **People:** Be a great place to work where people are inspired to be the best they can be.
- **Portfolio:** Bring to the world a portfolio of quality beverage brands that anticipate and satisfy people's desires and needs.
- **Partners:** Nurture a winning network of customers and suppliers, together we create mutual, enduring value.
- **Planet:** Be a responsible citizen that makes a difference by helping build and support sustainable communities.
- **Profit:** Maximize long-term return to shareowners while being mindful of our overall responsibilities.
- **Productivity:** Be a highly effective, lean, and fast-moving organization."

Seriously? It is way too long. It is not specific; it can't be measured easily and is full of undefined terms. What does "be a great place to work" mean? What does it mean to "nurture a winning network of suppliers?" Also, what does "being mindful of our responsibilities" mean?

Yes, the six "P's" are cute. However, if I surveyed the average Coke employee, I wonder how many would be able to tell me what the corporate vision is? Even if they could remember one or two of the six "P's," I doubt they could explain what they mean to the company or to the individual employee.

Southwest Airlines

Southwest Airlines' vision statement is, *"To become the world's most loved, most flown, and most profitable airline."*

This statement is concise, forward-looking, and it is simple to understand. One might question the phrase "most loved" because it may mean different things to different people. Still, you get the sense that "most loved" means their customers are thrilled with, even love, their service.

But what's most important about this vision statement is I bet any Southwest employee I ask could repeat that vision to me and explain what it means to them and the company.

Procter & Gamble

P&G's vision statement is, *"Be and be recognized as, the best consumer products and services company in the world."*

This statement is concise and forward-looking. However, I don't see the point of the phrase, "be, and be recognized as." If, for example, you are well dressed, does it matter if you are recognized as well dressed? Either you are well dressed, or you are not. Either you are the best, or you are not. Also, the phrase "be, and be recognized" is in the passive voice. Always use active voice. It is more inspiring.

Additionally, the word "best" is problematic because it is open to interpretation. How will you measure "best?" Is it market share, sales, product variety, customer service, loyalty, or some combination of factors? How will anyone know if you have achieved "best"?

General Motors

General Motors vision statement is, *"to be the world leader in transportation products and related services. We will earn our customers' enthusiasm through continuous improvement driven by the integrity, teamwork, and innovation of GM people."*

This statement is forward-looking and precise. Although the phrase "related services" is open to a variety of interpretations. There is no jargon to confuse the reader. If they stopped at the first sentence, it would still be a pretty good vision.

However, when they go on to the second sentence, that is when they begin to stray into the territory of a mission statement as they describe *how* they will accomplish the vision. I find that the phrase “customer’s enthusiasm” is problematic. What do they mean by “enthusiasm” and how do they intend to measure it? Is enthusiasm some kind of likeability index? Is it a loyalty measure?

Stakeholders must understand the precise meaning of a statement for it to have the desired impact.

Microsoft

Bill Gates said in 2016, “*Our vision is to create innovative technology that is accessible to everyone, and that adapts to each person’s needs.* That’s concise, clear, and measurable. I’m sure the average Microsoft employee could restate and explain that vision.

Too bad Microsoft didn’t stick with Bill’s vision. The current CEO, Satya Nadella, released this vision statement in 2017:

Microsoft is a technology company whose mission is to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more. We strive to create local opportunity, growth, and impact in every country around the world. Our strategy is to build best-in-class platforms and productivity services for an intelligent cloud and an intelligent edge infused with artificial intelligence (“AI”).

The way individuals and organizations use and interact with technology continues to evolve. A person’s experience with technology increasingly spans a multitude of devices and becomes more natural and multi-sensory with voice, ink, and gaze interactions. We believe a new technology paradigm is emerging that manifests itself through an intelligent cloud and an intelligent edge where computing is more distributed, AI drives insights and acts on the user’s behalf, and user experiences span devices with a user’s available data and information. We continue to transform our business to lead this new era of digital transformation and enable our customers and partners to thrive in this evolving world.

This “vision” statement violates all the principles of a good vision. First, it is part vision and part mission statement. Additionally, it is too long, rambling, and full of jargon. I find it to be cold and impersonal, and I’m not sure how much of it is measurable. It’s a great example of a statement meant for the consumption of Wall Street investors.

I can’t imagine even the CEO could tell us the vision of Microsoft without a cheat sheet, let alone any of their 135,000 employees!

Apple

Tim Cook, the Apple CEO, delivered what he called a vision, but I see it as a belief statement with a bit of vision included.

He said, "We believe that we are on the face of the earth to make great products and that's not changing. We are constantly focusing on innovating. We believe in the simple, not the complex. We believe that we need to own and control the primary technologies behind the products that we make and participate only in markets where we can make a significant contribution. We believe in saying no to thousands of projects so that we can really focus on the few that are truly important and meaningful to us. We believe in deep collaboration and cross-pollination of our groups, which allow us to innovate in a way that others cannot. And frankly, we don't settle for anything less than excellence in every group in the company, and we have the self-honesty to admit when we're wrong and the courage to change. And I think regardless of who is in what job those values are so embedded in this company that Apple will do extremely well."

Like Microsoft's statement, this statement is part vision and part mission and is designed for the consumption of Wall Street investors. Arguably, it is certainly not a visionary statement for the unification and inspiration of employees.

Some Good, Some Could Be Good, Some are Terrible

So far, we've examined six vision statements from well-known companies. Three (Coca-Cola, Microsoft, and Apple) are far too long and complicated to serve as vision statements. Two of the statements are pretty good (P&G and General Motors) and with a little wordsmithing would be great vision statements. The only one of our group that meets the initial criteria we established for a good vision statement is Southwest Airlines.

With these big, successful companies having mediocre to poor vision statements one might naturally ask, "Why? Why don't they develop strong vision statements?" If you look back at Coca-Colas, Microsoft, and Apple's statements, I think the answer is their executives were more concerned with writing a statement for public consumption and Wall Street. Instead of writing a statement to benefit their employees and stakeholders.

We established that it is beneficial for companies to have personally meaningful vision statements for their employees. We also know that from the example of Southwest Airlines, and to a lesser extent from P&G and GM, it is possible to develop good vision statements.

Next, let's examine some tips on how you can write a vision statement for your company or organization that will unify and inspire your employees!

Tips for Great Vision Statements

As I mentioned before, a strong vision statement is future-oriented, concise, and inspirational as it describes what impact the business will have if it succeeds.

Jessica Honard, co-owner of [North Star Messaging + Strategy](#), suggests starting the process of developing your vision statement by asking yourself three questions:

1. What ultimate impact do I want my brand to have on my community/industry/world?
2. In what way will my brand ultimately interact with customers/clients?
3. What will the culture of my business look like, and how will that play out in employees' lives?

The answer to these questions provides a roadmap from where you are today to where you want to go. The vision statement needs to fill the gap between today and the future.

So, with that in mind, here are eight tips for crafting and deploying a vision statement for your organization.

- Project five to 10 years in the future.
- Dream big and focus on success.
- Use the present tense.
- Use clear, concise, jargon-free language.
- Infuse it with passion and make it inspiring.
- Align it with your business values and goals.
- Have a plan to communicate your vision statement to your employees.
- Be prepared to commit time and resources to the vision you establish.

Just to get your creative minds going, and to reassure you it is possible to craft a concise, inspiring vision statement, here are a few good examples.

- **Amazon:** "To be Earth's most customer-centric company where customers can find and discover anything they might want to buy online."
- **Ben & Jerry's:** "Making the best ice cream in the nicest possible way."
- **Caterpillar:** "Our vision is a world in which all people's basic needs – such as shelter, clean water, sanitation, food, and reliable power – are fulfilled in an environmentally sustainable way, and a company that improves the quality of the environment and the communities where we live and work."
- **Google:** "To provide access to the world's information in one click."
- **Habitat for Humanity:** "A world where everyone has a decent place to live."
- **LinkedIn:** "Create economic opportunity for every member of the global workforce."
- **Oxfam:** "A world without poverty."
- **Samsung:** "Inspire the world, create the future."
- **Walgreens:** "To be America's most loved, pharmacy-led, health, well-being and beauty company."

Hopefully, you can now see it *is* possible to craft a good vision statement. It takes introspection and a brutally honest appraisal of who you are and who you want to be as a company. But the point I want to be clear on here is, it can be done effectively. Also, it is certainly worth doing if you want to reap the rewards of higher employee engagement!