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Positive Vision-Based Planning: Linking Vision to Action

Traditional approaches to organizational planning often involve participants' ventilating about their problems as a first step. Although this ventilating technique may lead to some much-needed catharsis, it can also result in an atmosphere of negativity that permeates the entire planning process.

Planning is hard work, and the only way to get through that hard work successfully is to be armed with sufficient energy and a positive attitude. Consequently, starting the process with ventilating about problems may be counterproductive.

Instead, a leadership team needs to adopt a planning approach that shifts the focus from problems (where the organization has been) to the future (where the organization is heading). It is, in fact, possible to help an organization's leadership team develop an excitement about the future—and to help ease the pain of traumatic events such as downsizing or a merger.

This article presents a planning approach inspired by my early consulting work, which was grounded in positive communications. In those days I watched teams strengthen themselves and deal with planning and problems much more quickly and effectively when they focused first on the positives rather than on the negatives. Although this approach runs counter to the philosophy that emphasizes ventilating first, I saw it work better time after time. Consequently, I developed a positive approach focused on creating an organizational vision that acts as guidance and support for a leadership team.

The benefits of positive, vision-based planning that have been experienced by leadership teams are as follows:

1. The creation of a vision that acts as guidance and support for the leadership team
2. A solid understanding of the team's vision and its success measures
3. Recognition of successes as well as improvement needs
4. A focus on possible gains
5. Quick clarification of desired outcomes
6. The creation of specific action items linked to vision
7. The adoption of a problem-solving structure that shifts the emphasis from the destructive effects of the problem to the constructive focus of the team's vision
8. A unifying effect not only within a leadership team but also between a leadership team and other organizational groups

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How to Lead a Management Team through Vision-Based Planning

As mentioned previously, this sequence of steps involves discussing positive issues before problems. For this approach to be effective and the outcome to be positive, it is essential that the following steps be taken in the order presented.

Step 1: Creating the Overall Vision Statement

The first step consists of creating a vision statement. The team may create its statement “from scratch” (without any pre-existing materials), or the leader of the team or someone else may bring a draft to the session. The vision statement should include the following elements:

- Business, task, and financial issues
- External relationships with customers, suppliers, and partners
- Internal relationships (those within the organization) that support tasks and customers

These three elements are useful because they are few in number and cover the basics. Also, most organizations, left to their own devices, tend to shortchange the element of internal relationships; thus, it is helpful to include it in the vision statement.

Some organizations choose to add elements. As long as the three listed above are covered in some way, clients may include other elements that they can relate to rather than ones suggested by the consultant. After the team members have agreed on elements, they proceed to creating a vision statement that they can agree on.

A question that sometimes arises is the difference between vision and mission statements. These terms are often used interchangeably, causing some confusion, but there is a difference. A mission statement defines the business that the organization is in; a vision statement goes beyond the mission statement to describe the level of excellence or quality to which the organization aspires.

The following is an example of a mission statement:

We rent, sell, and maintain cars.

In contrast, here is an example of a vision statement:

We strive to be the number-one car-rental company in the world and to maintain excellent relationships with customers, suppliers, and partners. Our employees are valued team members and are proud to work with us.

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Step 2: Creating Success Measures

During Step 2 each of the major elements that appears in the vision statement is listed (business, task, and financial issues; external relationships; internal relationships; and any other elements that the leadership team has included), and corresponding success measures are developed for each. The number of success measures should be sufficient to create a vivid picture of the results that will occur if the team's vision is achieved.

Success measures are either observable or quantifiable and are always stated in positive terms (as if already achieved). Sample success measures are as follows:

- Our products are received, used, and respected by clients as world-class science
- Other divisions come to us first for division-level consultation and problem solving
- We are increasing profitability by 10 percent this year

If the consultant is not sure whether a success measure is specific enough to observe or quantify, he or she should ask the team members to make this determination. The level of specificity needed for clarity, particularly for the observable success measures, varies widely among teams. If a measure is clear to the members of the leadership team involved, it is acceptable.

The advantages of success measures are as follows:

- They link planning at all levels, from strategic planning, accomplished by top management, to implementation, accomplished by employees.
- They provide quality assurance and control for implementation planning and ensuing action, to ensure that both reflect the strategic plan.
- They provide up-front direction and course correction for quality- improvement efforts.
- They focus teams on success and desired outcomes rather than on problems.
- They provide a specific picture of what a realized vision would look like.
- They help bring people together rather than create distance between them.
- They provide a common, positive focus for working together across group or unit boundaries.

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Step 3: Assessing the Current Organizational State

During the third step the team looks at what is going well and what needs to change with regard to the elements of the vision statement and the success measures. The successes and areas for improvement are examined separately:

- The consultant allows the team members enough time to contemplate what is going well and to specify current areas of success. Often the team members are eager to leap to problems, but the consultant should encourage them to discuss accomplishments thoroughly, as this discussion is an important prerequisite for identifying what needs improvement.
- After areas of success have been specified and discussed, the consultant invites the team members to move to a consideration of what needs improvement in the organization. Because the team is building on the positive foundation established during the previous discussions, this discussion can be a constructive and collaborative event despite the fact that it concerns problems. The consultant should monitor the discussion carefully to ensure that the team members do not prematurely embark on establishing action steps. Also, it may be necessary to discourage blaming.

Step 4: Specifying Action Steps

The fourth step consists of developing actions to narrow the gap between the current organizational state (what needs improvement) and the desired organizational state (the success measures established for the elements of the vision statement). The team members set priorities and agree on initial action steps that will move the organization toward the vision. Actions may be addressed concurrently in the areas of business, task, and financial issues; external relationships; and internal relationships.

If achieving the vision requires extensive changes in organizational culture, the team should take an incremental approach to action steps and should establish a strong foundation for the planning effort by working through the issues surfaced in Steps 1 through 3. Otherwise, too much change may be undertaken too rapidly, leading to failure. The team members should be encouraged to temper their urge to rush through changes with an examination of the probable outcomes of proposed actions.

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Following Up: Next Steps

The vision statement is reproduced and distributed to all team members for review and comment as needed. Then another meeting is held to clarify and resolve questions and to finalize commitment to the vision. If necessary, continue meeting until commitment is clearly evident.

Any subsequent action planning required is accomplished, and the team members check their proposed actions against all relevant success measures.

Facilitation Issues

Presenting a Visual Layout for the Planning Process

Figure 1 presents a template that helps a planning team visualize the planning process. The consultant may wish to reproduce this figure on newsprint and post the newsprint prominently in the room in which the planning session is held so that the team members are continually aware of where they are in the process.

Business, Task, Financial Issues

External Relationships

Internal Relationships

1. Vision Statement: Written in one to a few sentences that incorporate all three of the above elements. (Other elements may be included if the team wishes.)
2. Success Measures: Listed separately as one sentence each, with at least one measure for each element.
3. Assessment of Current State: Listed as sentences or bulleted items: (1) what is going well and (2) what needs improvement.
4. Action Steps: Listed as sentences or bulleted items specifying who will do what and by when. Necessary resources (materials needed, people who should be consulted may also be recorded).

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Logistics

If possible, all team members should meet in the same room at the same time, especially for the first time they use vision-based planning. Information should be recorded on a newsprint flip chart and posted in such a way that all team members can view it. Using this approach ensures that every team member is exposed to the same set of notes.

Whoever serves as the scribe or recorder should be adept at capturing the team members' and the consultant's words quickly and accurately. This person may be either the consultant or a team member, as long as the member can participate in the process at the same time.

Tips for Succeeding with Vision-Based Planning

The following suggestions may be helpful to the consultant who conducts vision-based planning with a leadership team:

1. Make sure that you have the appropriate consulting experience. This planning approach assumes not only consulting experience but also the ability to see and understand broader system implications of both the content and the process of the team's discussions. The ability to see beyond the immediate topic is particularly important in that planning tends to surface key issues and problems in leadership teams.

Guiding discussions of what is going well, what needs improvement, and specifically what needs to be done is a basic skill needed for any planning process, including this one. Also, preparing clients for the planning session, getting buy-in from the highest levels involved in the process, and clarifying roles and expectations are additional consulting skills needed.

2. Make sure that you have the necessary experience in group facilitation. Good facilitation skills are a prerequisite for using this approach. The consultant must keep things moving, ensure that issues are dealt with in a constructive way, and keep the team on track.

3. Be flexible, but conduct the process steps in order. Balancing flexibility with keeping the integrity and sequence of this planning approach is necessary for success.

4. Maintain a consistently positive focus. Keep the team focused on positive issues long enough to create a positive climate for the entire process before beginning to discuss problems. Taking enough time to discuss the vision and success measures first, before problems are placed in the limelight, requires self-discipline on the part of the consultant as well as the team members.

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In addition, a positive discussion about the vision and the success measures has a unifying effect on the team members as they see the common elements in their desired outcomes. Also, the positive environment minimizes the dynamics of blaming and antagonism when the team members discuss improvements needed in the organization. Finally, creating a positive climate raises the team members' hopes and expectations for themselves and the organization.

Participant Questions and Answers

The questions that team members usually ask relate primarily to changing from the traditional problem focus to a vision focus. Following are common questions and suggested ways to handle these questions:

1. Will we be able to devise success measures? Without exception, every team that I have led through this process has been able to generate success measures. In fact, often the list of measures has needed to be shortened. Generally, the members know what they want and simply need permission to voice their desires.
2. How can we express success measures in positive terms? Often the team members are so accustomed to thinking in terms of problems that it is easier for them to express what they want in negative terms.

As this issue has to do with cultural conditioning, the consultant should explain that nearly every leadership team has to change some thinking and speaking habits in order to focus on the positive. Subsequently, the consultant should provide a few examples of success measures phrased in positive terms and should assist the members in rephrasing without becoming directly involved in content issues.

For example, the team members may be working with the following item: "Information from customer service comes too late to change our marketing efforts." The consultant may provide an example of the same situation stated in positive terms, as if the desired situation already exists: "We receive information from customer service in plenty of time to make necessary changes in marketing efforts."

3. What is the difference between a goal and a success measure? The consultant should explain that a goal refers to a target, whereas a success measure is an indicator of what success looks like when that target has been reached. Unlike goals, success measures always consist of measurable or observable elements. It may be helpful for the consultant to explain that the vision statement presents broad, general statements of aspiration, whereas success measures present specific indicators of success in achieving the vision.

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4. What if we are unable to agree on a vision? Although it is best to start the process of vision-based planning with the vision itself, there may be times when the team members cannot agree on a vision. In this case the consultant should encourage the members to devise success measures first and then compose the vision statement.

This alternative procedure is especially useful when a leadership team has several “left-brained” members, as it helps these members to progress from specifics to the “big picture.” It also highlights agreements and disagreements among members in specific terms, thereby helping the members to clarify issues earlier. The consultant should concentrate on keeping a positive focus during this discussion so that agreements and disagreements can be surfaced readily, leading quickly to the vision work.

5. How many success measures should we have? A typical number is twenty (six or seven each for the business, task and financial issues; the external relationships; and the internal relationships), but this number varies widely depending on the complexity of the organization. If the team members feel that more than twenty are necessary for appropriately guiding the organization, then the consultant should encourage them to devise as many as they believe they should have.

Another approach is to devise a core list to guide top management and then ask each division or department to create its own success measures, which are subject to the approval of top management. The important point is to meet the needs of the client organization.

6. How can we share success measures with the rest of the organization? Each leadership team needs to figure out how to share the products of its vision-based planning with the rest of the organization.

Some leadership teams prefer to share from the bottom up, starting with the front-line workers; some prefer sharing from the top down, starting with the level of management next to the top. Some prefer to share success measures having to do with urgent needs first; some prefer to start with new ventures. There is no one “best” way; instead, the approach selected must fit the client organization’s culture.

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The Uses of Vision-Based Planning

Vision-based planning is especially appropriate for clients who:

- Are in a hurry for results
- Have a practical focus and want a practical plan
- Have difficulty moving from an abstract vision or mission statement to implementation (need help in linking a vision to action)
- Are faced with changes at different levels
- Want an approach that unifies rather than divides the members of the leadership team

I have used this approach for strategic planning; implementation planning based on strategic plans; task and project planning; and planning for changes such as reorganizations, cross-functional or intergroup linkages, and relationships with customers. Other applications have included planning for marketing, refocusing information systems, and planning for research and development.

Vision-based planning has also been very useful in focusing total quality management efforts to save time often spent floundering in the early stages or to link TQM to strategic plans. In my organizational-healing work, it has provided a positive focus for rebuilding and for working through conflicts and difficulties in a collaborative, encouraging way.

Another application involves working jointly with internal or external customers to clarify expectations, intergroup-communication needs, and the characteristics of effective working relationships. The positive focus minimizes the antagonism that often occurs when two or more groups with different roles join forces to resolve issues or to plan improvements.

Although the best use of vision-based planning is before a change that is potentially traumatic, in many organizations the need to respond quickly to environmental changes often precludes planning. Even after a traumatic change, vision-based planning can give organizational members hope about the future and the energy to face what lies ahead.