

Too few organisations have a strong and positive Vision of what they want to do, to have, and to become, as a business entity. Time invested in clarifying Vision, Values and Behaviours will significantly add focus and direction to the business yielding tangible returns on customer acquisition and retention, return on investment, profitability and enhanced shareholder value.

Essentially this process should start at the top of the organisation but is equally successful when applied to smaller local entities such as sales and marketing groups, customer focus teams and other specialist units geared to adding value to the bigger picture.

### Strategic Focus not Tree Hugging

Organisations that commit to the process of a rigorous clarification of 'Vision and Values', are creating a very tangible business plan for themselves both in the short and the long term. These businesses will have a tight rein on resource expenditure and will differentiate between strategies that work from those that do not. If organisations can predict direct cause/effect relationships between the Vision of the business to KPM's (Key Performance Measures) – then there would be a high degree of satisfied shareholders, customers and managers and staff to celebrate the organisation's success.

There are some very strong business arguments in favour of developing a strong Vision, Mission and Set of Values and these include:

- Clarifying the real focus and 'raison d'etre' of the business.
- Questioning and evaluating whether the business is on target to achieve its core strategies.
- Assessing how functional components of the business measure up to supporting the whole entity.
- Assessing whether the culture of the business is delivering business results.
- Assessing whether the current Vision, Culture and Values that encapsulate the organisation are focused strongly enough to facilitate growth and success.
- To revise any 'Cultural Strategy' to cause improvement in business performance.

# Shaping a Vision – Living the Values

by Philip Atkinson



Working with the business culture should always be strongly aligned towards measured improvement otherwise any intervention has no more impact than being 'feel good' factors of little value other than 'tree hugging' for its own sake.

### De-Mystifying Culture Causing Performance Improvement

In too many organisations, 'culture' is often viewed merely as an intangible atmospheric condition that somehow contributes to performance. This is wrong. Culture has to be shaped to enable achievement of goals. I would argue that the core issue is that 'CULTURE' does cause 'RESULTS'. Our role is to design and shape a culture to do just that. Too many cultures exist by default or by accident, when they could be meticulously designed to yield the results the business demands.

Any successful business needs a strong and positive culture to act as the engine to drive performance and yet still, few businesses fully understand the relationships between the input of culture and the output of results (see diagram opposite).

### Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail

Failing to have a firm direction in terms of Vision and Values can significantly damage the business. Instances and examples can be recalled where organisations have a hazy, unfocused, wishy-washy and confused culture yielding mediocre results. Could you really expect anything else with no direction in Vision, Values, Style of Management behaviours etc? For some organisations, this means that, at best, the culture is maintained but never led or driven with any force or intensity. The danger with a barely maintained culture is that positive 'role models', that others can emulate, never come to the fore and there is confusion about what managerial behaviour is acceptable and what is not. This ambiguity will permit vague performance standards to proliferate and no real management style will evolve.

### Key Issues in the Vision and Values Debate

Vision and Values are seldom explicitly stated in most organisations. When they are, they will give some intellectual clarity to the purpose and operational thrust of the organisation. Intellectual clarity is the starting point for debate with others on what the direction of the business can become. Many organisations never achieve this degree of rapport with their staff. It is essential that the top team and (at least) their direct reports can answer the following question.

***“What is it we want to do, to have, and to become, as a commercial entity?”***

The important words here are Do, Have and Become. This is a critical issue to be addressed by top team members and the sooner they do it, the

clearer the Vision for the business will become. By stating the Values by which we will do business in clear unambiguous terms, there is created an emotional call to staff which results in an emotional commitment and a sense of energy and mission for staff at all levels.

### Cultural Review – Taking a Good Look in the Mirror

At this stage of 'Vision & Values clarification' it is invaluable to conduct an audit of the Culture. It must be objective and focused. This then enables the correlation of current emotions and feelings with metrics for assessing progress in the future.

The cultural review is very powerful in helping any organisation hone their performance if they focus on the right things. With commitment to change being evident, just imagine what most organisations could achieve if they really did design, shape and develop a high performance culture.

### Strategic Direction in Question

When conducting a cultural review, much information is generated that is incredibly powerful in helping the company reappraise its position in the market and the role it should take for the future. A strong team effort driven by consensus must operate at this level. There must be seamless interaction between the top team and the next layer down. If this is not apparent how will they achieve their goals and how will they communicate within their teams and direct reports?

### Vision & Values – the Genetics Business

As well as highlighting the need to work on Vision & Values, a cultural review will also highlight the hard tangible elements as well as the soft elements of the business. Apparent anomalies can arise whose resolution can move the business forward. Recently, a client company, a major player in the Genetics industry, had found that the direction on which they thought they had focused their energies was not shared with their staff. There was confusion about the direction the company was taking. Since form follows strategy, concern was expressed as to whether the right structure and reporting relationships were in place in order to focus the energies and attention of people. This concern resulted in a Vision & Values clarification exercise, which aided alignment of direction with focused energy.

As a result of this exercise the same company has now developed a strategic plan to focus upon world markets, conducted a Vulnerability Analysis and Competitor Analysis of their own business in 40 geographic markets. The strategic exercise forced sales and technical people to work together on specific issues. Each workshop was driven by the word 'specificity' for each discrete market, and it was then possible to develop very specific plans to meet the specific needs and relative maturity and risk the company's products in each market. At the end of this exercise, it was decided that some markets were not worth the associated risk and, accordingly,

resources were diverted using a variant of the 'Boston Matrix' from 'zero or low potential growth' to those more promising emerging markets which needed investment.

Further, the company ranked the action necessary to be taken to develop its culture for the challenge of 2005/7. Prior to this clarification on 'Vision and Values' within this company, they had only planned their future growth based on predicted sales each quarter. This client then conducted a full strategic analysis of each of their businesses, including joint ventures – all as a result of continued need to re-evaluate the culture. They have turned their culture around.

Now consider, if this is what can be achieved with a successful company, what progress can be made with one barely keeping its head above water?

### Issues when working on Visions & Values

When working on a strong Vision, the output is frequently a brief statement to capture the image and direction of what the business should become. This statement must be exceptionally visible and should encourage the words of the top team with action. Perhaps one of the best Mission Statements we have helped others create took less than 30 minutes and succinctly stated the mission of the company at a difficult time – although not very elegant it summed up their desperate circumstances – and this was "Beat the Competition!"

In some future time when the company have recovered their competitive hold in the market, they could add to it but at that moment in time the call was direct and to the point, expressing a sense of urgency which was either 'Beat the Competition' or close up the business! Fancy statements on customer service,



**Philip Atkinson** consults and trains regularly on Organisational Development, Behavioural and Cultural Change. He consults and lectures in the UK, USA and Europe and has written seven books on change management. He can be contacted at:

**Philip Atkinson Consulting,**  
The Coach House,  
PO Box 17181,  
Edinburgh,  
EH11 1XN  
or by telephone  
0131-346-1276  
or by email  
through the  
website  
[www.transformations-uk.co.uk](http://www.transformations-uk.co.uk)

### Business Culture Drives Performance

**Vision** – Where is the business going? What is important to the business? What does the organisation want to become, do and have as an entity?

**Values & Management Style** – Which Values, if displayed in our management style, will optimise the successful achievement of performance improvement? What Values do we need to live to create and sustain a strong and positive culture?

**Strategies & Goals** – Are we confident our strategies and goals are encapsulated in our strategic Vision and how we transact business through our Values?

**Behaviours** – What behaviours are consistent with our Values of how we transact business? What specific behaviours, if practised consistently, will project us forward to achieve our Vision, Strategies and Goals?

**Structure & Roles** – How can we best organise ourselves to achieve our strategies and goals?

**Key Performance Measures** – To what actions, processes and metrics should we commit, which strongly indicate our achievement of our strategies and goals?

***“ Too many cultures exist by default or by accident when they could be meticulously designed to yield the results the business demands. ”***

## Change Management

quality and teamwork would do nothing for the salesmen of this business who had to get out negotiate their best deal, and then deliver to specification at the cost agreed! The point is that this Vision actually had the following immediate impact. It:

- Alerted all staff to the potential impact on company performance of failing to overcome competitors
- Focused energies on competitor analysis, which culminated in benchmarking core issues that were important to the customer
- Led to a revised and refined sales strategy
- Assessed core internal processes that put the business at risk when delivering to the customer
- Examination of customer 'wins' and 'losses' resulting in a strategy for customer acquisition
- Examining customer service problems and preventing them recurring
- Galvanised a team spirit across the functional boundaries in the company
- Created a strong sense of loyalty

The point here is a simple focus and communication on 'Company Health and Direction' created some immediate wins. Just imagine what could be achieved in the longer term by rigorously committing to this process.

### Enough of Vision – What about Values?

Values usually indicate 'how we will behave or how we will execute a particular action.' Values tell us what will guide our actions. They tell us what is important to you from that which is not. In other words "we value what we do and we do what we value". Values indicate how we direct our energies. As human beings our Values guide our personal behaviour. If we are forced to do things that do not fit into our 'Value System' either we fail to commit to them or only do so under duress or through reward. Values are our intrinsic barometer of what is important to us. We know and 'feel' when we are doing things that fit and do not fit our personal Value system.

Corporate values however are a little different. Values that have been articulated through the organisation depict certain ways of behaving. If an organisation undertakes a 'Values Clarification' process, then people at all levels should have a clear idea and understanding of expected ways of behaving and working. Where this process breaks down is when organisations fail to and confuse people by not articulating the Values or, rather, confusing them totally by saying one thing and doing another.

When undertaking the 'Values Clarification' exercise the Values chosen must reflect the Strategy of the business – if not where is the link between means and ends?

Many organisations live their Values though many do not. Customers, consumers, suppliers and staff that have contact with the organisation will always be able to assess the degree of alignment between what an organisation says is important about how it delivers to its constituents and the reality.

### The Difference: Espoused and Real Values

Sometimes there is a real problem ensuring that Vision and Values become more than words written on paper. Everyone will have sat in an office reception area and carefully read through the values which are adorned on walls, on plaques on coffee mugs and tee-shirts. For instance, you will have been exposed to;

***“In Quality we trust”***

***“The Customer is King”***

***“Service Excellence is our goal”***

***“We believe in partnering with our suppliers”***

***“Our staff are our most important asset”***

The above are what I call the Espoused Values – what the company says but does not always deliver. In the instance where the Values are not lived, the cynics amongst us may interpret these values as;

***“Volume is more important than quality”***

***“Deliver no more to the customer than he is due”***

***“Get it right but still charge it to the customer”***

***“Impose strict cost reduction exercises on our suppliers”***

***“Over manage to ensure conformity of behaviour”***

It is obvious when a 'Values exercise' has been unsuccessful. People, staff or customers can see through the 'spin' – the point-less exercise espousing values which will elevate the organisation operating at a perceived higher morality. But claiming a higher calling, a superior level of 'service excellence' and communicating this to key constituents is a shabby and futile activity if not even the basics of service delivery are met. It is even more important that the values exercise is conducted honestly because the mismatch between 'stated' and 'received' values is just too obvious for anyone who has contact with an organisation.

Management Teams have to commit to doing the right thing. The benefits of articulating values are enormous in indicating desired behaviours in teams and people. Committing to the exercise as a tool for improved performance can only benefit the whole organisation.

### By what Criteria are Vision & Values Judged?

Vision and Values should appeal to the 'heart' as well as the 'head' and should focus attention on some future state or engender a genuine commitment to achieve that state and the associated behaviours of that state. It must be remembered that well

#### Doing the Right Thing: Integrity was not a Core Value

We experienced a classic case where the direct reports of a top team were working on Value clarification, and one of the Values chosen for discussion by the top team was 'Integrity.' It soon became clear that the direct reports of the top team were extremely uncomfortable at going to their customers and their own teams and claiming a high degree of integrity as a core value of their business – because several notorious commercial deals in the past had not demonstrated the presence of this value.

The top team listened to their people and agreed to 'dump' the Integrity value until the company generally had appraised its business practises in those 'dodgy' areas and put systems and protocols in place to prevent those circumstances ever arising again.

articulated Vision & Values help to focus people on the desired actions and behaviours.

To benefit from Vision & Values here are some criteria which I think it important to satisfy:

- Strongly customer focused
- Challenging and stretching
- Inspirational and enthusing
- Encourage passionate commitment
- Emotionally bonding at a team level
- Be easy to understand and communicate to others
- Simple to articulate and straightforward
- Shared – Go beyond one person's dream
- Evolve and not be frozen in time
- Provide a rationale or motivation for change and improvement

Overall, the purpose after the completion of Vision & Values is for the top team to win the support of all and to commit to action to sharpen, intensify and deepen the Vision, and Values through communication.

## Communication of Values

Every time a business communicates either internally with its own departments, functions and people or externally with the customer, shareholders, consumers or other constituents it demonstrates its Values.

A great deal can be achieved and implemented very quickly but the communication process has to be thorough.

Through a complex communication process everyone had a part to play in understanding the meaning behind Vision and Values and the rationale behind the key drivers in shaping the Values. The link here is to demonstrate how Values can convey desired behaviours, which later can be related to specific technical and team competencies. A specific Communication strategy has to be articulated, and the relative health of the Vision and Values process for the business is the degree to which the Communication strategy sustains the Vision for the future. There are many opportunities to ensure that 'Living the Vision and Values' becomes business as usual only when it is integrated into operational processes and practices.

## Vision & Values – Global & Local Teams

It would appear that the Values & Vision exercise can be applied not only at the top team strategic level but also locally at functional or at specific locations. This process has been used many times in a variety of business contexts and with a variety of teams including:

- Call Centres
- Branch or Regional Offices of larger organisations
- Devolved businesses
- Production facilities
- Functional areas – Finance and IS/IT
- HR Departments
- Sales and Marketing Teams
- Customer Focus Teams
- Logistics/Distribution Centres

In some organisations, the Vision and Values for the business have been stated but need to be articulated in a specific manner and in context. Although the Vision for the larger business may be obvious, the smaller, local, functional, branch or office team can undertake the same exercise to clarify their role and mission and where and how they can fit into the bigger picture. For instance, it is undesirable and impossible to have the exact culture operating everywhere in the same organisation without some commitment to tailor it to the specific context of the business activity and the work undertaken in a particular location. For this reason, this exercise is an extremely powerful exercise if the business unit is anywhere between 6 – 50 staff. The exercises can clearly help focus where resources are best deployed and how best to achieve results that fit within the bigger global picture of the organisation.

## Summary: The Bottom Line – Vision & Values

If an organisation has not set itself a course, and excited and stimulated its people to commit to the journey, then its resources would be better deployed elsewhere. Committing to the process of Vision & Values clarification is an investment in prevention. No organisation can afford to neglect this exercise. Many do just that and by so doing confuse those whose efforts, energies and zeal drive the organisation to work with a peripheral rather than value added focus.

Clarifying what a business stands for adds drive and direction. Identifying Vision & Values enables emotion to be attached to direction and is critical in shaping Behaviours. Consider the major issues and how they impact on your business. . . .

- Can you articulate with certainty the Vision & Values and Behaviours that should drive your business?
- What action is your business taking to ensure that the Vision & Values process is delivering benefits to the bottom line?
- What is the impact on the performance of your business of failing to specify the Vision, Values and Behaviours inherent within your culture?
- What evidence is there to suggest that your culture operates beyond the 'maintenance' level only?
- Appraising objectively – how would you align Vision & Values with your current business strategy.
- Can you with certainty agree that the culture you work within has been designed, shaped and modelled to cause the measurable achievement of customer retention, acquisition, satisfaction, growth, return on investment, cost, production and distribution efficiencies, the effective deployment of resources, profitability and enhanced shareholder value? ■

### IMS Library and Information Service – Important Update

As regular users are aware the IMS library and information service is now being serviced by the Management Information Centre based in Corby.

For those who have not used the databases recently, the login process has changed. Members should therefore contact MIC on **Tel: 01536 207400** or email:

**mic.enquiries@managers.org.uk**

to obtain the new procedures. Members who wish to contact the Management Information Centre by mail should write to:

Management Information Centre  
Chartered Management Institute  
Management House, Cottingham Road  
Corby, Northants NN17 1TT