

Staying Ahead of the Chains This Year

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January, 2018



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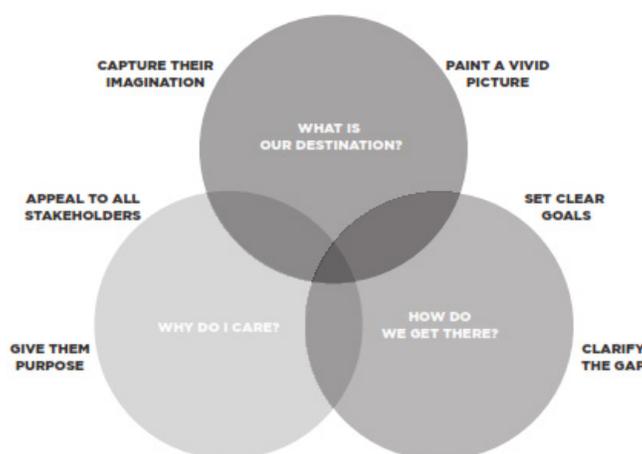
Many businesses have fiscal and operational measurement periods that coincide with the calendar cycle. As such, the advent of every new calendar year marks a new beginning for our work lives – setting a new vision, launching new strategies, and committing to new actions and behaviors that are consistent with the business results we want to deliver and the kind of leader we want to be.

Many leaders spend the end of one year planning for the next, all in the hopes of coming out of the gate at full speed and getting the year off to a great start. We all know what the opposite feels like –when the businesses we operate, or the teams we lead, are stuck in neutral. People may be working hard, but we just aren't getting the traction or seeing the progress we need to be successful. Getting off to a slow start often haunts us for the entire year, as we seem to spend the rest of the year playing catch up. Nothing is more frustrating and demotivating for your organization. Moreover, it often leads to inefficiency, as we throw resources around in unproductive ways, or chase projects or deals that we otherwise might not, all in the hopes of getting back on track.

In the game of American football, they call this situation, "playing behind the chains." The "chain" refers to the marker that is used to measure the distance that the offense

must cover in order for them to retain the ball, stay on offense, and keep trying to score. Playing “behind the chains” in football is much like the business scenario I painted above – it limits your choices, forces bad decisions, and drastically reduces your chances of reaching your goals. As such, football teams are always focused on playing “ahead of the chains,” or in other words, being ahead of schedule, and beginning each new offensive series with a strong start. That enables the team to choose from a much broader set of plays, keeps the competition guessing, and significantly increases their chances of winning. In my new book, *Ahead of the Chains*, I explore what business leaders can do to keep their organizations operating from that advantaged position.

One key differentiator is in how effectively leaders align their organizations to the vision and goals they have established. Sometimes this entails getting an entire company engaged with a new organizational vision, or simply ensuring that a team is fully invested in reaching the goals, milestones or quotas that they have been given. In either situation, failure to execute effectively and efficiently can translate into a lack of alignment and considerable lost time, putting you behind the chains. From my experience and research, creating and deploying an effective vision must include three things: the *What*, *Why*, and *How*.



- *The What:* Chances are, if you created or were part of creating the vision for your organization, you can picture what success looks like – it is as clear to you as if it were right in front of you. Your challenge, however, is to paint a vivid picture for the rest of the organization. And that picture must be compelling enough to inspire people to engage with that vision and take action to move towards the destination that you describe.
- *The Why:* But to be compelling, the destination has to be more than sales targets and operational KPIs. To be truly inspiring, it must appeal to your stakeholders on a deeper level. If your vision can recruit their hearts as well as their heads, that emotional commitment can carry them through the inevitable obstacles they will encounter along the journey towards the goals.
- *The How:* Even if you have appealed to the hearts and minds of your stakeholders, eventually, you are going to need their hands as well. So, a great vision must clearly define the work that must be done to realize it. To do that, in addition to describing

where you want to go, you need to honestly consider where you are starting from. Leaders who share grand visions of the future without a fair assessment of the present risk losing both their own credibility and the engagement of their stakeholders. Conversely, a clear picture of the gap between the current and desired states can guide individuals in how they can contribute to closing that gap.

Let's examine an organizational vision statement that illustrates these aspects effectively. Consider Amazon's vision:

"To be Earth's most customer-centric company, where customers can find and discover anything they might want to buy online, and endeavors to offer its customers the lowest possible prices."

- *What:* Amazon wants to be the place where shoppers go to buy anything online. This seems simple, but there is a tremendous amount packed into that simple statement. They do not segment out a portion of consumers – essentially everyone in the world is a potential customer. And clearly, they are not just in the book business any longer, like they were when they started. They want to sell anything you "might want to buy online." This profoundly signals to shareholders that Amazon is a growth company, and that they are aiming at a huge market with a big payoff.
- *Why:* The source of passion at Amazon is the customer – "To be Earth's most customer-centric company." Again, they have set out a huge, global goal that would inspire anyone. But they have made it clear: if you are going to work at Amazon, you will need to be a fanatic about serving customer needs.
- *How:* They clearly believe that at least one way that they will be successful in attracting customers from all over to shop at Amazon is to offer the lowest possible prices. This communicates to customers that they should expect uncompromising value when they shop at Amazon, and challenges them to compare delivered price with any other retailer. They punctuate that point by actually allowing other retailers to sell on their site. Amazon doesn't care who ultimately sells the product to the customer, as long as the customer gets the best value in the end.

In one statement, Amazon describes why investors would want to buy shares in this company, why people would want to work for this company, and why consumers would want to buy from this company. This bold, inspiring, and compelling organizational vision statement provides Amazon with the ability to effectively and efficiently recruit shareholders, employees, and shoppers to join "Earth's most customer-centric company."

The focus, attention, and energy of the people in your organization are your most precious resources. A sound vision that incorporates the *What, Why, and How*, efficiently funnels these resources towards your organizational goals. Stay "ahead of the chains" this year by communicating and consistently reinforcing a sound vision for your team.

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