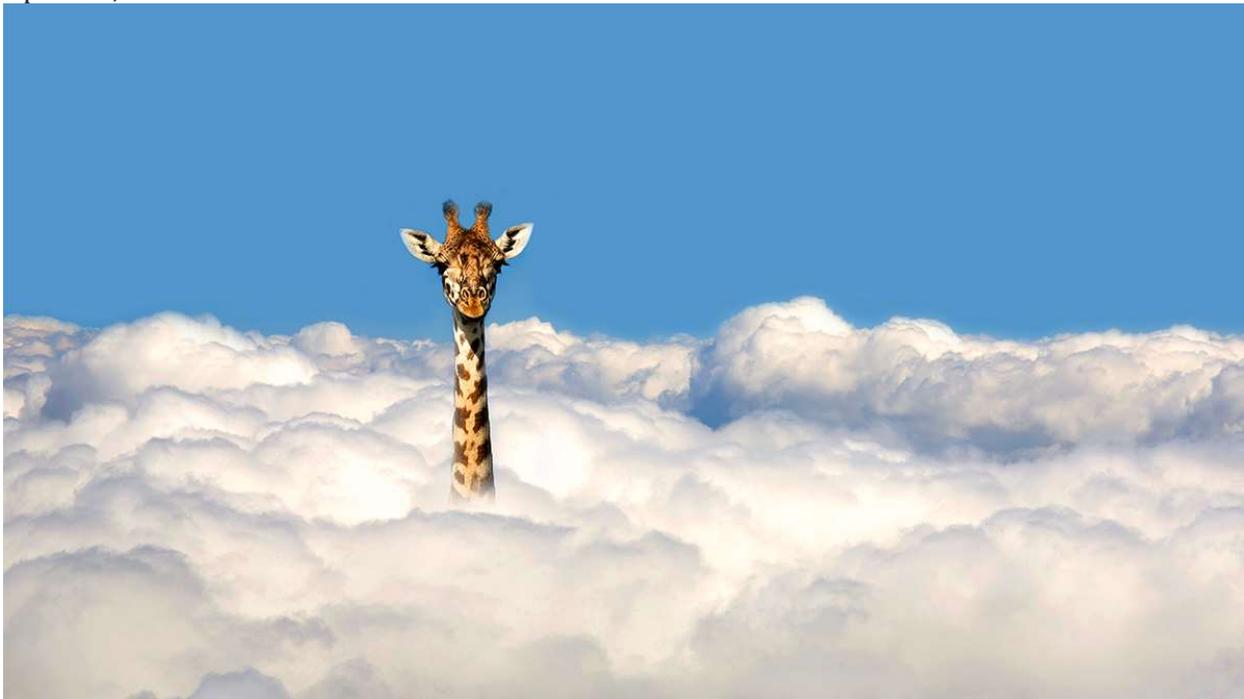


You Don't Have to Be CEO to Be a Visionary Leader

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Creating a unifying vision for an organization is a [fundamental skill](#) for leaders. A simple, bold, inspirational vision can feel almost magical: it brings people throughout the company together around a common goal and provides a focal point for developing strategies to achieve a better future. Unfortunately, however, building a vision has become more associated with a company's top-level leadership than the managers in the rest of the organization. How often have you heard something like: "leaders set aspirational direction, while managers simply ensure that day-to-day operations follow accordingly"?

Even as a manager (and aspiring leader), however, you have a number of opportunities to get hands-on experience in shaping vision. In our research for the [HBR Leader's Handbook](#), we identified three critical vision-creation opportunities that you can grasp, even if you are not the CEO: contributing to senior leaders' vision work, translating the company's vision for your team, and developing a new front-line team vision that can be cascaded *up* through the

company. Each of these can propel your professional development, leading to bigger responsibilities over time. We'll look at these more closely before closing with practical advice about how you can make the most of these opportunities.

Helping the CEO Shape the Company's Vision

Crafting a vision requires a certain element of seeing into the future. But good senior leaders know they are missing critical information: they are far removed from customer experiences, operational realities, and the hopes and dreams of people working for them. Tapping the insights and experiences of others who will be touched by the work can help senior executives achieve that sense of connection, and many institutionalize the gathering of these kinds of ideas: witness, for example, Sam Palmisano's [idea jam](#) at IBM in 2003 in which he engaged thousands of employees and other stakeholders; or the [Global Service Jam](#) process that many city leaders have used over the past few years to engage their citizens in identifying opportunities for ambitious community improvements. Raise your hand to volunteer your own perspective in this kind of collective problem-solving, and not only will you begin developing your vision-creation abilities, but you'll also learn from others who are working through some of the same problems that you are.

The World Bank offers a classic historical example of visioning beyond the C-suite. In 1995, when President James Wolfensohn saw the need to reinvent the institution away from its post-WWII reconstruction role, from the beginning he imagined a new, more philanthropic direction, something generally about poverty reduction. But to flesh out this vague notion, he convened multiple working sessions with clients, government members, and many other more junior executives and staff throughout the bank. Through the process, a broader team of stakeholders progressively articulated a fuller vision for the institution—"pursuing a dream of a world free of poverty," but specifically achieved via increased professionalism for the organization, increased learning and knowledge-building, and a higher standard of talent to be attracted and developed. This more pragmatic and motivating final version for the Bank benefited from the hands of many non-CEO contributors.

Translating the Company Vision to Make it Relevant for Your Team

Even if you don't have chance to help shape the "early drafts" of your company's vision, if you are a leader at any level of the organization you will likely be called upon to work with your team to translate that vision for your particular unit or function. This in itself is vision-crafting, albeit at a smaller scale.

At the World Bank, for example, Dennis Whittle, the head of a small strategy team, brainstormed with his colleagues about how to translate the overall organization's "world free from poverty" concept into something tangible and practical for his team. They came up with a vision that new poverty-reduction strategies could come from anywhere in the world, not just from the experts within the Bank. This idea led to a series of "development marketplaces" where thousands of people throughout the world could showcase innovative new ideas for economic development and compete for funding.

Imagine that you lead a logistics team at Amazon, whose vision is “to be the earth’s most customer-centric company...a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy.” You might cascade that vision down for your unit by imagining how accuracy of fulfillment and speed of product delivery makes good on customer desires about “finding anything they wanted to buy.” Similarly, if you were leading a local operations team for Lyft, which has a vision of “reinventing cities around people, not cars,” you might shape a vision for your team around the service to close gaps in public transportation in your city.

This kind of smaller-scale vision-crafting will benefit from the same kind of broader perspective that more senior leaders themselves will want to seek. Even if you are simply “translating” vision from the upper part of the organization, take some time to solicit ideas from other parts of the company that also have a stake in your unit’s performance aspirations; and of course be sure to cross-check your “translation” with those senior leaders who are guiding the overall vision for the enterprise.

Catalyzing Your Own Vision

Sometimes a new company vision doesn’t begin with a CEO and instead bubbles up from the visions that lower-level leaders use to drive innovation and change in their own units. When Broadcaster PBS developed and launched a successful new channel for children (PBS Kids 24/7), the initial vision came from Lesli Rotenberg, SVP of Children’s Media for the network. Rotenberg convinced a skeptical CEO Paula Kerger that such an offering was consistent with the overall educational vision of the network, and could be developed cost-effectively to meet real audience needs that were not being addressed.

The transformation of the United Way in the early 2000s provides another example of bottom-up visioning. After a decade marred by a national leadership scandal and declining donor interest, the federated charity began to rebound thanks to several local innovations that would later spawn a new vision for the organization overall: to move from being primarily a corporate fundraising entity (measured by dollars raised) towards a more strategic network dedicated to community impact, measured instead by a more disciplined set of local indicators of human welfare. The community impact vision eventually adopted by the national board was the culmination of experiments with more human service visions and strategies in different mid-size cities across the country. Over the course of several years, these were consolidated, refined, and institutionalized (in the form of a new set of “standards of excellence” for achieving impact in health, education, and income for the communities of the broad membership)—and the process was praised for its embrace of local innovation and knowledge instead of top-down mandate.

Your organization may not be ready for—or even sympathetic to—bottom-up vision development. But the relentless need for continual innovation in today’s operating climate may just give you the opportunity to promote new ideas from your own local experiences that can demonstrate potential for broader growth and even reinvention in your company. When Dominic Barton visited a wide range of more junior partners around the world as new Managing Director of McKinsey in 2009, he realized that the vision for a new McKinsey would be found not in the corporate office but rather in knitting together the most successful

experiments from a mosaic of entrepreneurial innovators who were already transforming how the firm served its clients. Many of those partners who contributed their thinking to that effort went on to become more senior leaders in subsequent years.

Getting Yourself Into the Vision Game

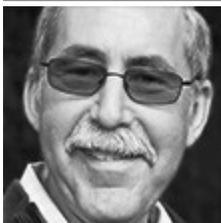
So how can you position yourself for these kinds of vision-building moments, and strengthen the “vision-muscle” in your leadership toolkit? Every situation will be different, but here are a few tips to improve your chances to get involved and do some vision development.

1. **First, get clear on what a vision is, and why it matters.** [Don't confuse “vision”](#) (an aspirational picture of future success) with “mission” (why an organization exists), “values” (the principles and moral beliefs by which the organization chooses to operate), or strategy (the decisions about where and how to compete that bring a vision to life). Organizations renew their visions more frequently than their mission, as a way to motivate themselves to new levels of performance.
2. **Watch for different kinds of opportunities to contribute.** Contribute to the vision-work underway by other leaders. Translate an already-agreed enterprise vision down to the unit you are leading—or focus the work of your team on a local or regional vision. Catalyze innovative change for the organization based on some front-line innovation you're involved in. Find opportunities outside your company: shape or build a vision in your faith based organization, a neighborhood association, or some other community organization where you're a volunteer. You can learn from many different opportunities, even smaller-scale ones.
3. **If you find a vision-building opportunity, don't do all the deciding alone.** Just as a senior leader

might benefit from having you involved and contributing to a major corporate vision, share the process with others working with you in any of your own vision-building. It will sharpen your collaboration skills as well.

4. **Learn by watching or studying other vision-building.** Even if you're not actively involved in a vision-process, you can learn a lot by actively watching how others do it. Talk to other leaders about visions they have developed, and understand how and why those visions came out the way they did. Study visions of companies documented in the business press, or learn from partners or clients about the visions they have for their organizations. As you see and understand organizational visions of other companies, divisions, or teams, you'll better understand what makes for a successful one—which you can then bring to the next opportunity in your own organization.

Because developing vision for an organization sets the stage for strategy and higher performance, it will always be seen as an essential capability for top leaders. But don't misread that enduring truth to mean vision is therefore always above your paygrade. Like any leadership capability, visioning requires practice—and there's no better way to get that practice, at any level, than by building your craft through smaller or sudden opportunities to make a contribution that comes your way. Learning by doing is a gift for anyone on the organizational chart with the courage to dream and speak up.



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