A Critical Review of the "Vision" Literature

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Abstract

Given the criticality of vision to modern organizational leadership, the paucity of research into what makes an effective vision is surprising. This paper reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on vision, particularly vision definitions, components, and realization factors before identifying directions for future research. These directions include looking at what the components of an "effective" vision are, identifying the attributes and content of visions associated with superior performance, as well as the ways in which such visions are communicated and realized at different levels of organizational analysis.

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the focus on leadership has shifted from traits and leader behaviors to the need for leaders to articulate compelling visions within their organizations, particularly those organizations undergoing major change [1], [2], [3], [4]. In this context, vision refers to a cognitive structure or image of a desired future state [5]. Vision-based leadership has alternated from being construed as a faddish and trendy concept, to being viewed as a fundamental attribute of effective leadership and a basis of one's power to lead [6], [7]. This has been emphasized in both theoretical discussions (e.g. [8], [9], [10], [11], [12]) and research (e.g. [13], [14], [15], [16]).

While theorists and practitioners make frequent mention of the importance of vision in business organizations, few guidelines are available for using visions effectively. The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on organizational vision, starting with vision definitions, and then vision components, how to realize a vision. Finally, we propose some directions for future research.

2. The oretical Approaches

In this section, the theoretical literature on vision definitions, attributes, content, and realization is discussed, followed by a review of the empirical research.

2.1. Vision Definition

For over two decades, many scholars have seen vision as important to leadership, strategy implementation, and change [17], [18], [19], [14], [20], [21]. Despite its seeming importance, vision is still not defined in a generally agreed upon manner, which is critical because empirical research on vision may be affected by the various ways in which vision has been defined. Table 1 shows a sample of descriptions of vision.

One suggestion is that vision is a form of leadership [19], [21] in which a "visionary leader" alters an organizational culture to bring organization members to understand, accept, and carry out his or her plans for the organization. Others have viewed espousing vision as one of the essential tasks top organizational leaders perform [22], [23] and as a demonstration of leadership competencies [24].

Table 1 Vision Description

NO.	Vision Description
1	"Vision" is a form of leadership in which a "visionary leader" alters an organizational culture to bring organization members to understand, accept, and carry out his or her plans for the organization [19], [21].
2	"Vision" is one of the essential tasks top organizational leaders perform [22], [23].
3	"Vision" is a demonstration of leadership competencies [24].
4	"Vision" is a goal-oriented mental construct that guides people's behavior [25].
5	"Vision" is the force which molds meaning for people of an organization [26].
6	"Vision" is a term used to imply a product of component parts such as "mission" and startegy, and cannot be explicitly separated from one another [17], [27].
7	"Vision" is an organization image of the future [28], [29], [77], [27], [30], [31].
8	"Vision" is a pattern of organizational values that underlies a unique visionary pattern for an organization's future [32], [33], [34], [6].
9	"Vision" is a field which leaders can use its formative influence to create a power, not a place, an influence, not a destination [35].
10	"Vision" describes a future world and outlines a rich and textual picture of what success looks like and feels like; it paints a picture and tells a story [36].
11	"Vision" is what each leader defines it [37].

Considerable disagreement exists over whether terms like mission, goals, strategy, and organizational philosophy differ from vision. Table 2 summarizes some of the key areas of disagreement. For example, much confusion exists between vision and mission. In an attempt to distinguish between them, Levin [36] suggested that mission provides a statement of the purpose of an organization's existence, while vision is a statement of direction. O'Brien and Meadows [38] concurred that mission is a statement of purpose, although others prefer to define mission as an often-inseparable component of a business' vision. For example, Lipton [27] defined vision as a combination of mission, strategy, and culture, where mission was defined as the purpose of an organization, strategy as a basic approach to achieving the mission, and culture as the values of an organization that support purpose and strategy. Collins and Porras [17] distinguished between two components of vision: "core identity" and "envisioned future."

Table 2 Areas of Disagreement

No.	Areas of Disagreement
1	"Vision" is the result of combining other components such as core values, mission, and strategy [17], [27].
2	"Mission" is the result of combining purpose, stategy, values, and behavior [39].
3	"Vision" is the first step in producing such other components as mission and strategy [40], [41], [43], [42].
4	"Vision" and "mission" can be explicitly separated [40], [43], [42].
5	"Vision" and "mission" cannot be explicitly separated [27], [39], [17].

Other scholars, attempted to explicitly separate vision and mission, stating that vision needs to come first in order to subsequently drive development of mission and strategy (e.g. [40], [41], [42]). Vision is also seen as closely related to organizational goals and strategy (e.g. [36], [43]), although strategy does not specify the desired future in the vision, but provides ways of achieving the vision.

Philosophy and vision are also frequently confounded, probably because statements of philosophy share inspirational and idealistic characteristics with vision statements. Levin [36] argued that visions certainly need to reflect, and be congruent with, an organization's values and ideals. However, visions should go well beyond statements of philosophy by describing those values and ideals in action, including a description of how these ideals are practiced, what that experience is like for those affected, and a link between these preferred behaviors and successful performance (Levin, 2000).

An alternative view comes from Wheatley [35] who suggested that instead of creating a destination for an organization, vision should be viewed as a field which leaders can use as a formative influence. Creating a vision means creating a power, not a place; an influence, not a destination. This field metaphor would help leaders understand that they need congruency, i.e. matching visionary messages with visionary behaviors. In Wheatley's view, the field of vision needs to permeate through an entire organization as a vital influence on the behavior of all employees, and leaders should feel genuinely threatened by incongruous acts because of the disintegrating effects of such acts on the leader's dreams.

Despite all these differences, a comparison of the various definitions of vision suggests that they share a similar set of characteristics, as shown in Table 3. Essentially, scholars agree that vision is about the future, induces people to act towards a common goal, provides a sense of direction, and is important for strategy and planning.

Table 3 Shared Vision Characteristics

Item No.	Shared Characteristic
1	Vision is always about a desirable future [17], [28], [32], [33], [29], [34], [19], [77], [27], [26], [21], [24], [25], [30], [31].
2	Vision is considered necessary for leadership, a process of inducing others to act towards a common goal [44], [45], [6], [46], [26], [22], [23], [7], [24], [16], [35].
3	Vision provides a sense of direction for organizational members to proceed [28], [17], [47], [32], [33], [34], [19], [29], [77], [36], [27], [26], [21], [24], [25], [30], [31], [16].
4	Vision is seen as important for business strategy and planning [5], [17], [40], [41], [43], [30], [42].

Regardless of these commonly-shared characteristics resulting from attempts to define vision, there is little agreement among academics as to what "vision" is. The situation does not appear very different among practitioners, as Baetz and Bart [48] found when they requested copies of mission statements from a number of organizations and received documents with a variety of titles including mission, vision, values, beliefs, principles and strategic intent/ direction. Raynor [49] suggested that these concepts are so tied together that to speak of one was to involve them all. Van der Heijden [50] introduced the term "Business Idea", which he defined as an organization's mental model of forces behind its current and future success.

Avoiding the definitional issue altogether, Baum, Locke and Kirkpatrick [37] chose to define the term vision as each leader defines it, because it is the leader's actual vision that guides his/her choices and actions. This pragmatic approach can be justified on three grounds. First, every leader develops a vision in his/her own way, sometimes rationally and objectively, often intuitively and subjectively [51]. Second, visionary leadership can vary importantly from leader to leader [16], in both the leader's style, the content of the leader's vision, and the context in which it takes root. Third, every leader induces his/her followers to act using various techniques, such as legitimate authority, modeling, goal-setting, rewarding and punishing, organizational restructuring, team-building, and communicating a vision [46]. Baum *et al*.'s [37] approach thus offers a pragmatic way around the definitional confusion in the vision literature, but it is not necessarily helpful in research into vision where consistency in definition is required.

2.2. Vision Attributes

What are the attributes seen to be necessary for a vision to be effective? Opinions vary, from the view that an effective vision is *inspiring, abstract, brief, stable* and *motivating* [46], *strategic* and *well-communicated* [52], to Kouzes and Posner [6] and Jacobs & Jaques' [29] ideas that *long-term* and *focus* should be included. Sashkin [21] and Sims and Lorenzi [53] proposed that effective visions are *inspirational, widely accepted,* and *integrated with visions of others*. Others argue that an effective vision should also have *clarity*, because the degree of clarity or precision of the vision statement influences how well it is understood and accepted [29], [46], [51], [21], [53]. Nanus [51] suggested that effective visions should be *understood* and *direct effort*. Other scholars have posited that visions should be *inspiring* and *challenging* to energize employees around a value system, and *clear* so that they can be communicated effectively throughout an organization [46], [21], [53].

Though many leadership and business strategy theorists have postulated different attributes of vision, there are some commonly shared attributes among them, as shown in Table 4, which includes definitions based on [54], [37], [46].

Table 4 Vision Attributes

Item No.	Shared Attribute	Theorist	Definition
1	Brevity	[37], [46]	A vision statement should be brief, but brevity should not overrule the endeavor to state the vision definitively.
2	Clarity	[37], [29], [46], [51], [21], [53], [55]	A vision statement should be clear and precise in such a way that it is understood and accepted. Clarity makes the overarching goals understandable to everyone.
3	Future orientation	[37], [29], [77], [27], [46], [30], [55]	A vision statement should focus on the long-term perspective of the organization and the environment in which it functions. It should guide the organization far into the future.
4	Stability	[37], [46]	A vision statement should be general and abstract enough so that it is not affected by most of the changes in the market or in technology.
5	Challenge	[37], [46], [51], [21], [53]	A vision statement should motivate people to work toward a desirable outcome. Visions challenge people to do their best.
6	Abstractness	[37], [46]	A vision statement should represent a general idea as opposed to a specific achievement. It is not a narrow, one-time goal that can be met, then discarded.
7	Desirability or ability to inspire	[37], [46], [21], [53], [55]	A vision statement should represent an ideal that is worth working toward for the followers. If followers do not perceive the vision as an attractive goal, they will never commit themselves to achieving it.

2.3. Vision Content

Literature on vision content is sparse. Baum, Locke and Kirkpatrick [37] argued that the content or core of a vision also needs to be addressed because it is important to organizational growth. According to Westley and Mintzberg [16], the strategic content of a vision may focus on products, services, markets, organizations, or even ideals, with this strategic component being the central image that drives the vision. Moreover, vision content need not be common across different visionary organizations [17], consistent with Pearson's view [22] that a successful strategic vision takes into account industry, customers, and the specific competitive environment in identifying an innovative competitive position in the industry. For example, a bank vision could contain content relating to market share, whereas a manufacturing vision could mention producing quality products. In the healthcare context, Williams-Brinkley [55] argued that the focus of a healthcare vision should always be on patients, their families, and staff.

In several case studies, vision process and content have been blended together in accounts of visionary leadership (e.g. [16]). Though vision content and process, and visionary leadership, are distinctly different, it is clear that these aspects are related in some complex ways.

2.4. Realizing Vision

How leaders can realize their visions has been extensively addressed, and Table 5 highlights seven common themes.

Table 5 Common Themes to Vision Realization

No.	Common Themes to Vision Realization
1	Develop strategies and plans to achieve the vision [61], [5], [17], [3], [57], [56], [18], [19], [77], [46], [51], [20], [21].
2	Acquire support from both internal and external stakeholders [56], [6], [46], [51].
3	Communicate the vision to promote change [61], [5], [3], [57], [56], [58], [8], [15], [36], [46], [51], [4], [55].
4	Alter organizational infrastructure to support the vision [57], [56], [46], [51].
5	Align people and supporting systems to suit the vision [14], [6], [46], [51].
6	Empower followers so that they can enact the vision [3], [56], [51], [20], [21], [59].
7	Motivate followers [60], [61], [57], [56], [14], [6], [46], [51], [4], [62].

A common suggestion is that the first thing visionary leaders should do after adopting a vision is to develop strategies and plans to achieve it. The second theme often found in the literature is that leaders need to acquire support for the vision from both internal and external stakeholders, for example, from workers and managers inside the organization, as well as customers, investors, and other important entities or people outside the organization, such as government bodies. Middle and lower levels of management in particular should be involved, and financial as well as human resources committed [63].

The most frequently mentioned theme in the literature is that leaders communicate their visions in order to promote change. Additionally, effective leaders are advised to invest considerable time in networking with people both inside and outside their organizations to generate trust and consensus for their visions [51], thereby gaining support from stakeholders.

The fifth common theme is that visionary leaders align people and organizational supporting systems to suit the vision, such as the recruiting and incentive systems, teamwork focus, and job design. This theme overlaps somewhat with the fourth common theme, which states that visionary leaders alter organizational infrastructure to suit their visions, essential because human resources are part of the organizational infrastructure.

Visionary leaders also empower their people to act consistently with the new vision, which helps sustain their commitment to it. This is particularly crucial for leaders in the middle or lower levels of management, who face more problems and challenges in implementing their visions than leaders at the top, by virtue of their wide scope of authority. The visions of midlevel executives need to support, or at least not conflict with, those at a higher level [51]. A common hazard reported by midlevel executives is that they are treated like managers, not leaders; they feel under so much pressure to achieve efficiency and short-term performance, they are unable to pay attention to longer-range issues such as developing a vision or building the unit for the future. Nanus [51] recommended that managers in this situation should delegate as many of their day-to-day responsibilities as they can to subordinates, to free up time for leadership roles.

The last common theme found in the literature is that visionary leaders motivate followers. Clearly, leaders cannot achieve their vision on their own, so they must motivate others to work toward it. In achieving the vision, followers can become exhausted, frustrated, and disenchanted, and leaders need to encourage their followers to carry on. Effective leaders motivate their followers through the use of formal authority, role modeling, building self-confidence, creating challenge through goal-setting, delegating, rewarding, and punishing [46].

3. Empirical Findings

Research into vision can be undertaken at the level of the individual, business unit or across an industry. Generally, vision has been studied as a blend of charismatic leadership in a wide variety of samples and industries, with generally positive findings between this kind of leadership and followers' performance, attitudes, and perceptions. Empirical studies range from laboratory subjects using students (e.g. [64], [65], [66]), military leaders (e.g. [67], [68], national leaders (e.g. [69], [70]), corporate leaders (e.g. [5]), educational leaders and administrators (e.g. [71], [72], [21]), to hospital leaders (e.g. [73], [74]). In addition, no published studies have reported a negative relation between

charismatic leadership and individual performance. At the business-unit level, two studies on corporate managers [75], [76]) reported significant relationships between charismatic leadership and business-unit performance.

Research on vision itself has generally focused on four aspects: development, articulation, communication, and implementation (e.g. [51], [7], [20], [24], [76], [16]).

However, what constitutes a vision has been largely overlooked by researchers, with the exception of a longitudinal study by Baum, Locke and Kirkpatrick [37], that found positive relationships between vision attributes of brevity, challenge, future orientation, aspiring, abstractness, clarity, stability and vision content, and organizational performance in entrepreneurial firms. The researchers surveyed CEOs of architectural woodwork firms, and found that vision attributes and vision content were directly related to venture growth, as measured by sales, profits, employment, and net worth in these entrepreneurial firms. These vision attributes were strongly related to venture growth through their effects on vision communication.

Larwood *et al*. [15] published the first large sample empirical study of vision content. In this study, chief executives in one national and three regional samples participated in a study of content and structure of their business visions. They were asked to describe their visions in one sentence and to evaluate their visions along 26 content dimensions. Vision content ratings appeared in clusters found to relate to rapidity of firm change, amount of control the executives exercised over firms, and type of industry. The study did not, however, associate vision attributes with performance.

The empirical review reveals that there are few reported studies on vision attributes and vision content. One major study however indicated positive relationships between vision attributes and content, and organizational performance, supporting the previously discussed theoretical literature that vision is critical to organizational success [37].

4. Directions for Future Research

Clearly the literature suggests many areas for future vision research, including looking at what the components of an "effective" vision are, identifying the attributes and content of visions associated with superior performance, and the ways in which such visions are communicated and realized. The level of analysis is also important as existing studies of vision have mostly focused on individual performance, and few have been conducted at the business unit and organizational levels. A large gap in the literature, available for future research, is looking at the effects of espousing a vision, and the nature of the vision and visioning process on business-unit and/or organization-level performance.

In particular, one could hypothesize that visions that are brief, clear, future-oriented, stable, challenging, abstract and inspiring will be associated with higher-level performance at individual, business unit and organizational levels than visions without these characteristics. Further, the literature suggests that visions that contain messages relating to the relevant industry, customers, and/or competition will be more effective at various levels within an organization than visions that do not address these issues. A third broad area for future research relates to realizing the vision. Based on the literature, one could test whether visions are more effective in organizations that develop strategies to achieve the vision; acquire support from various internal and external stakeholders; communicate the vision to promote change; alter and align organizational structures, people, and systems to suit the vision; empower followers to act upon the vision; and motivate followers via the vision.

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