

A Clear & Compelling Vision

By Bob Nelson, PhD

The starting point of any organizational change is having a clear and compelling vision for those you are leading. If employees are not inspired by what your team, department or organization is trying to do, it will be more difficult for them to have the motivation to succeed --- especially in tough times.

“A vision is not just a picture of what could be, it is an appeal to our better selves, a call to something more,” says Harvard professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter. From that vision, you can shape your “unique competitive advantages,” that is, those aspects that you have to offer your customers that your competition does not. Because the unique advantages you have to offer and the needs of your customers can shift drastically in changing times, you should look at this frequently.

Revising Goals to Met a Revised Vision

Once you've clarified your vision for your group, analyze what's working and what isn't. Established customers may be cutting back on using your firm's services, but what new clients have recently started to invest with you? What do those new clients have in common and how can you approach similar clients in the marketplace? Changing times call for changing strategies to meet your company's goals. Engage employees to determine what is working and what is not.

Next, set revised goals and renew your focus. When profits are down, it's time to review company-wide goals as well as the goals of each individual employee. Doing so provides employees with a greater sense of direction and control, and ensures that everyone is working in tandem to progress through a difficult time. Involving employees in the broader goals that apply to the entire company gives them a better understanding of what is expected of them and engages them in achieving them

To create attainable goals, consider these helpful guidelines:

- **Focus on goals that most closely align to your organization's mission.** You might be tempted to take on goals that are challenging, interesting, and fun to accomplish, just make sure they are not too far removed from your organization's mission.
- **Pick the goals with the greatest relevance.** You have only so many hours in your workday, so it clearly makes sense to concentrate your efforts on a few goals that have the biggest payoff --- rather than a boatload of goals with relatively small payoff.

- **The best goals are few in number and specific in focus.** Pick two to three goals on which to focus. Having a broad number of vague, constantly changing objectives dilutes the efforts of you and your staff and can result in a complete breakdown in the process.
- **Goals should be simply stated.** Avoid jargon, buzzwords and phrases that can have multiple meanings, or are prone to misinterpretation. Focus instead on using impactful, simple, and easy-to-understand language that is clear to all.
- **Have “stretch” goals.** That is, goals that are not too difficult (which undermines one’s motivation) but not too easy, either. It’s the goals that are between those two extremes, perhaps with a 70% chance of success, that tend to be the most motivating.
- **Involve employees in the process.** The best managers involve employees in the goal-setting process to obtain their buy-in and commitment towards achieving those goals. Once employee commitment is obtained, their motivation, resourcefulness and creativity in reaching the goals skyrockets.

The Top Ten Planner

One effective technique for increasing alignment of goals between managers and employees is called the “Top Ten Planner.” A manager asks an employee to take some time to make a list of his or her top job responsibilities, projects and priorities. It’s okay if the employee only comes up with five or six items on their list. The manager does the same activity, taking time to focus on the employee’s job, with the intention that both the manager and employee will get back together the next day and compare the two lists.

Once reconvened, the two lists are compared and discussed. Often the overlap between the two lists is only 40 percent or less. The employee learns what the manager thinks his or her top priorities should be, and likewise, the manager learns about an employee’s current priorities. Sometimes, the priorities are never explicitly stated, and a manager might learn that a project he thought the employee had completed is still in the process of being implemented. Communication can be fickle and it is easy to get out of alignment on goals and expectations during fast-moving and dynamic times. The Top Ten Planner is a good vehicle to realign priorities and expectations.

Providing feedback through regular performance review meetings is the best way to let employees know how they’re doing and keep them focused.

Performance reviews traditionally occur once, maybe twice, a year. However, more frequent reviews --- ideally, quarterly ---- lets employees know where they stand, ensures that managers and employees are on the same page regarding

their goals and performance, and provides an optimal opportunity to discuss future and development opportunities for employees.

Tie Goals to Financial Incentives

It is also important to link goals to financial rewards. Although intangible forms of recognition and rewards are important, employees also want and expect monetary rewards when they have succeeded ---- especially if you've had a salary or bonus freeze. There's no doubt that companies have had to get creative structuring their financial rewards. If those rewards have been cut, they should also be reinstated as the organization can once again provide such incentives, especially for its top performers. Consider placing more emphasis on measurable goals that employees can control --- such as production levels, customer service surveys, or material deliverables such as product development. I also recommend identifying stand-out employees that are most likely to leave or be lured away by a competitor, creating separate bonus pools for them, and awarding them based on merit or performance.

Energizing a workforce to change starts with creating a clear and compelling vision and direction for the organization that is broken down into individual goals for each employee. Revising goals and focus is a key part of surviving a recession. Business cannot be conducted as usual, changes must be made, and everyone must be a part of the process. That is why it's critical to include employees in setting these goals. For any degree of change to be successful, support is absolutely necessary.

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