

Build A Vision With Cut-Through

The vision statements of many organizations have no resonance outside the boardroom. It may mean something to those executives who developed the statement (or delegated the development of it!), but most are too input-focused and generic to be of any real use to people on the front-line.

The trouble with statements that state that the company will be the 'best', the 'most admired' or the 'avatar in its industry' is that they provide no guidance as to what you really want to achieve.

Done well, however, a vision statement acts as the arrowhead of your strategy, bringing to a single point the essence of who you are and how you will succeed. An effective vision statement has three key elements.

1. It is focused on outcomes. It states what the organization will achieve and its impact on the world.
2. It is specific. Clear choices have been made and it is not simply a bland, motherhood statement written at such a high level that everyone can agree to it.
3. It gives a sense of how you will achieve your intent. Not only does the statement describe the end result, but it also guides the style in which it will be achieved.

To bring this to life I have randomly selected vision statements from four of the UK's leading retail banks. I am not picking on our beleaguered banking industry. On the contrary, I think that these statements reflect the quality and style of many corporate visions across a variety of sectors. The four visions are:

1. To become one of the handful of universal banks leading the global financial services industry
2. To be the best financial services organization in the UK
3. To be the UK's most admired financial services business
4. We are the world's local bank

Only the fourth statement, which is HSBC's vision statement, passes the 'cut-through' test. When I read that vision, I get a sense of a global presence, an inter-connected organization and a focus on strong customer relationships. I imagine that senior management comprises people from diverse backgrounds who are brought together by their cosmopolitan approach.

With the other banks, too much is left out. In particular, I have no inkling as to *how* they are seeking to achieve their goal. The only picture it brings to my mind is of a lot of middle-aged men in pinstriped suits, blue shirts and red braces. If their vision statement were an arrowhead it would simply bounce off its target rather than cut through it.

My favorite vision statement is from Southwest Airlines. It passes all three of the tests set out above and is as sharp as any arrow from Robin Hood's quiver. Southwest's vision acts a touchstone for the ongoing management of the business. Herb Kelleher, the former CEO, put it like this: *"I can teach you the secret to running this airline in thirty seconds. This is it: we are the low-fare airline. Once you understand that fact, you can make any decision about this company as well as I can"*.

Can you say the same about your vision statement?

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