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Learning Organizations Part 6: The Power of a Shared Vision

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“By focusing attention on a vision, the extraordinary manager operates on the emotional and spiritual resources of the organization, on its values, commitment, and aspirations. The ordinary manager, by contrast, operates on the physical resources of the organization, on its capital, human skills, raw materials, and technology.”

— Warren Bennis, Jagdish Parikh, and Ronnie Lessem, **Beyond Leadership** (1994)

Peter Senge, author of **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook**, states that “Shared visions emerge from personal visions. This is how they derive their energy and how they foster commitment.” A vision gives us a place to go. The more we see how we fit into the vision, the more likely we are to do what it takes to achieve that vision.

The concept of a shared vision is

most easily explained by using an organization with which we are all familiar: the family. Most visions in organizations are developed by senior management; most visions in families are developed by the parents. Both senior managers and parents assume that their employees and their children do not need to be involved, but that they buy into, and are committed to, the vision. As a result, these visions lack the inspiration that a shared vision provides to people. Without shared vision, there is nothing to negotiate. The vision belongs to the CEOs or the parents, not to the organization or the family.

What does an organization without a shared vision look like? Organizations and families that lack a shared vision are characterized by:

- Conflict that is never resolved, which lingers and permeates all decisions and interactions
- Lack of individual responsibility

- Lack of cooperation, because everyone’s vision is different, and no one can see how his or her vision fits into the organization’s vision
- Reactive behaviour towards events, which can create crisis
- Lack of autonomy that shows up as aggression and avoidance, which can lead to rebellion
- Lack of systems thinking and understanding of interdependence, which shows up as selfish behaviour
- An environment that stifles experimentation, innovation, and creativity

People do not make these choices deliberately. They are acting in response to a gap that is empty of vision, values, purpose, and goals to which they can commit. This is interesting, because a shared vision

identifies a gap between *what is* and *what is to be*. The difference is that a vision gives a clear direction for actions and decisions to bridge that gap. A shared vision implies that everyone is actively involved, and that all can see how their personal visions fit into the bigger picture. A shared vision is dynamic; it changes and flexes to meet the emerging needs of the organization or family.

What is a shared vision?

Senge, in **The Fifth Discipline**

Fieldbook (pp. 302-303), outlines the components of a shared vision:

- **Vision:** an image of our desired future
- **Values:** how we expect to travel to where we want to go
- **Purpose or Mission:** what the organization is here to do
- **Goals:** milestones that we expect to reach before too long

What does a shared vision do?

A shared vision provides the *creative tension* required for people to strive to achieve the vision. Creative tension occurs when you have a vision of a place where you want to go, as well as a clear picture of the current reality. The gap between the vision and the current reality causes tension. As humans, we naturally strive to resolve this tension. It is precisely this tension that taps into people's motivation to achieve the vision. This is why a shared vision is so inspiring.

Developing a shared vision is difficult and time-consuming. Because it takes tremendous effort and courage to develop a shared vision, most organizations and families do not take the time required to build one. However, the most powerful driving force, which can make or break an organization

or a family, lies in its ability to build a shared vision that inspires and motivates all of its members to join the effort, and to achieve greatness.

Shared visions can be developed with any number of people, at any level of the organization or family. The key to a shared vision is to make sure that all of the people:

- See clearly both the vision and the current reality
- See how their personal visions fit into the shared vision
- See how their personal visions fit into the overall direction

Once people buy into the shared vision, they are able to do the work that is central to achieving the vision. When people understand where they are going, they do every job and solve every problem within the context of the vision. The vision becomes a vehicle for setting priorities.

The closest that most families get to a shared vision is planning for a holiday. The planning usually includes:

- Developing a vision that will meet individual and group needs (e.g., a place to go)
- Determining the current reality (e.g., budget, time)
- Determining possible strategies to bridge the gap (e.g., car, plane, travel routes, accommodations, scheduling of activities)
- Determining each person's role in achieving the vision (e.g., driving, booking accommodations, packing)

The price that we all pay for the lack of a shared vision in both organizations and families is shown on the list on the previous page: unresolved conflict, lack of responsibility, lack of cooperation, reactive behaviours, lack of autonomy, selfish behaviours, and lack of experimentation, innovation, and creativity. Even though we are all aware of this price tag, most of us are willing to pay this price. The most common excuse I hear from people is, "I don't have the time to develop a shared vision." This tells me that the advantages of a shared vision are not a priority. **If a shared vision were a priority, people would make the time to develop one.**

If you choose not to make the time, the price that you pay is a high one. You will continue to work in mediocrity, and your people and your family will be directionless, inefficient, and ineffective. This is the price of not pursuing a shared vision. **Are you willing to pay this price?**

"When individuals feel that they can make a difference and that they can improve the society in which they are living through their participation in an organization, then it is much more likely that they bring vigor and enthusiasm to their tasks and that the results of their work will be mutually reinforcing."

— Warren Bennis, Jagdish Parikh, and Ronnie Lessem, **Beyond Leadership** (1994)

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