For companies to be successful, it’s important to understand what a vision is, and how strong leadership helps accomplish it.

The words vision, mission, purpose and leadership are heard so much in business today. Vision is the plan for what the future of the organization will look like. Mission encompasses the daily activities to achieve this long-term goal. Purpose is why the company does what it does. For companies to be successful, it’s important to understand what a vision is, and how strong leadership helps accomplish it.

The three key components of such leadership are direction, alignment and commitment (“Leadership Happens Through Direction, Alignment & Commitment, Center for Creative Leadership, ccl.org).

**Seeing and Believing**

Vision is where the organization wants to go — how stakeholders think about the future or how they want it to look. A clear and concise (20/20) vision allows all organizational stakeholders to know what the company is trying to achieve.

For a professional football team, the vision statement might read, “Our vision is to win a Super Bowl by the year 2025.” But let’s look at the reality of that vision vs. the current organizational performance. What if this team has never won a championship before, and its employees and fans are used to losing? That is, what if the internal and external stakeholders do not expect to win a championship?

For the vision to come to fruition, everyone involved must create new mental models. They must come to see that winning is possible and that leadership has a clear plan to achieve that goal. It may take new people coming into the organization, new leadership and/or changing the mindset of existing employees.

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin’s three-step model for change management starts with “unfreezing” what people think and have accepted as their truth. This is essential so their minds can open to look at things in new ways without bias. The next step is to change the engrained mental models. People must be willing...
A Team Effort

To achieve the vision, everyone in the organization must play a role in creating it. They must be empowered to be fearless and remain focused — day by day, month by month and year by year. There are no shortcuts.

This is where strong leadership comes into play. Everyone must have some type of input on the organization’s vision. If people are going to be fearless yet focused during this unprecedented journey, they must be part of creating the vision; an organization’s vision will fail if created only by upper management. In today’s digitally connected world, and with more collaborative generations (millennials and Generation Z) in the workplace, this concept is more important than ever.

Top-down (autocratic) management is not effective. Rather, the way to bring a vision to life is to empower people (participative style) at every level of an organization. Ask employees for their input, questions, ways to improve, what might be missing, what they would add, etc. These are all open-ended questions: Management wants to hear them out and to incorporate what people share.

People either buy in to a vision with their thoughts, emotions, blood, sweat and tears, or they will look at it as some “flavor of the month” upper management idea that will never work. Even with total buy in, it is difficult for an organization to achieve long-term growth. Without it, it’s nearly impossible.

Turning Vision into Reality

Achieving a vision is built upon great leadership. Strong leaders work to ensure that the vision is achieved even as unforeseen obstacles or problems develop.
Moreover, they are aware that there is an opportunity behind every obstacle and a solution behind each problem. In this way, they come to expect the unexpected and understand that many different choices may need to be made along the journey, but they never lose sight of the finish line that is the vision. Leaders must be fearless and focused in the pursuit of the vision.

Direction, alignment and commitment play distinct roles in making leadership happen and in achieving the vision. Direction helps all parties agree on what the actual vision is, and helps everyone focus on what they desire to achieve together. This component is vital. Oftentimes, groups are uncertain of what they want to accomplish, or see several different things because of their perspective. Direction means that we are clear and consistent in what we are trying to do and how we are trying to do it.

Alignment helps different individuals and groups work together, with tasks, roles and energies all coordinated. For example, consider a group planning a cross-country drive. Once the group has its vision and direction, it needs to have plans in place. What if someone gets sick? Will they need to rotate drivers? How does the group ensure everyone will work together? That’s where alignment comes in.

In leadership, just as in driving a car, alignment makes for a smooth ride so we can achieve our vision. Without it, the organization doesn’t operate efficiently or effectively.

The importance of commitment in the leadership process cannot be overstated. In such cases, we have people who have agreed to make the collective group’s success — not just their individual success — a personal priority. It’s amazing when we are all going in the same direction — all parts are in alignment, and people are completely committed. However, the “human being” part of this leadership and vision process can also be the most difficult. Humans inherently get distracted, frustrated, sidetracked or
focused on their individual priorities. This is just normal human behavior, so it’s vital to have continual positive reinforcement of our vision and commitment by everyone every day. Notice I say “our” vision. Once it moves from being “their vision” to “our vision,” everyone takes ownership of it. Once they take ownership, they have their name on it. Once their name is on it, they do not want to fail because it will reflect poorly on them. This, in turn, leads to individual commitment, even when times get tough.

Ready for Growth and Change

The world is moving faster every day. People are inundated with more information than in the history of mankind. For more sales, better marketing or growth, organizations must change. Without top leadership on board for such changes, they are destined for mediocre results at best. Thus, no matter what the vision, whether it’s a smaller team or divisional vision or a larger overall organizational initiative, everyone must be on board.

Organizations want to grow, and growth is achieved by having a clear roadmap and vision for the future. Ensure all stakeholders know this vision and make it simple to follow. Remain fearless in your approach and know one thing will hold true: The future will change.

We must all develop a clear vision of where we are and where we want to be. Ensure everyone involved takes part in creating the vision and is aligned and committed to it. The organizations that spend time defining their future will be the ones running into the future — and those that don’t will be limping. I suggest the former and a relentless focus on creating a 20/20 roadmap built on strong leadership to ensure future success.

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Be Above the Baseline

As featured on the SGIA Printing Press blog on SGIA.org

Quick: What are three things all printers claim to offer their customers? A quick look at the website of the perfectly average but totally fictitious company, “No-Name Graphics,” will tell you. To quote: “We pride ourselves on excellent customer service, quality printing and on-time delivery.”

Perhaps your company’s website says something similar. While all of these things may be true, it is first important to understand that such a claim is like saying, “We are committed to meeting your expectations by providing exactly what you expect, and nothing more.”

Customer Service

Every company — at least in their marketing materials — claims to have excellent customer service, but what does that really mean? For companies working at the top end of the printing industry, customer service has morphed into customer experience.

Meeting basic expectations is for the rest of the pack. Today’s leading companies have transformed their consultative selling approach into consultative customer service. Instead of being a print provider who is there to do business whenever the phone rings (the passive approach), these companies work with their customers as service providers, helping them realize their distinct wants and needs, and consulting with them on what’s next (the active approach).

Quality Printing

What is quality printing? Does it mean your customers never come back to you with complaints, or that your work is “fine?” In my many years working with printing companies, I’ve seen that those companies that earn the biggest, most profitable accounts are also those that have their processes in check: Strong color management, color standards, certification, efficient workflow, top-to-bottom knowledge of the materials needed to not just do the job, but to do the job right.

Consider this: A beautifully executed print has not been executed beautifully if it begins to fade just months into its three-year expected life. Knowledge, reliability from job-to-job and experience become true value-adds.

On-Time Delivery

Delivering the job means you made the print and got it to the customer on or before the deadline, right? This means you met basic expectations, but didn’t go any further than that.

What happens after the printing is done is often more valuable (and more difficult) than making the print. These elements include installation, kitting, shipping, fulfillment and on-site management. At the top end of the printing segment, companies have taken the expectations for printers and extended them far beyond the print. By doing so, they separate themselves from their competitors, and in some cases offer capabilities that make them truly unique.

What to Do

Whether you serve commercial printing, apparel decoration, wide format, industrial, packaging or other segments, your challenge is the same: To exceed expectations. What, as a business, can your company do to differentiate itself, not just through marketing or a splashy website, but through its actions? Answering that can be a core path toward success.