

Beautiful leadership and the demands of artistic vision

Denver Bingski D. Daradar

De La Salle University

dbddaradar@gmail.com

It was in the early 1990s when I first encountered Joel Barker's video, "The Power of Vision" (1990). I was young, highly impressionable, and more than a tad idealistic. Then, I found a number of its key messages quite inspiring and empowering, particularly the anecdote of the young man throwing starfish in the ocean. And no, that's no spoiler (yet).

Now, as he presented his ideas on vision, Joel Barker manages to integrate his thoughts into board room bullets. A vision, he suggests, must be "leader-initiated, positive and inspiring, comprehensive and detailed, and shared and supported" (Barker, 1990). What he was attempting to communicate was that leaders must be able to both develop a clear vision of the future, and form a vision community that, believing in the vision, will work together to bring that vision into a reality.

And that got the ball rolling for what I observed was more than a decade-long obsession of organizations to start crafting their own vision, mission, and value statements. This process, whose outcome were a vision, mission, and values statements, gained a stronghold amongst organizations when it caught the world by storm. The results were initially fantastic: suddenly organizational life, especially for-profit companies, were about more than just the money. There was purpose and meaning.

Then, these visions, set into concise vision statements, found its way onto the lobby walls of corporate headquarters and branches, and into employee onboarding programs. Some organizations, like one personal care manufacturing conglomerate I got to consult with in the early 2000s, launched programs to communicate and secure understanding – if not support – from various stakeholders such as suppliers and key accounts.

The journey of that personal care group of companies was fascinating for me. I was fresh from college and was placed as an assistant to a team of management consultants that facilitated the vision, mission and core values (VMC) cascading workshops. I got a front row seat watching how most senior executives found alignment between their own personal vision and goals with that of the company, while a few outright declared that this was not for them and opted to resign their positions. I couldn't believe my ears. Yet, that was, for me profound proof of how an authentically crafted VMC could thresh the wheat from the chaff. Suppliers hopped on the bus, and key accounts appreciated the engagement.

Sadly, the gains of these workshops did not prove long-lasting.

Time proved the ever-accurate judge. As vision statements got hung on office walls, so did it fade, tarnish, and accumulate dust and cobwebs. Unaligned structures and processes, impatient

and irresolute leaders, weak management systems, strong countercultures and cliques, and poorly designed human resources systems were the undoing of vision.

How many onboarding sessions have I seen when visions are only briefly discussed, in a by-the-way or in-passing fashion, and never critically dissected and communicated in a manner that is relevant and valuable? Some sessions even just ask their employees to read through the manual, declare that they understood it, and sign-off on an undertaking!

And underpinning the entire buy-in process is the classic question: what's in it for me? Organizations scrub employee backs if they do likewise. Where are the other stakeholders in this vision? How can this mutual scrubbing be more than just about the money?

Our personal care company was a good example of how reducing the VMC to statements, emptying the organizational conversation of what should be the “comprehensive and detailed” version of the VMC, and not translating the same VMC into strategic and operating processes that will make it real and concrete could all lead to useless rhetoric, neglect, and eventual meaninglessness. In my humble opinion, this organization that was poised to be one of the biggest conglomerates in the country, is now just an almost-there. Because the VMC was reduced to statements, because the leaders failed to create and maintain a living and growing vision community. The stakeholders – employees, especially – lost the inspiring reasons to stay and contribute to the building of what could have been a great company.

But they were not the only ones suffering from these symptoms of corporate neuralgia. There followed wave after wave of scandals that prove either of two things: that vision statements do not possess the same power as vision, or that some powerful visions are not in the vision statements yet unbridled by concrete corporate values and ethics. From the late 1990s to the first decade of the 21st century, we have seen only a continuous explosion of corporate, financial and economic debacles that destroyed legacy corporations, put executives in jail, made countries bankrupt, and left hundreds of families homeless and hungry. These, and more, are only evidences of what Nancy Adler refers as “the results of the twentieth century’s long experiment in ugliness” (Adler, 2015).

Without having to trivialize the various external factors that have contributed to these tragic events, I propose that by-and-large, the inability of organizations to translate vision into visionary and value-laden processes and leadership hastened the experiment in ugliness. The utilitarian mindset in businesses still prevail. All elements must lead to profit, even if it means compromising or sacrificing elements of their vision, some of those values, and worse, some of their people.

This, for me, begs a couple of questions. Firstly, do these all mean that the notion of strategic visions and corporate missions and values have no practical place in the arena of business? Secondly, are the consequences of this “long experiment in ugliness” reversible? Is there hope? This question is even more urgent: the evil motivations behind the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 should have taught everyone – not just one nation – a lesson or two. And yet, barely recovering from the aftermath, there continues to be deceit and destruction sweeping the corporate world. It seems almost hopeless.

Answering this two-fold question requires both management scholars and practitioners to do a real, heart-felt *mea culpa*. Reversing the observations of the likes of Adler requires a commitment of leaders to experiment, if not create, beauty. Yes, beauty – the complete antithesis of the ugliness that permeates the world in general, and business, in particular.

Now, this kind of beauty is not the mundane notion of aesthetic taste. Rather, this beauty we talk about is characterized by harmony, integrity, and clarity. (Alvira, Clavell, & Melendo, 1991), the possession or pursuit of which takes us on the contrapuntal path away from ugliness.

This *harmony or proportion* of the thing itself, and its relation to its surroundings demands an accord or congruence of all related elements. I propose that in an organization, it could mean that accord, congruence, or even cadence – if you will – of all stakeholders with what the company is doing and is trying to achieve. These should not be misconstrued to mean symmetry, for stakeholders do not make the same level of contributions to what the organization is trying to pursue.

Then there is *integrity or completeness* of the thing, whereby something is more or less close to being what it was designed to be. I suggest that in an organizational setting, this means that all stakeholders, functions, and processes are fully integrated and synched in working together towards what the organization is hoping to attain. And mind you, that includes profits, without detriment to the other outcomes expected by different stakeholders. Thus, in its operations and outcome generation, there is a level and sense of seamlessness.

Finally, there is *clarity*, whereby a thing is known for what it truly is, fully transparent. I submit that this could mean that an organization becomes or is what it claims to be and is perceived by its stakeholders as precisely being so.

Reflecting on these characteristics of beauty, and there seems to be some ideas that resonate with the early ideas of corporate visions and missions. However, this time, through the lens of beauty, it demands something more. It is no longer just condensed statements emblazoned on office reception walls. It's no longer just a result of a three-day executive vision development workshop. It's no longer just a series of vision cascading seminars – even if it means communicating to stakeholder representatives.

Through the lens of beauty, this resurrected notion of vision, mission and values demands more. To achieve harmony, I propose that there must be some sort of scorecard that indicates the objectives, targets, and programs of management for and in relation to each of its identified stakeholders, internal and external. To achieve integrity, I suggest that there should be a serious review of business and management processes with the purpose of examining and streamlining ways of delivering value to stakeholders, ensuring that no one is left behind, and that all – including shareholders – benefit. To achieve clarity, I submit that there must be regular transparent reporting to all stakeholder groups, and a process to constantly communicate not only the corporate ideals enshrined in the vision, mission, and values statements, but the progress the company is making towards its full attainment.

Thus, if I may propose a new term, this revival could best be termed as an *artistic vision*. Art requires a level of discipline, an acquisition of skill wrought by constant practice amidst trial and error. It demands commitment, and not just any commitment. It demands a commitment to perpetuate beauty: harmony, integrity, and clarity.

Indeed, the leader does not see the financial value of the firm twenty years down the road, just as no artist creates with a vision of how much his or her painting will fetch fifty years later at an auction. Rather, the leader embraces a message, value, an idea that will always be meaningfully part of society, of cultural life, without detriment to any stakeholder, but a positive force in all its areas of operations. The leader then orchestrates all the important elements and incorporates – yes incorporates, which means to fully embed and make a necessary part of the organization – each stakeholder to make the artistic vision a realized work of art.

To think that this is impossible is sweeping haste. There are companies out there, just on or below the public radar, who have gradually begun embracing the principles of what I have come to label as beautiful leadership, focused on realizing what can be accurately called an artistic vision.

Since I began this reflection with the example of a personal care manufacturing company, allow me to end with another example from a similar industry.

Another personal and home care manufacturing company was established with a two-fold purpose: to make a profit by producing and selling personal and home care products that are of superior quality and more and more organic and sustainable, and to be able to build an organization that will serve as the hub of an ecosystem that provides rehabilitation for youths-at-risk.

This company has strengthened its commitment to use only organic materials for their products, and has slowly adopted sustainability initiatives such as product refilling stations. They have made it an organizational policy that 70% of their manpower complement should be composed of youth-at-risk who have been hired, and provided a chance to go to college while receiving company-sponsored counseling services. Top management scorecards are broken down into three non-negotiable components: profit, time and effort spent with youth-at-risk mentees, and the manager's self-care commitment. The founder and chief executive mandated: we must be profitable and grow our sales if we are to help more youth.

The margins are not too thick, but the business has been growing. They have built partnerships with other organizations, foundations, and communities in order to make this reality. Their managers are as passionate about the purpose but are fully cognizant of the financial goals.

The company is relatively young compared to many other players, but this one is an artistic work-in-progress. The leader was fired up years ago, seeing the plight of the youth-at-risk in another country, and wanted to make a difference for the same in the Philippines. Leaders and companies like these only affirm that a return to beauty and an escape from ugliness is possible, and the possession and execution of an artistic vision will demand more than statement or credo. They say business isn't for the fainthearted. I say art isn't for the frivolous. Art – artistic vision – is only for the committed, the idealistic, the game changer. It demands more, but it will give more.

This is beautiful leadership creating a work of art, founded on a clear artistic vision. If it is possible for them, it can be possible for many. Let's start dreaming our artistic visions, work with others to make them real, and make a better, more beautiful world.

Denver Bingski Daradar is an assistant professorial lecturer at the Management and Organization Department, Ramon V. del Rosario College of Business, De La Salle University. His current areas of interest and reflections cover the broad, emerging discussion on beautiful leadership, grounded in metaphysics, and expressed in strategic management. This paper is based on an article that first appeared in the Green Light column of Manila Standard, published on March 31, 2019.

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