

Do Companies' Future Visions & Purposes Really Matter?



BY THOR OLAFSSON

Sam Walton, founder of Walmart retail chain, once said "raising capital for the next growth stage of the company is hard work, but not as difficult as finding managers with a clear vision". He strongly advocated that executives should be able to anticipate the future development of their business unit and forward that vision, and this capability was key to their recruitment.

Walton was not alone in the view that vision was an important leadership capability. Much research including an extensive survey by leading scientists, Kouzes and Posner, supports this idea.

It is sometimes said that managers are more concerned with short-term improvements in operations while leaders look further ahead. In my writing, I make a distinction between managers and leaders, but the real challenge is to **play both roles** well.

But what makes "vision" so powerful?

One explanation is that a leader who has a clear vision gives people hope for a better future. A leader who aligns his vision together with the situation on the ground, truly bridges the gap. If he gives people the opportunity to bridge the gap **with him**, painting the future picture in collaboration, then they have a common goal. This is powerful. Strong leaders know this works, because bridging the gap has the **power of creativity**, which brings hope and enthusiasm for everyone involved.

Taking the hope that a powerful vision brings, is questioning WHAT it is, important to bridging the gap when approaching the future vision? By tackling the question of purpose alongside the work of shaping the future vision, the **leader deeply empowers** people. When people find a worthy purpose, it is driven by invisible forces that do not actually cost the company anything. In this respect, **the purpose is as an endless resource** that can be retrieved at will. Examples are people who have chosen a profession such as teachers, nurses or scientists. For them, salary is not the main driving force, but rather working on something that has a worthy purpose.

In Strategic Leadership's international work with the global pharmaceutical company Roche, we meet a lot of leaders who have a clear vision of the required needs to develop the business. This view enables them to for example produce and distribute hardware for blood tests faster and cheaper than before. The purpose is to help alleviate suffering and save lives.

In this context, I recall when an employee at Ossur described how it would affect her and other staff when children and adults could walk around the office cheerfully with **new artificial limbs**. She talked about this as the incentive to do her best and help.

Some companies we work with, however, have poorly defined vision and purpose. Here, we see that a good manager *can* keep people happy but engagement takes a lot of work. In comparison, the effort to keep people engaged at work is less when the vision and purpose are **clear**. The difference between the enthusiasm, concentration and endurance of the staff is tangible.



We find some managers are quick to say:

"Yes, this is all good but not all companies are healing people or saving lives. We can shape a vision, but a noble purpose is difficult in our case. "



It is certainly true that what is needed is often a question of defining an exciting vision, based on a strong foundation of purpose. But it is possible. A good example of this is the CEO of a financial institution in the UK, who said to me:

"The financial activity as such gives me little or no purpose. But the ego-free environment we are shaping and motivating people for personal growth gives me great inspiration."

One way forward in this scenario is, therefore, is finding purpose in shaping the work environment.

