Ensuring the success of bold visions

A CEO’s new vision often blurs into an indistinct image once the initial blitz is over. To ensure that the vision is more than just a daydream, companies should follow a five-phase model that some organisations have used successfully to avoid disaster or complacency.

Why new visions fade away

Failing to focus
An organisation can be confronted with a dozen or more major initiatives at a time. If the top team attempts to wrestle with all of them at once, middle managers and front-line employees will likely be confused. The bold vision will get mired.

Sitting out this dance
Too many leaders try and dance without a partner. They don’t communicate how others in the company could learn the steps to the new dance, leaving most to walk away from the dance floor in fear!

Skipping the skill building
Many companies we examined did not invest to develop the new skills their people would need to realize the vision.

Mismatching messages and metrics
It would become clear through the stories floating through the organisation that yesterday’s leadership behaviours were still seen to be of paramount importance in spite of the need for changes to fit the vision.

Clashing powers
In many cases an organisation’s political dynamics and culture can become a major barrier to the success of the new vision.

Neglecting the talent pipeline
What’s needed to make the vision work? Layers of change agents, from top to bottom – a critical mass of people who embody the behaviours and values of the new call to action.

The Change Model
We observed five critical activities, performed in sequence, that together form a systems approach to enabling bold visions.

Phase 1: Framing the agenda
The leaders in our study who successfully brought about change framed their organisation’s challenges as compelling stories that created an urgent agenda for action. In addressing the need to create an organisational climate that was consistent with the company’s performance objectives, these change leaders took into consideration both external (brand, corporate social responsibility) and internal (culture, values, behaviours) concerns.

When Mark Thompson was hired as the BBC’s new director general a few years ago, he inherited an organisation deeply entrenched in the analog world. After listening to industry experts, customers and employees Thompson framed the BBC’s new enterprise agenda: Creative future. A vision of investing heavily in digital technology and becoming leaner and smaller.
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Phase 2: Engaging the organisation

Once change leaders have framed their agendas, they must do whatever they can to distribute ownership of that vision as broadly as possible. But this has to be done the right way. We found that while managers yearn for more leadership in their organisations, they don’t want to be cast as followers. Instead they want a different style of leadership, characterised by authentic collaboration and broad-based engagement. This finding is why we emphasise that bold visions must be enabled rather than merely executed.

Mark Thompson’s strategy to engage the BBC’s stakeholder communities with his Creative Future vision started at the top. The director general engaged the BBC’s board of directors in a series of dialogues that eventually produced a set of recommendations for restructuring the BBC along four criteria: creative, digital, simple and open. The board owned the overarching direction of the restructuring. It left Thompson to the task of engaging his managers and executives so that the restructuring would come to life in day-to-day operations.

Phase 3: Building Mission-critical capabilities

While engagement with the new vision is critical, it’s not enough. The development of new capabilities is also necessary, as companies usually have gaps in what they want to do and what they can do. How do you go about identifying which capabilities will provide differentiated competitive advantage? How do you identify and address capability gaps without turning the process into an enterprise wide blame game? Either or both of these concerns can become cancerous is matched with a CEO with a short attention span who ‘just wants to get on with it’.

In order to realise the full benefits of Thompson’s bold vision, the BBC required new skills and capabilities and cross unit collaboration. Thomson attacked these problems in a variety of ways. The technologists were bought together from across the organisation to create a ‘powerhouse resource’. He introduced a programme to create a better understanding of the vision studies and to enable BBC producers to work more flexibly. He also encouraged hundreds of staff to try out their expertise in other disciplines throughout the BBC, enabling them to span boundaries and develop capabilities.

Phase 4: Connecting the dots by creating alignment

Bold visions are frequently derailed by subtle means: by mind sets, systems and processes that are out of sync or by the unintentional messages sent out by the very executives that are trying to enable the visions to take root.

The alignment of visions and process can also be reinforced by changing organisational structure and its support mechanisms. For example, following the restructuring of the BBC’s departments, Thompson created a new operations group. This was set up to bring leadership, direction and consistency to the BBC’s big infrastructure projects, a critical element of the creative future vision.

Phase 5: Energising the organisation through the power of people

No vision of the enterprise can come to life without the enthusiastic support and follow-through of literally thousands of managers and employees. Our research indicated that most companies’ talent management systems were not in sync with their future capability requirements. It seems that leadership failures stem from executive inattention to the connections between talent requirements and competitive capability requirements. All too often the problem is not that leaders are failing their companies, but rather that a companies talent policies are failing its leaders.

Great change leaders are committed to building robust talent processes – they do not delegate this job to the HR department. At the BBC, Thompson brought in a new head of ‘BBC people’, with the express purpose and mandate to create a human capital strategy that is directly linked to the corporation’s creative future vision.

Continuous revision

Competitive realities have forced executives to rethink what their companies are doing, and how they are doing it, over and over again. A bold vision that fundamentally misreads the competitive landscape has no chance of success, regardless of the process used to make it a reality. The vision has to be on target, sophisticated, inspiring and far-seeing. Once those difficult criteria have been met, however, a process is needed to take the vision from its birth to a new way of doing business. By following the model outlined here, executives can sustain the momentum and see though the changes, of enabling bold new visions.