

March 4, 2008

SEEKING A CHANGE IN ORGANIZATIONAL VISION? **REMEMBER: PERCEPTION TRUMPS EVERYTHING ELSE**

By **Dan Ferdinand**

If you're like most leaders, you have a vision for your organization. The question is always: How do you get there? How can you lead your organization from where it is, to where you want it to be? How can you get people to earnestly embrace change if the beliefs that drive their thoughts – and ultimately their behavior – are so fixed, that any attempt to get them to change will most likely be met by resistance, or by grudging obedience? The key to any successful organizational change is true commitment to a vision – not only by management, but by each member of the organization, especially those on the front lines of delivering care and services.

As every experienced manager knows, commitment is *not* engendered by giving orders. It is a product of strong and unwavering leadership that authentically embodies the values, courage and passion to inspire employees to become deeply committed. The old axiom about how it “starts at the top” hasn't lost its applicability. A unified senior management group has the potential to affect a tipping point where resistance is replaced by commitment, where the will to change gains strength and speed as a positive “buzz” courses through the pathways connecting the workforce.

A misaligned workforce can prevent an organization from reaching its potential. There is a direct correlation between perception and alignment, as well as perception and misalignment. Any perceived breaking of the ranks within the senior management team will be noticed by some employees, and they'll spread the news to everyone else. Maintaining alignment to a new organizational vision requires more than simply announcing a change; it requires strong and consistent leadership from a unified senior management team. The perceptions of your workforce cannot be overlooked – and shouldn't be underestimated. Peter Senge, a highly regarded expert in the field of organizational development, got it right when he said, “The easy way *out* leads right back *in*.” In other words, it doesn't take much to rekindle old beliefs. If the new organizational vision isn't genuinely embraced by your senior managers, the new, positive beliefs will be replaced by negative or old ones, and with the speed of a heat-seeking missile, they'll scuttle any hope for true organization change.

The senior management group needs to be vigilant about making sure that the weariness of maintaining business as usual, and the endless planning and implementation meetings, hasn't dampened their passion for change. Weariness and hopefulness make for bad partners. The combination can serve to alienate those who have become weary from those who remain strong and hopeful. One way to renew a manager's enthusiasm is for the chief executive to have private meetings with his/her team members and provide reassurance, when appropriate, and discuss leadership-related concerns such as alignment and role modeling.

Consider: How many plans for a new organizational state include a reminder that reads: “Check for disconnects within workforce, to prevent a negative future state ([see sidebar](#)).” Perhaps

transformational planning should include this task, because a change initiative can be completed to perfection, and still be a total failure in the heads (perception) and hearts (commitment) of the employees on the front lines. If there *is* a disconnect with the staff who deliver care and services, how can one possibly expect a successful transformation into a new and better organization? You can't unless you are so disconnected from the service level that *your* beliefs are creating a false sense of comfort.

In any sweeping change initiative, it is imperative to understand employees' beliefs about both the *current* and the *anticipated* future states of the organization. Your workforce's beliefs will create a perception that will strongly influence their behavior, and the ultimate success of the future vision. Failure to connect with staff, and to influence their beliefs, will have enormous consequences. Moreover, their perceptions (what they see and how they experience it) should be a valuable input before and during the unfolding of a future vision.

Organizational Disconnects

The importance of being aware of both vertical and horizontal disconnections within the organization should be a constant concern.

A vertical disconnect can be loosely defined in the context of this article as when top management is not aware of what is really taking place at the service level. For example, top management has mandated, or believe they mandated, that each member of the workforce will be required to attend a specific learning program within six month. However, due to inadequate feedback loops up to top management, the mandate was gradually abandoned and the silence from top management was perceived as permission to do so.

A horizontal disconnect can be loosely defined in the context of this article as when the CEO is misperceiving things within his/her senior management team and vice versa. As in the case of vertical disconnects, this may have been a gradual process that went unchecked long enough to create a collective perception that everything was okay.

Sometimes the disconnections are referred to as "uncoupling" because during the organizational process of determining "how" a problem would be solved, the different levels within the organization unintentionally conspire to develop something that doesn't resolve the problem as initially defined.