



Vision Planning Tom Massey

It Began in Boulder

A few years ago I had the great privilege to spend the day one-on-one with Jim Collins, author of the best sellers *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*, at his Leadership Lab in Boulder, Colorado. After a long day of discussing how the principles from his research of businesses related to the social sector, I asked what I thought was a “throw away” question. I said, “Jim, most of my clients have shortened their planning horizon from 5 years to 3. With immediate pressures and the speed of change I guess that is a good idea, right?”

Jim leaned far forward in his chair and said with a great deal of conviction, “Absolutely wrong! I would challenge the leaders of all social sector organizations to begin planning in a much longer time frame.”

After another hour of fascinating discussion on the research behind such a challenge and the methodology many companies use for longer-term planning, I knew I had to develop a longer-term planning process for clients of Triangle2 Partners. Jim was kind enough to review our research and development work over the next year and offer suggestions.

Four❖Point Planning

I developed the Four Point❖Planning process specifically for the social sector. The development of the model comes from my 25+ years of managing and providing professional services to social sector organizations. More than 80 organizations have used Four Point❖Planning to successfully develop and implement a plan that produces alignment and the desired results.

The model is organized in four aligned levels of planning:

- ❖ *Vision Planning* – articulating and quantifying a clear understanding of what defines ultimate success for the organization that will take 10 years or more to achieve.
- ❖ *Resource Planning* – establishing a course of action to develop and secure the leadership, funds, market, facilities, partnerships, and other resources needed over the next 3 to 10 years to achieve the vision.

- ❖ *Strategic Planning* – determining and developing the short list of key priority initiatives for the next 1 to 3 years that will set the course toward the vision.
- ❖ *Operational Planning* – integrating the key strategies with the ongoing work of the organization, executing, and producing measurable results on an annual basis.

Vision Planning

Vision Planning is the process that produces the vision for an organization – the navigational beacon for other planning and significant decisions. A vision defines why the organization exists and how mission achievement is measured. A vision plan is the organization’s long-term commitment to individuals, communities, or society.

The best vision plans are clear and concise in presentation, but often complex in measurement and implementation. When a vision is significantly compelling and consistently shared among leaders, alignment of resources and activity follows.

Vision plans are the expression of the organization’s cause that is:

- ❖ Clear
- ❖ Concise
- ❖ Compelling
- ❖ Consistent

Vision Planning is more about the cause than the organization

I have found planning in the social sector is often about how to make the organization great. I read statements like, “to become the premier provider of _____.” Is that really why the organization exists – to be the best or actually compete with other organizations? Or does it exist to improve society or transform people’s lives in some way, often in partnerships with other organizations?

Also longer term planning in social sector organizations often moves toward more people and programs, bigger budgets, and new facilities. While there is nothing wrong with any of those, I would ask *why* do we need more, bigger, or new? Vision planning is the activity that precedes all those discussions by attempting to answer the *why* question.

Vision planning is about impact – not activity

Two other words some organizations attempt to use in vision planning that seem appealing are *consensus* and *comprehensive*. I urge caution in pursuing these characteristics in developing a strong vision.

To reach consensus, sometimes there is a great deal of compromise needed to have a vision where everyone affirms, “I can live with that.” This could reduce the boldness and reach of a vision. I suggest the following approach:

Input by many – decisions by few

An organization should seek as many perspectives and data points as possible to consider in vision planning. However, decisions are best made by a small group of individuals described in the next section (*The Vision Council*).

Similarly, the idea of a vision plan being comprehensive seems to make sense. However most organizations are complex and multifaceted. In the attempt to be comprehensive, a vision can become so broad that it is meaningless. A vision to *Do Good or Help People* is comprehensive, just not clear or compelling.

Another activity that is less than helpful is to attempt to make every existing activity *fit* under a new vision to achieve comprehensiveness. Instead, I suggest another idea:

Acknowledge everything – Focus on the most important things

The Vision Council

The Vision Council is the small group of individuals responsible for developing the vision plan and recommending it to the organization’s board of directors. In my experience, the best Vision Councils are 6 to 10 people (8 is ideal).

Usually the organization’s CEO is the only staff member on the Council, but sometimes there is a rationale to have other senior staff members as well. It is important to have board members on the Vision Council; but it does not have to be exclusively board members.

Characteristics desired in Vision Council members include:

- ❖ Depth. Council members need a long tenure of participation, service, and/or leadership with the organization, or the cause.
- ❖ Breadth. Members should have an understanding of many aspects of the total organization – approaching a 360-degree view.

- ❖ Connected. A broad perspective of community needs, societal trends, and existing networks is an asset that ensures the organization is relevant.
- ❖ Adaptable. Since vision planning is not a linear activity it requires the ability to deal with ambiguity, change, and innovation.

An issue of concern to some organizations is the idea of *inclusion* or *representation* in the process. The challenge is how can every constituency, perspective, and area of a complex, multifaceted organization be a part of the process, without expanding the Vision Council to an unmanageable number (and still not have *everyone* represented)? There are several ways to do this:

- ❖ Vision Council members individually and the group collectively must have a wide variety of experiences and networks to bring multiple perspectives into the process.
- ❖ Guests from across the spectrum of perspectives should be brought into the process in meaningful ways (see *Vision Forums* below).
- ❖ Research and data can bring aggregate information from many constituencies, perspectives, and markets.
- ❖ In-depth visits to leading edge organizations will help explore a variety of environments (see *Vision Trips* below).

The Vision Planning Process

Using data and input in a variety of working sessions, The Vision Council considers four areas:

- ❖ Core
- ❖ Context
- ❖ Capacity
- ❖ Commitment

There is a set of questions to be discussed in each of the four areas:

- ❖ What is our core? This begins with the organization's mission statement and history – the roots of our cause.
 - Why was the organization started?
 - What are some long-held principles and values?
 - What has been strength of our organization's past?
 - What has compelled people to give time and money to the organization?

- ❖ What is the context for our planning? This is an honest assessment of the current state of the organization and future environment.
 - What are the brutal facts about our organization's current performance, resources, image, and issues?
 - What are our organization's unique qualities?
 - What are the future issues in our community, service area, or society that may positively or negatively affect our organization?
 - What are the trends and changes over the next 10+ years that we must consider?

- ❖ What is our capacity? This is a discussion of how our *cause* can be most relevant and significant to the future *condition*.
 - Which of our unique core competencies are most needed in the future?
 - What could be some areas of impact for our organization in the future if we stretched?
 - How can we resource our vision?
 - Are there other organizations that could partner with our organization or be a better provider of some services?

- ❖ What is our commitment? This is a process to use the common response themes from the above questions to determine potential areas of impact for a vision plan.
 - Does the area of impact fit with the organization's cause?
 - Does the area of impact address a significant future condition?
 - Does our organization have a unique capacity to address the area of impact?
 - Do the leaders of the organization have a passion to address the area of impact?

The vision planning process is iterative, not linear. The Vision Council will need to use all of the questions, data points, and discussions to determine some short list of the best possible areas of impact.

These areas of impact are fully developed by the organization's staff or consultants for final Vision Council decisions. Some organizations have only one area of impact. Others have up to five, usually connected by one common theme. Most vision plans contain both qualitative and quantitative measurements.

A draft of a vision plan is developed and tested with the organization's stakeholders. A final vision plan is developed and presented to the organization's board of directors for review and approval. The approved vision plan is used to develop resource, strategic, and operational plans.

Vision Development Work

The Vision Council is engaged in the development process over several months. There are few, but very important, meetings.

- ❖ Orientation. This meeting is to ensure all Vision Council members understand the process and their role. Members will also be asked to:
 - Make some decisions on the vision planning calendar and other options within the process and outcomes.
 - Share what data they would like to have for decision making.
 - Suggest guests to provide input into the process.

- ❖ Vision Trips. There are three types of Vision Trips, each for different purposes. The first two should be completed early in the process, with the last type done after some decisions have been made.
 - Informational trips to the organization’s own facilities and operations.
 - Exploration trips to another organization to discover new and innovative ideas (also called “wildcatting trips”).
 - Targeted trips to another organization that is “best in class” in an area likely to be a part of the new vision.

- ❖ Vision Forums. These sessions are to bring expert guests’ perspective, insights, and data to the Vision Council – not as a presentation, but as discussion. Ideally, each Vision Forum would focus on a topic of importance to the organization.

Guests (often in a panel format) are asked to discuss data and views that forecast the next 10+ years in their area of expertise or experience, and their opinions and suggestions on possible roles the organization should consider to be a relevant asset on the topic being discussed. Possible Vision Forums include:

- Community leaders (general thought leaders)
- Political leaders and policy makers
- Demographers and social forecasters
- Other social sector organizations’ CEOs
- Economic development experts
- Content experts of interest to the organization (education, youth development, community development, health, urban issues, etc.)
- Funding sources
- Those currently involved with the organization (board of directors, staff, donors, volunteers)

- ❖ Decision Retreat. This extended working session is designed to:
 - Review and analyze the input from all trips and forums.
 - Discuss the questions in the *Process* section above.
 - Determine the most common themes from all input and discussions.
 - Evaluate the most common themes using a Vision Criteria Matrix.
 - Determine the top themes to be researched and further developed by staff for possible inclusion in a vision plan.

Vision Review & Approval

- ❖ Feasibility Testing. A draft vision plan is tested with many of the individuals involved in the Vision Forums, especially the board of directors and those involved in the organization. This is done in group sessions, individual interviews, and online responses.
- ❖ Board Review. After research, development, and draft testing by the staff, the Vision Council reviews drafts of possible vision plans and makes recommendations for presentation to the board of directors.
- ❖ Final Development. The Vision Council and staff develop the final vision material for the board.
- ❖ Board Approval. The Vision Council attends the board of directors meeting for the final vision presentation for board approval.

Alignment & Action

The articulation of the Vision Plan varies greatly from organization to organization, but a few elements are common in all:

- ❖ Vision Communications. Vision Council members may be asked to help communicate the vision to the media, community, and organization.
 - Naming the vision plan or developing an overarching theme – even if there are multiple areas of impact.
 - Developing a digital communications package (artwork, design features, templates, etc.) for print, web, email, power point, and video distribution.
 - Support materials, such as posters, folders, etc., are produced.
 - A strategy for media, community, and organization communications is detailed and implemented.

While developing and articulating the vision is important, the real power in the vision process is in alignment, integration, and measurement:

- ❖ The work on the resource, strategic, and operational plans must be in alignment with the vision plan.
- ❖ The vision must be integrated into all aspects of the organization:
 - Budgeting & Resource Allocation
 - Staff Performance Evaluation
 - Financial Development
 - Leadership Development
 - Communications
- ❖ Key quantitative and qualitative measurements to validate vision success must be determined, base lines established, annual and multi-year targets set, and a process for on going review and adjustments implemented.

Additional Planning Resources from Triangle2 Partners

- ❖ Vision Council Calendar Worksheets
- ❖ Workbooks for Vision Trips & Forums
- ❖ Vision Council Retreat Workbooks with Vision Criteria Matrix
- ❖ Sample Vision Plans
- ❖ Sample Performance Worksheets
- ❖ Triangle2 Resource Planning
- ❖ Triangle2 Strategic Planning
- ❖ Triangle2 Operational Planning

For contact and additional information, please visit our website:

www.triangle2.org