

Dick Richards
FOR A CHANGE

**WORTHY VISIONS
PASS ONE
SIMPLE TEST**



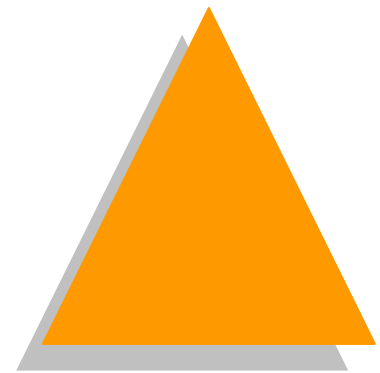
First this admission: I am a purist about organizational visions, believing that they ought to describe the contribution the organization intends to make to the human community. I am in awe of Winston Churchill anticipating a world safe for democracy, of Walt Disney's desire to provide a hiatus from everyday life, of Steven Jobs' aspiration to democratize computing, of Martin Luther King's dream. So I have a "Worthiness Test" for a vision—does it promise a valuable contribution to the human community? If it does, there is more than a good chance that it will turn people on and induce them to help make it real. If it does not, there is little chance of that happening.

Vision became popular in the 1980's when organizations discovered that a worthwhile vision can provide purpose and focus. Suddenly it seemed that every organization had to have a "vision statement." That inclination continues today and executives craft statements that, more often than not, are soon forgotten. I think they are forgotten partly because they fail to meet the Worthiness Test.

The majority of vision statements that turned up in a recent Internet search fail the Worthiness Test. Most were less about making a valuable contribution to human society, and more about the business the organization is in and its aspirations to dominate that business. For example (and edited only slightly for the sake of anonymity), one organization says its vision is, "To be the best provider of knowledge in the eyes of our customers, employees and the public." This statement fails the Worthiness Test because it does not tell us why the company's knowledge is



There is one simple test for the worthiness of a vision: does it promise a valuable contribution to the human community?



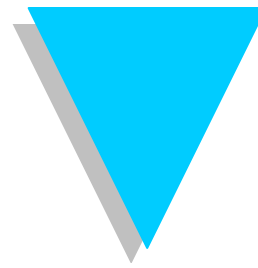
valuable to anyone or how it contributes to the human community. The vision is centered on the organization's desire to be the best and impress people with how great it is. This self-aggrandizement is the most prevalent sentiment within the vision statements that I found. It is reflected in phrases such as these:

- ◆ pre-eminent in the world
- ◆ recognized as the global leader
- ◆ a premier worldwide manufacturer
- ◆ an international reputation for excellence.

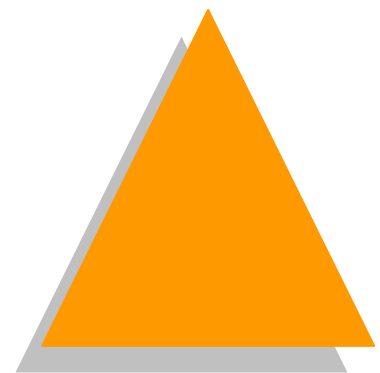
There is nothing wrong with being the best or having a good reputation, but such statements reflect organizational appetites for achievement masquerading as visions. I want to ask, "How about making a commitment to something more worthwhile than your own reputation, recognition or pre-eminence?" I feel certain that most of the people in those organizations, once the initial hype about their vision abates, feel much the same way.

A few of the visions that I found do pass the Worthiness Test. Many of them were created by social service and educational institutions rather than by business organizations. It is more obvious to social service and educational institutions that they exist primarily to make a contribution to humanity. One of my favorites came from Bloorview MacMillan Children's Centre of Ontario, Canada. Bloorview MacMillan enables children with disabilities and special needs to achieve their best. The vision is a heart stopper, "Defy Disability." That's all of it: two words. It suggests a world in which disability is met head on and challenged with resolve and dignity. More importantly, it suggests that the people at Bloorview MacMillan care about something other than themselves. And it implies that the rest of us ought to do the same. The statement is both a vision and a call to action.

Another vision that passes the Worthiness Test is proffered by the Fielding Graduate Institute, which



Passing the Worthiness Test means making a commitment to something more worthwhile than your own reputation, recognition or pre-eminence.



promises a “community of life-long learners making ethical global change.”

Some business organizations do pay attention to their contribution to the human community and have the courage to say so in their vision statements. Whirlpool, for example, passes the Worthiness Test with this: “Every Home... Everywhere. With Pride, Passion and Performance. We create the world's best home appliances, which make life easier and more enjoyable for all people.”

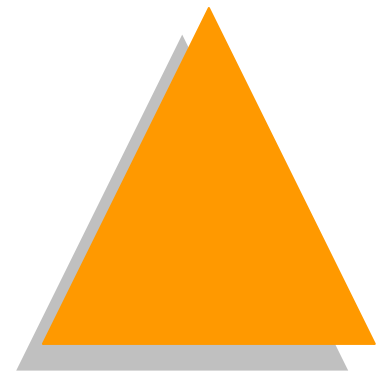
Yes, much of the statement is about Whirlpool itself: its aspiration to be everywhere, and its values. But Whirlpool states clearly that making life easier and more enjoyable is their underlying reason for doing what they do. Unlike the first statement above, in which the company says it wants to be the best so everyone will recognize it as the best, Whirlpool wants to be the best for a larger reason.

One corporation passed the Worthiness Test twice—the Japanese giant NEC Corporation. In 1986, then chairman Koji Kobayashi envisioned that NEC was creating “a situation that would make it possible for any person in the world to communicate with any other person at any place and any time.” In 2001 NEC envisioned an “iSociety” in which the networks around people “promote an exchange of information and knowledge for the achievement of a new creativity in society.” Thank you NEC.

I was offered a useful summary of the difference between those vision statements that pass the Worthiness Test and those that do not by Heather Roseveare, Director of Family and Community Relations at Bloorview MacMillan. She told me, “Our vision captures the heart of what we do—defy disability—but also how we do it, and why we do it.” Vision statements pass the Worthiness Test when their authors address *why* they do whatever they do beyond their own self-interest.



Worthwhile visions suggest that the people who created them care about something other than themselves.



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