



## Developing a vision for change

By John Hennessey and Marie Lou Griffin

**Delivering transformational change successfully is tough. One of the main reasons is that, as its name would imply, change is new. At the outset, the destination is often unknown. It seems counterintuitive to start a journey without knowing the route and exact destination, but in a change environment that is nearly always what we do.**

Coping with such high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty is very challenging. Fear of the unknown and a lack of clarity as to the way forward can lead to resistance and a desire to maintain the more familiar status quo.

In our second issue of Viewpoint, we take a look at how to deal with this ambiguity and how to set out a clear vision for successful change.

## Why have a vision?

Let's start with Lewis Carroll who appears to have got the concept some time ago.

**Alice:** Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?

**The Cat:** That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

**Alice:** I don't much care where.

**The Cat:** Then it doesn't much matter which way you go.

If you want to get somewhere, you have to know where 'there' is. It's as simple as that. The vision is an articulation of the place you will end up when the change is completed. By setting out where you want to get to you can begin to signpost the journey and by measuring the gaps between where you are and where you are going, you are able to clearly define the changes required to bridge those gaps. This sets out not only your journey, but starts to tell you how you will get there.

Once in place, the vision provides direction and purpose to the group of people who will deliver the change and their fear of the unknown will be significantly reduced. Being able to describe the vision is powerful. It allows change leaders to communicate, explain, inspire and set out the case for change. But its use is not just at the outset of the journey. By regularly referring back during the process of change delivery, you can check that what you are doing remains directionally correct with the goal of realising that vision. Confusion and disagreement in delivering the change will be significantly reduced.

The vision helps align what you are doing to achieve your goal, course-correct, prioritise and stop activities which are not aligned to realising that goal. When decisions need to be taken, the forks in the road which so regularly appear can be navigated with more certainty – because you know which path takes you to where you want to go.

Now that would make both Alice and the Cat happy, wouldn't it?

## What makes a good vision?

So if you accept the arguments for having one, let's talk about what a vision looks like. We'll start by stating what it is not. A vision isn't:

- A set of non-specific truisms or taglines. No doubt we all want to be 'world class' and 'delight the customer', but how?
- An architect's drawing of the destination (that comes later)
- A plan to get there. Managers have plans, but leaders have the vision



## So what is a vision?

At its heart, a vision is the product of thinking about the environment and challenges that provide the context within which you operate today, how that context might change over time and where you want your organisation to be in the future. To that end, a vision:

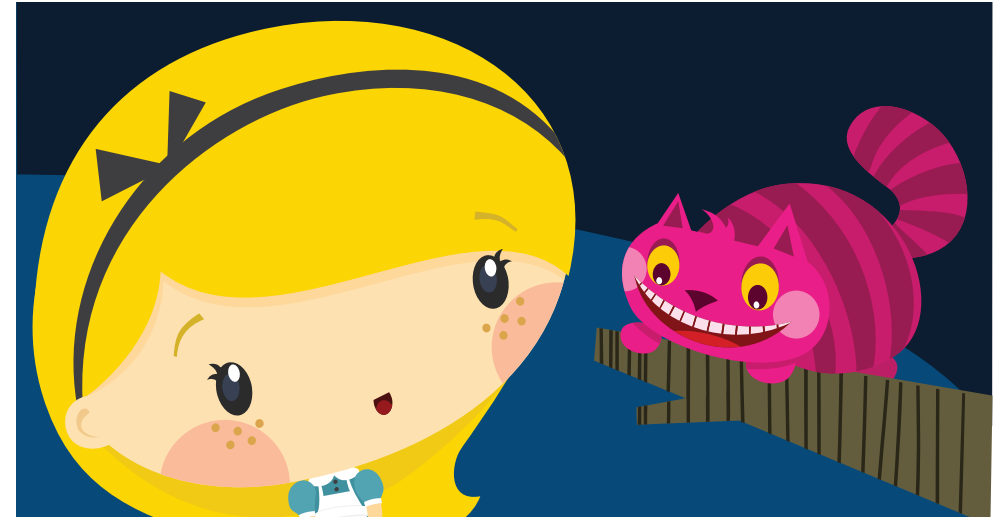
- Describes what success looks like – not in detailed design terms, but the attributes of the end state which will lead to success (e.g. fast, easy to use, innovative, cheap, scalable, profitable, market-leading)
- Is articulate, but not so granular that you get lost in detail
- Is desirable and aspirational, whilst being realistic and achievable
- Is focused and specific, but provides sufficient flexibility to allow you to react to future changes in your environment and give planners and designers sufficient latitude to interpret it and come up with the best answer to deliver it
- Is the scorecard against which you measure how successful your change has been once you're done

## I want one, how do I get it?

Articulating the vision is central to defining and implementing change. We'd hope that by now, if you have a change agenda, you see why you need a vision. So how do you go about producing a vision? Time to turn our attention to coping with ambiguity, because when you start out developing your vision, the page is blank and that can be very unsettling.

Here are some techniques we have seen that work very well:

- In setting out your vision, make sure you occupy the space where you want to get to, not where you are today. Remember a vision is aspirational, so being anchored in your current situation will hamper your ability to produce it
- Keep it high-level, this is not the design phase of change delivery
- Try to examine what success looks like on as many dimensions as you can (e.g. product, service, customer, cost, function, features, people, culture, geography, location, technology) and in as concrete a way as possible – this will help you to be more articulate about what you mean by success
- Don't do it all yourself. Getting a cross-functional team together will help you. They will inject valuable insights and share the problem. Your team members will become advocates for the change and support you and your people on the journey
- If you can't see the end from where you are, set out some steps which will get you more data and a better understanding than you currently have. If you can't jump the pond in a single bound, lay down some stepping stones – one at a time
- Allow the vision to evolve over time. Using devices like versioning (V0.1...1.0) will help people understand how good your thinking is and how far it has progressed. Expect to go back to it over time to check it remains valid as you learn more and your context changes



- If you don't have all the facts and data, make explicit assumptions and know the process by which you will replace these assumptions later
- Consider having the development of the vision facilitated. It's often easier to have someone who is not implicated in the change – and thereby largely unaffected by the personal impacts – help you through the process

## The role of the leader

Setting out the vision is the role of the leader. Here is some advice if you are in that position:

- Be uncompromising about needing to develop a vision
- Don't panic! You will almost certainly not know it all when you start, but by appreciating and accepting that, you will feel less unsettled
- Pick your team. Choose people who can embrace the uncertainty and are capable and adventurous enough to develop the required thinking. These may not necessarily, or exclusively, be people drawn from your 'top team' but may include specific subject matter experts

- Create a sense of urgency. People often want more data before making decisions, so get enough to make a conviction call and move on – the design phase will validate your judgements later
- Whilst forcing the pace, nonetheless invest enough time in the process as it often takes time to walk around the problem
- Fill the vacuum before others do. While you and your team need time to develop the vision, the speculation, fear and uncertainty of others can be damaging. Don't feel the need to communicate the vision before you are ready, but do be prepared to fill the communication void in the meantime. Tell people what you are doing and when they can expect to hear from you next
- Be supportive of those who don't have the answers, whilst being insistent that the answers need to come, even if they have to evolve over time
- At the outset, be tolerant of imprecision and a difficulty to be articulate
- Emphasise that the vision is directional, not precise
- Hold your nerve, expect uncertainty and resistance, but be tenacious about completing this process

## Key messages

At CMP we are very strong advocates of laying out the journey before setting off. In our experience, time and effort spent doing this upfront are repaid many times over later on. Our key messages on this topic are:

- Establishing a clear vision is critical for successful change delivery
- A vision is a set of statements of what success looks like, not a detailed plan for how to get there
- A vision is directional, not precise, and it may evolve over time
- Prepare yourself and your team to cope with significant ambiguity

- Be prepared not to know all the answers and be tolerant when that happens
- Recognise that setting the vision is a leadership role and will require a sense of urgency and momentum to get it done effectively
- Time spent setting out the vision pays off handsomely – insist on getting it done well before you set out to deliver it

If you are interested in any of the issues raised in this article and want to discuss them further please contact [john@the-cmp.co.uk](mailto:john@the-cmp.co.uk)

In the next article we will examine creating the case and the momentum for change – and the role of change leadership in delivering it.

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### About the Authors

John Hennessey and Marie Lou Griffin are the founding partners of The Change Management Partnership (CMP), a change management consultancy whose focus is making change happen in a business context.

John has fifteen years of change experience and before setting up CMP was the Head of Change for a FTSE 100 global Financial Services company.

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