The Vision: overused, often misunderstood and with numerous flavours; in reality a vision is simply a clear picture of the future of your business. There is no doubt that every business needs a vision: if you don't know where you are going, any route will do. The problem isn't that businesses lack vision; even if not articulated most business owners would have an ideal picture of their future. The problem is that most visions are never implemented because there is a widespread lack of know-how to turn vision into reality. Like most things in life that consist of five per cent idea and 95 per cent implementation, left simply as blue-sky thinking, an unfulfilled vision is no better than mere delusion.

Creating the vision is easy

I like the way Jim Collins and Jerry Porras in their book, Built to Last explain a vision. The authors selected the paradoxical phrase 'envisioned future' to encompass their definition. They suggest that on the one hand a vision conveys a sense of concreteness—something vivid and real; you can see it, touch it, and feel it. Yet on the other hand, it portrays a time yet unrealised—a dream, a hope, an aspiration. In other words, your vision is the image you have for your business at some point in the future. All you have to do now is make it happen.

So this is how it normally goes: you have a day of coaching and you are all revved up from your 'blue-sky' session. Everyone leaves feeling highly motivated and will undoubtedly go to sleep dreaming of the golden future their newly developed vision will deliver. Everyone enjoys these touchy-feely sessions where teams can bond behind a common purpose but just a few days back in the usual routine, reality kicks back in. Without the means to convert the vision into reality, the vision very often gets left in the too hard to-do pile.

A vision without action is just fantasy

The only real way for your vision to become reality is to go through a structured process, which maps out the journey and offers tangible milestones that must be reached if the vision is to become a reality.

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be achieved in order to succeed. The name given to this process is business planning. From this document everything else sprouts: the budget, the necessary resources (human or otherwise), the sales target, the marketing plan, the training needs, and specific objectives for members of the team. It doesn’t sound as much fun as the ‘blue-sky’ motivational team day, but generating a business plan is the only means by which you can bring your vision to life.

The likelihood is that your current momentum will not allow you to turn your vision into a reality unless specific plans and actions are taken. Even if your recent results have been impressive, this does not guarantee your future will be. No business is immune to changing market conditions which are often driven by external factors outside our control like customers, competitors, government, and the economy; these and other influences will create an uncertain future and most likely drive the need for change.

Bridging the gap
Having established a true position of where you are today, we must look at tomorrow. What will it take to realise your vision? Is your goal to exit the business in five years? Is it to double in size, or to make an acquisition? Or maybe your business is in trouble and you want to turn it around and take it to the next level? The key is to build a model at the macro level, which will tell you what must happen to make the dream come true. You need to be honest in the process. The model will tell you how realistic your achievement is. For example, if the only way to achieve your dream is to triple the size of your business every year for the next five years, you might want to rethink your vision.

Once you have ascertained that your vision is achievable the question is, will your current momentum over future years deliver it or will there be a gap? The business planning process enables you to assess the gap and to find strategies for closing it. The plan will break down the overall journey into deliverable milestones and will not only identify where the business must be in any given month and year ahead, but translate the key drivers that will underpin success. Your plan has mapped out what has to take place in each of the crucial areas of your business and the exact deliverables team members must achieve – so congruence of business and people objectives is realised.

Managing performance
The essential bit is to keep the performance of the business on track through regular review of the numbers and lots of other key metrics. Through the production and analysis of monthly management accounts you can track real performance against targeted performance and find out where corrective action must be taken. The performance management system will include the performance of our people. Regular reviews to identify the things that have been done well and those that require improvement, along with the associated training and development, ensure everyone in the business aims for the same target.

A business plan is the only means of translating what is essentially pie in the sky into the kind of business you dreamed of owning. By breaking things down into detailed bite-size chunks in this way, and ensuring you stay on track month by month, we have in effect created the blueprint for translating the vision into a reality. The only way to create your future is to plan it.

About the author

Andy McDougall has over 25 years experience of business planning and brings techniques and expertise from a wide range of commercial and competitive business sectors. He delivers business planning services, email info@spoton-businessplanning.co.uk or call 07710 582559.