

## INVEST IN DIALOGUE, RELATIONSHIP, SHARED AMBITION & OWNERSHIP : TIME WELL SPENT

If you want professionals in an organization to be able to work autonomously, take initiative and decide how they contribute to that organization, then of course you need something that binds all those autonomous efforts together. In the classical model, that would be the job description, the individual objectives, flowcharts, the tasks of the manager and all kinds of control mechanisms such as evaluation interviews, bonuses, etc. ... that encourage people act coherently.

But if that no longer works and you have to make the transition from stability to dynamic instability (Snippe, 2014, p. 139), then there must be something else that defines the organization, indicating that people within an organization are doing this together, that it's worth to contribute to 'the club', wanting to make it successful and feel personal satisfaction when it happens.

And I would like to name that "something" as a "shared purpose" or "shared ambition", a good collective idea that drives the group of travelers during the 'trek', the organization. What are we doing, and why, what impact do we want to bring about and why do we put our soul into it? Why are we members of this club, and what do we want and expect from each other? This shared ambition creates an 'ethic of contribution' the idea that you are there to make that 'trek' happen, to support each other in the difficult moments (for example when it rains inside the tent or your fellow traveler has blisters).

You could say: yes, but companies do that anyway. Every company has a vision, a mission statement and values that are part of the internal communication strategy and management training.

Indeed, at first glance they look the same, and yet they are very different, in several ways:

- 1. THEIR ORIGIN.** A shared ambition stems from a dialogical process with and between all stakeholders. It is not negotiated between 'parties', but it is a creative search for where we can put our efforts together. A 'company vision' usually originates from the management committee, and mainly translates the 'vision' of 1 stakeholder group (owners/investors) that negotiates with other stakeholder groups (labor unions) to 'sell' certain objectives often in exchange for something else, such as new employment or salary increase.

The vision thus becomes a transactional process rather than a breeding ground for collective initiative. At best, this results in a compromise between interest groups, but not a shared ambition.

There is often also very little transparency about how that vision came about? What analysis of the business context was made, what alternatives were part of the scenario planning and why were these choices made? Vision is often the result of power relations in the management committee, but whether that is also the best direction for the organization?

The vision is sold through communication, training, etc. Ideally, everything is well explained, but it remains a story of a few, communicated to the many who then are supposed to embrace and implement it. That does not lead to ownership, at best to enthusiastic followership.

When facilitating management workshops, I often heard employees and managers who 'cerebrally' knew the vision, interpret it very differently, call it woolly, invented by a 'gang' from another planet and most importantly object the choices made based on their professional judgement. That will not have triggered their creativity and ethic of contribution.

If a "shared ambition" is developed from an organizational dialogue with all stakeholders, it should not be sold, explained or trained to help people understand what it means for them and their team. The dialogic process in and off itself is the learning process.

- 2. THE WORDING IS DIFFERENT.** To look at the wording, we use the distinction that (Snippe, 2014) makes between static and dynamic function definitions. Vision and mission statements are usually formulated as static function definitions, indicating 'who or what they are as an organization' or 'what products or services they produce' and possibly add an 'ambition' (the largest, the best, etc ... ). Alternatively, and a generative image is an example of that, you can also create a dynamic function definition. Then you focus on the 'impact' you want to have, the effect your activities need to have on your customers, society or possibly other stakeholders. The example of sustainable development as a generative image is an example of such a dynamic function definition because it points to the 'desired effect' outside the organization.

It is dynamic, because it doesn't say how to do it, thus leaving a lot of room for professionals to fill it in with their own professional imagination and decide to act. It allows also for all stakeholders to adhere to the same 'flag', because all stakeholders are impacted and can contribute to 'sustainable development' (in different ways). It creates enthusiasm for all and leaves a lot of room for all kinds of apparently independent, autonomous initiatives, in which many people can do their thing but still contribute to sustainable development.

The pitfall here could of course be that you make it so vague and empty that it has no meaning anymore, totally void from passion and ambition. Starbucks' 'To inspire and nurture the human spirit', and Microsoft with 'help people around the world to realize their full potential' are two examples of 'vague and woolly'.

This also shows that it is not only about wording, there must also be a substantive drive behind it that comes from the stakeholders. Otherwise it becomes wallpaper and its sole function might be hanging on the company restaurant wall.

The fact that employees and managers are actively engaged in the dialogue leading to a dynamic function definition, and the fact that it creates a lot of space for them to fill it in with their own actions, also results in employees and managers being able to turn challenges into opportunities.

(Snippe, 2014, p. 67) illustrates this nicely. EMI, a successful record label, defined itself as an organization that sold vinyl records. When the CD appeared on the market in the early eighties, the entire organization resisted, because the CD was the enemy of the vinyl record and would destroy their business. They spent a lot of energy fighting off the CD and defending the vinyl record (which was a struggle lost in advance) and they could conceptually not buy in to the idea 'CD'.

EMI lost its battle and went down in favor of the CD, which, by the way, suffered the same fate a few decades later in competition with MP3 and Spotify. Suppose EMI's function definition had been dynamic and something like: 'we are here to make people enjoy very nice music'. Then there would have been much more room for acceptance of the CD, which would then not be seen as an enemy but as a new, additional means to realize the ambition of the organization (making people listen to beautiful music).

This is of course not only about wordsmithing. Such a function definition has a lot of influence on the organization structure and a lot of functions, roles, individual objectives, etc ... will reinforce the idea that it is about 'producing vinyl records'. For example, you may not have a department that develops other music carriers, or a research department that looks at what is needed for people to really enjoy music, and there will probably be KPI's linked to the record sales (and nothing else). And then it is easy to see the 'CD' as a threat for my role in the organization and for my bonus. To find out if a 'joint ambition' or a 'function definition' is more than a nice slogan, you must be able to recognize it in the architecture (structure, processes, roles, jobs, etc...) of the organization.

- 3. THEIR PURPOSE.** Vision and mission statements are (maybe even unconsciously) primarily intended to keep initiatives in check (constraining), to ensure that nothing happens in the organization that is not focused on that vision (and therefore in the example of EMI, everything must be about vinyl records). It triggers convergent thinking.

A generative image (or a dynamic function definition) has precisely the opposite intent. A generative image, on the contrary, stimulates divergent thinking and encourages people to fill in the 'image' from many different perspectives.

The goal of a vision and mission statement is very often also efficiency and performance but ignores the development paradigm. Learning is not seen as part of the sustainable performance of the organization but as a means to a goal (eg: selling records). So, if you consider 'selling records' as your DNA, why would you encourage people to learn all kinds of things that have (at first glance) very little bearing on 'selling records'.

A generative image has also the explicit intention to establish solidarity between the partners in the dialogue, and that is why the process (how we arrive at such a shared ambition) becomes much more important, where in classical vision thinking the content is more important. Classical vision and mission statements (translated into individual objectives) often incite to internal competition instead of solidarity and ethic of contribution.

- 4. SHAPE OTHER STAKEHOLDER RELATIONS.** A vision or mission is usually a management statement based on the interests of the shareholders. Such a vision strengthens their influence and supremacy over other stakeholders (especially employees). It frames the game as 'competition and discourages other stakeholders participate in the strategic process.

A generative image to the opposite, bridges the different stakeholder interests and brings people together in a dialogue, so they are invited as partners and co-creators. Let's go back to 'sustainable development' as a generative image: it allows all stakeholders to take initiatives, everyone wants to make their own existence 'sustainable' in the future and it only becomes

sustainable if it doesn't 'crush' others ... Green boys and entrepreneurs, for example, can see themselves as 'allies' rather than adversaries when they look through the glasses of sustainable development.

To simplify it grossly: if the green boys win, they will lose their work and they are thrown in poverty, but if the capitalists win, they will choke on the CO2 emissions they produce. But if we collaborate, don't look at it as a 'box match', then we might be able to create a sustainable future where we all prosper.

5. **THEIR EVOLUTION.** Visions die (and organizations often collapse with them) if the business context changes rapidly and dramatically. Because visions have indoctrinated collective thinking in the organization, the organization cannot make the change. Theoretically you can of course develop a different vision, but in a rapidly changing business context you will always be too late.

A generative image puts the ability for change in the heart of the organization as complex system. What you do is constantly changing, because the situation changes, but your reason of being is there for the long term. A vision or mission statement can be 'wrong' because it is based on a sort of 'prediction' of how the business context will change. A generative image cannot be wrong, because it doesn't try to predict how the situation will change. It only implies that it will inevitably change.

The generative image creates the space for all stakeholder to get involved, to do what they think contributes best and to change what they do if they reckon they can improve their contribution. What we will do in 2040 to contribute to sustainable development will look very different from what we do today, but still we are working on sustainable development.

There is a fundamentally different paradigm behind 'shared ambition' and generative images on the one hand and corporate vision and mission on the other. Visions and missions (as artifacts of the mechanical organization) start from the idea that there is such a thing as 'the right choice', the truth, and that the impact of your actions and strategic choices is predictable. In other words, they are in the right-hand side of the cynefin model (see above). While the idea of generative images is based on the assumption that there is no such thing 'the right choice' and, above all, that the impact of what you do is unpredictable and will change when external circumstances are changing. So it implies a lot of space for experimentation and probing, and new courses of action if we still want to contribute to sustainability, when circumstances change. These assumptions are illustrated in the left-hand side of the cynefin model.

Snippe, R., (2014). *Doorbreek uw Bedrijfscultuur. Hoe managers organisatieontwikkeling tegenhouden.* Den Haag: Academic Service.