The Work of Vision

How to shape the world ahead

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Sample

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Vision

What will it be like when we get there?

Long-term perspectives help people understand why disruptive change is needed— what's in it for them and what we get in the end. Compelling stories about the future help leaders communicate why disruptive change is needed— what's in it for others, what we, as an organization, gain in the end.

This section is about evoking ideas about the future in the present day. And to do that for the purpose of engaging people in your work. Creating visions of the better futures you want can be a leverage point for changing society. Sociologist Ruth Levitas describes this type of future thinking as "disrupting the taken-for-granted nature of the present." By offering new stories about what the future may contain, you invite people to see the present and the future differently. And Futurist Ruud van der Helm identifies that the power of visions is that they "create a tension between now, and what could be. To show why change is needed." By describing the details of a better future, you can help people see that our present state is not good enough. This, to me, is the magic. It's the mechanism of visions— to show people why the present state isn't good enough to motivate them to work toward something new.

Large and small visions

Visions of the future help motivate people to get more involved and aligned toward change. And these visions can be big or small.

Examples of big endeavors could include:
- Shift Massachusetts away from reliance on fossil fuels.
- Transform our campus into a space of radical belonging.
- Shift U.S. healthcare away from profit-driven policies.

These are ideas that require big transformations. Many stakeholders. Lots of change. Decades of committed action. They reflect the bold missions of advocates.

However, you can create visions for much smaller endeavors, too. When I'm coaching leaders and they say, "I want to improve the way my team runs brainstorms," I ask, "What would good look like?"

Taking the time to get precise about a good outcome is a form of visioning. It's the practice of forming a specific picture of what success looks like and using that to strategize and share with others. You can envision when you want to throw a really good party or need to have a difficult conversation.

Examples of smaller visions that begin by asking, "What would good look like?":
- Brainstorm in a way that involves every voice.
- Have an off-site where people feel relaxed enough to open up and share.
- Find a job where I feel valued and heard.

Visioning =
Imagine what success looks like
and communicate it to others.

Workspace: Explore your purpose

Small areas for change

What are some smaller things you are concerned with and want to see improve?

Big areas for change

What are some larger things you are concerned with and want to see improve?

Activity 1.
Imagining radical success

Instructions

Something that none of us reflect on enough is, what happens if it all succeeds? There is joy in "imagining winning," as the Center for Artistic Activism describes it. It is rebellious and radical to imagine that our work for change really will succeed.

This is a moment to put aside all the challenges and barriers and think beyond the next five years to however long it will take for change to happen. However long that will take, whether you are around to see it or not, it is wise to imagine the outcome you are aiming for and how good it will feel when it happens.

So, thinking about a specific mission that drives you, spend 30 minutes or 3 hours in this beautiful space to imagine what will be true and possible when your work is ridiculously successful?

> "Struggle is par for the course. But unless we have the space to imagine and a vision of what it means to fully realize our humanity, all the protests and demonstrations in the world won't bring about our liberation."
>
> Robin D G Kelley
> Freedom Dreams: the Black radical imagination

Workspace: Imagine Success

What happens when your work toward change is ridiculously successful?
What does the world look and feel like?

Activity 2.
Opposite Day

Instructions

A starting point for imagining an ideal future is to state all of the problems with today. And then turn them into opposite, optimistic stories of a better future.

This activity draws on our strengths to identify problems in the present. Which is sometimes much more straightforward than imagining hopeful futures. First, you'll write down a list of the worst problems in your area of concern today.

- College is too expensive, so only the wealthiest are sure they can afford it.
- No one feels any agency over corruption in the government.

Then, you take each statement and write what the opposite would be. And you begin to describe your radically hopeful future,

- College is… free.
- College is affordable to anyone who wants to go.

This way, you start to craft the statements that envision your better world. It's not easy; you still have details to figure out as you do this, but it's a great starting point.

For the government corruption example, it might become:

- Everyone feels the agency to root out corruption in the government
- Every resident knows what to do if they suspect corruption, and they are able to stop it.

That's a great starting point for a North Star vision, right?

Workspace: Opposite Day

Worst of today

Name what frustrates/saddens/enrages/stops you today.

In a better future...

Translate each frustration into a positive statement where, in your better future, the opposite will be true.