

The Vision as a Fundamental Wave within the Enterprise

Hans: From the very beginning of our joint management of the company, my cousin and I embraced one particular guiding principle: "The size of our enterprise should not exceed the scope of our hearts." We have always fared well with this maxim. I do not believe that a company's meaning that has been determined by the management alone can flow through all the various levels to the customer without being diluted along the way. The longer the path, the less remains by the time it reaches the end.

Martina: In that case, it seems justified for managers of large corporations to simply give in and say, "I don't know my numerous employees any more than I know my customers. What use is all this fuss about a meaning if it cannot even be relayed properly?"

Hans: There are no limits to the way a meaning can be relayed. Limits only exist if the essence of the meaning does not contain a great enough force of attraction, and if the notion governing the growth of the company is limited to multiplying external structures that are controlled by centrally instigated regulations. Here, stronger motivation and increased "conductivity" within the corporate structure are required to prevent the entrepreneurial impulses from getting bogged down in the various spheres. However, this cannot be achieved by means of regulations.

Martina: How then can we increase this "conductivity"?

Hans: By means of a vision borne by all the employees.

At the beginning of the 1980s, I felt for the first time the need to draw up a corporate mission statement, so I sat down with our advertising consultant to draft something suitable. In order to elaborate my personal attitude toward the company, we created a nice little chart with a picture of a conductor swinging his baton. The conductor was supposed to be imparting the mission statement. This statement included four attributes we decided should characterize our company: professional competence, helpfulness, vitality, and a close affinity to music. In addition, there were four performance criteria against which to measure ourselves: product range, professional competence, service, and competitive prices. In terms of our corporate policy, we at least declared our intention to act in the service of the public, both by making music available in its many forms and by renouncing excessive growth. We intended that the enterprise should continue to develop within the framework of its social and economic environment, in a healthy and harmonious fashion.

A few years later, I decided to adapt this mission statement in line with changes that had occurred within the company. Our new advertising agency recommended the communication consultant Edmond Tondeur as an experienced adviser. I asked him to draft a new version of our mission statement and told him what I thought it should include. To my surprise, he turned down this assignment, declaring that a corporate mission statement could only be conceived collectively, in collaboration with our employees. However, he agreed to assist us in our endeavor in whatever way he could. Thus, in October 1988, we drove with twenty departmental heads to the Rigi mountain in central Switzerland, where we spent three days working on our new mission statement. Several more such sessions followed and subsequently, regardless of where they were actually held, went down in the company's history as the Rigi sessions.

To kick off our first mission statement session, I used a text from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Wisdom of the Sands* that expressed my feelings exactly: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

Not used to first feeling my way toward a specific goal and then imbuing it with spirit before implementing it, I nonetheless felt the truthfulness of Saint-Exupéry's words—and was disappointed that they failed to trigger any response from the group. My notion of euphoric employees working at a euphoric firm also suffered a severe blow on the very first day: the entire team used this opportunity to give free rein to all their discontent relating to the company. I was like a cat on hot bricks, anxious to immediately provide each critic with an appro-

appropriate answer. However, Tondeur, my adviser, held me back. “Just listen to what they have to say,” he told me. “It’s important that they get all of this out of their system. Besides, you don’t have to have an answer for everything.” Yet that is exactly what I did want, as I was eager to emerge from the work session as a ruler of minds. I must admit that I needed several more such sessions before I was capable of working together with my colleagues and before I understood that the freedom to express anger and criticism is indispensable if we are to make room for something new. Later, I wrote in a personal addendum to the session: “We draw on the things we like to do best because they give us pleasure, on limitations because they make us creative, and on our deepest yearnings because they lead us to the source of our very being.”

However, everyday life at the company soon revealed that it was not so easy to deal with limitations as I had predicted in my notes at the time. All the same, our first jointly drafted mission statement contained fourteen statements concerning the internal dialogue as regards our customers, our employees, and the sustained existence of the company. We agreed that our mission statement should be neither a set of rules of conduct nor a list of strategic goals. Nor should it be an imposing self-portrait that did not do justice to our everyday business life. We wanted a mission statement to which we as individuals could align ourselves within the enterprise and toward which we could gear our actions. It should be a mirror of our strengths and weaknesses, a basis for a self-confident manner of working, and a basis for the development of mutual trust in our relationships. We regarded the implementation of these things as a process. The departmental heads kept notes of their experiences and shared them at regular intervals. Thus we were able to clearly identify the difficulties that arose in practice.

Time and time again, I felt that the criticism expressed by our employees hindered me. Whenever there was talk of too much pressure to perform, of too much hierarchy, of too little leeway to act independently, or—in connection with the not-particularly-attractive salaries paid to the sales staff—of a lack of job satisfaction, this aroused in me a mixture of opposition, despondency, and the urge to take flight. Such criticism, however, was simply an integral part of the constantly growing exchange within the company. And as we set about implementing the mission statement, my willingness to change also grew. I learned in a particularly striking way just how productive it ultimately is to take employees’ reservations seriously. Only by addressing these reservations was I

able to discern whether they contained any fundamental messages that necessitated a change in direction or whether they stemmed from a fear of change.

Fear is nothing more than blocked creative energy. It begins to flow again as soon as it is met with acceptance instead of impatience and actionism. Thus I gradually learned how much creative potential lies in circumstances that are ostensibly experienced as restrictions and is set free as soon as we address these circumstances. Numerous Rigi sessions were devoted to staff development to enable us to achieve our creative potential together. The issues that these sessions brought to light provided us with material for a process lasting several years, during which we discovered how to create conditions that enhanced the employees' enjoyment of and satisfaction in their work, rather than stifling their valuable motivational energy. Instead of dwelling on shortcomings as before, I learned to identify and focus on the potential of the individual employees, as well as on the potential of the teams. Moreover, this shift of attention from supposed deficiencies to the positive qualities of those around me also had an effect on myself; it encouraged me to practice accepting my own shortcomings in the same way. In my notes of the time I wrote, "If everyone occupies a position offering challenges that fill him with joy, his energy can flow freely to where it is needed."

A series of seminars with the title of "Joy in Serving" that were organized along these lines initially met with opposition, as the concept of serving is usually associated with a difference in status between the person serving and the person being served. This misunderstanding sparked many productive discussions. For example, when asked by the course leader what gave him the greatest satisfaction when dealing with customers, one employee replied, "Whenever I can prove to the customer that he is wrong." Evidently, as a provider of services, this employee did not feel himself to be on equal terms with the customer. His statement confirmed the need for our seminar, as its objective was to strengthen the self-confidence of the participants and promote an understanding of a concept of serving that aimed to enable employees to experience themselves on equal terms with the customers. On this basis, they were able to reappraise their own qualities, such as professional competence, patience, and an ability to communicate, which in turn gave rise to increased satisfaction both with themselves as human beings and with their work.

Of course, this process did not always run smoothly. For example, we had agreed that every week each sales assistant at our CD stores should give away a

free CD to a customer they felt would particularly appreciate it. Many of the employees had inhibitions about doing this, as they were afraid that the customer might view this gesture as an attempt to curry favor. Once, when I met Claus-Helmuth Drese, the former director of the Zurich Opera House, he said to me, “It’s amazing at your stores. Whenever I step through the door, I’m presented with a CD as a gift.” Our sales staff tended to assume that a prominent patron would not misunderstand their gesture. Furthermore, it appeared that they repeatedly made gifts to customers with whom the ice had already been broken, which was obviously not the original intention of the exercise.

The self-confidence of the individual repeatedly proved to be the be-all and end-all within the work processes and, as an entrepreneur, I sought all kinds of ways to boost our employees’ self-confidence. On one occasion, quite by accident, I came across an American course program called “Color Me Beautiful.” It is based on the knowledge that the skin reflects colors in ways that either enhance or diminish our charisma. Based on Goethe’s theory of colors, each tone has four characteristic shades that radiate various degrees of warmth or coolness and can be associated with the seasons of the year—spring, summer, autumn, or winter. The aim is to help people find the family of shades that enhances their own particular skin type. I participated in such a workshop together with one of our female store managers. I can still picture her shining eyes as she stood in front of the mirror and discovered how much prettier the appropriate shade made her. I wanted to offer our staff this small pleasure and witness the change it brought about inside them. From apprentice to manager, it had the same beneficial effect. And I discovered how important the staff’s self-esteem is to the successful development of a company.

Another initiative within our mission statement process was our cultural program. The employees were motivated to attend cultural events of their choice by being able to receive from the company a contribution toward costs. While there was no ceiling on the number of events, the offer was only valid if at least three events were attended per quarter. This program proved to be an ongoing success. Our employees attended concerts, theater productions, and opera performances that were of particular interest to them, and they shared their experiences with each other, as well as with the customers. Furthermore, their presence at the events generated a positive response among musicians and regular customers, and furthered our endeavors to network with the local music scene as stipulated in our mission statement.

One outcome of these changes was that at the beginning of the 1990s my cousin and I decided to restructure the company. It was our intention to withdraw from operative management, and as our children were not interested in taking over from us, we developed a ten-year plan to make the company less dependent on us. We realigned the former owner-oriented, hierarchical organization to create a corporate structure that resembled an arrangement of intersecting circles. During these changes, we also introduced our—as it later transpired, temporary—successor to his various duties. This step entailed a great deal of responsibility on our part, and I was far from certain about the future of the company. When, in the course of these developments, I read Matthias zur Bonsen's book *Führen mit Visionen* (Leading through Visions), I immediately knew that his approach would bring us considerably further.

*A vision is not made. It is already there,
just waiting to be discovered.*

In view of our plans to restructure the company, I quickly succeeded in persuading both the management and the board of directors to attend a workshop with the author of the book. During our work with him, we realized that a vision is not made, but rather discovered, because it is already present in the collective consciousness of all the members of the company. This insight took us straight to the next step. Until then, this topic had only been discussed among a relatively small group of management staff, so we now decided to repeat the workshop with all 150 employees participating. Despite the uncertainty as to whether my and my cousin's ideas—which were easy to present to a small team—might go under in a large group, curiosity compelled us to give it a try. We both agreed on one thing: the company should be guided into the future by a vision that would be discovered by us all.

As we could not simply close our stores for several days in a row, we worked for two days with half of the staff, followed by another two days with the other half. In both small groups and plenary sessions, we pinpointed and discussed the values that had been drawn up and were to be developed by the company to the benefit of society and our customers, employees, suppliers, and investors. We learned to perceive and express our inner visions. When the entire staff met on the following Sunday to compile all these images, we were surprised to discover how much we agreed on in terms of the meaning and the values of the company. This shared meaning is what gives a corporate vision its power, for it is instilled with energy by the entire workforce. Through this

collective process we learned that a vision is not merely a mental construct that is put down on paper, but rather an independent power, a kind of being that wants to be nourished. The more the vision is energized by everyone concerned, the stronger the impact of its pulling force will be, and the more comprehensively it will realize itself.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote: "...teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea." In our particular case, the vision extended beyond the benefits for customers, employees, and entrepreneurs and also addressed the well-being of society. In comparison to our prior mission statement, we were now placing a greater emphasis on the company's service to the community. Our corporate vision was as follows:

- Music moves people and fosters a sense of community.
- Our company acts in the service of music.
- We are open to music of all styles and of all peoples and aim to create for it a bright, warm, and lively atmosphere.
- We enjoy a special bond with everyone for whom music is a profession or calling.
- Thanks to our vitality, innovative spirit, and enthusiasm, we are always at the pulse of what is happening in the world of music and on the music market.
- Our commitment, diligence, product range, and activities correspond to the needs of our customers and give rise to trust and lasting satisfaction.
- Our prices are in accord with the services we offer. They are fair, competitive, and credible.
- We are a workplace where individual talents are allowed to unfold through shared thoughts, feelings, and actions to the benefit of a meaningful whole.
- We are characterized by a positive basic attitude and therefore regard obstacles as opportunities.
- We assume responsibility for ourselves, our work, our company, and our environment.
- We cultivate a mutual "give and take" relationship with our business partners.
- We are an economically flourishing enterprise.
- Everything we do, we do as human beings for other human beings.

In contrast to a mission statement, a vision does not set goals but rather comprises the values and attributes necessary to implement them. We took care not to incorporate comparisons with other companies. The few clauses were intended to express personal accountability and to convey issues that were of importance to us in a clear and comprehensible manner. This meant that the vision could serve as an ever-present orientation aid that was accessible to everyone and that channeled the strengths of the entire workforce toward the common values. Regardless of the particular task within the company, everyone, in every situation, should be able to ask everyone else, "What about our values?" No one should be doing anything within the enterprise that conflicted with his personal convictions. Every staff member had the opportunity to voice his matters of concern for discussion. The corporate values that we had developed together formed a point of reference in this respect, with the result that we were always able to find solutions in accordance with these values.

A corporate structure that is exclusively hierarchical in nature can create neither a vision nor the freedom in which the vision can develop its pulling force. However, if we invoke an image on the horizon that is overflowing with joy, we create a fundamental wave within the enterprise that gives rise to appropriate actions in each individual situation. There is no better prerequisite for enabling employees to act in a personally accountable way than a deeply rooted and widely supported vision. When such a vision exists, the need for rules and regulations diminishes, because individuals find a meaningful purpose in contributing, through their work, toward realizing a model whose impact extends beyond the company itself and ultimately takes on global dimensions. There can be no greater motivational energy than that which arises when the corporate meaning is congruent with the meaning felt by the employee. This energy sustains everyone and guides the enterprise toward natural growth.

In practice, it is vital to continually rediscover what realizing a vision and its values entails. Each member of the company needs the ability and willingness, as well as the self-responsibility and inner freedom, to carefully and subtly integrate the vision into his area of work. A CD sales assistant who holds himself and his work in esteem will treat the customer with genuine friendliness. And as a rule, a customer who is served in such a manner will return. The friendly and competent charisma of a sales assistant has an appeal that is far greater than any artificially engendered advertising measure. Moreover, it is a gift that has an effect beyond the customer and the company. Something as