

Grounded Visioning:

A Quick Way to Create Shared Visions



Build a shared vision in less than a day? It's possible by following these six steps.

By Jay W. Vogt

Every organization enters a phase in which its future appears hazy. The board and staff lose focus about their direction. You know you need to bring people together, but you're not sure how. You want to talk about the future, but you fear that a "blue sky session," where anything goes, may seem wildly impractical to some. Yet you need to inspire folks, and you must find common ground. And you have very little time in which to act, and not much money to invest. What do you do?

As a consultant I'm paid to have answers to such questions, and earlier in my career, I had none I really liked. All the tools in my kit took too long, or cost too much, or somehow missed the mark. So, working with my clients and tapping the best new ideas in the

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field, we invented an answer, which we call "grounded visioning." The process takes about half a day, and though you can easily spend longer, we've gotten great results in as little as two hours. It has worked in groups as small as a management team and as large and diverse as a public forum of 125 stakeholders.

TRY SIX QUICK STEPS

For a vision to have staying power, it must be shared. People support what they help create, so for people to embrace a new vision, they must be involved in its creation.

A vision must be bold enough to inspire, yet practical enough to feel achievable. An inspiring vision of the future that's grounded in what diverse stakeholders believe is possible – that's a "grounded vision."

So how do we do it, and do it fast? We follow six quick steps:

1. Assemble your stakeholders

We start by bringing together everyone with a stake in the organization's future – board members, senior staff, and key supporters. For Beth Ann Gerstein, executive director of the Society of Arts and Crafts, a century-old Boston institution, that meant bringing together the board, key staff, Resource Council, and Advisory Council of craft artists and business people. Many of these people — about 40 in all — had never met before.

2. Ignite your spark

Every visioning process needs a spark that ignites people's passion for what's possible. For our quick spark, we use short interviews. We ask people to find a partner (preferably someone they don't know) and ask them four questions, while recording their answers:

- **Attraction:** What attracted you to this organization and keeps you committed?
- **High points:** Tell a story about a time you felt most connected with, committed to, and proud of this organization.
- **Dreams:** Name three dreams, hopes, and aspirations you have for what this organization can be, do, or become.
- **Optimism:** Name one reason for optimism that these dreams can come true.

These interviews double as ice-breakers, so by the time they're done, everyone's feeling comfortable and connected. The energy in the room is already moving forward.

3. Describe best practices

We ask people to call out what attracted them to this organization and what keeps them involved. Replies at the Society of Arts and Crafts included:

- Being part of a historical movement – the oldest arts and crafts organization
- Having a positive impact on the craft community
- Unique opportunity to be involved with a diverse mix of people and artists
- Positive attitude of the people involved.

This exercise, though short, reawakens everyone's commitment to the organization. It helps make our connection personal. It maps the "DNA" of what produces inspired volunteers and staff.

We ask people to share a few stories about times they felt most committed to the organization. One participant recalled creating a craft guide, and how the experience transformed her, was useful

to the craft community, and pulled her into the organization as a volunteer for good. Another recalled working on the Marketing Committee and described how she and the group's other members realized they could be anything they wanted to be, and so began to really dream.

After several such stories, themes naturally emerge. These themes map the organization at its very best. The Society of Arts and Crafts, for example, came up with the following endings to the sentence, "When we're at our best, we. . ."

- Roll up our sleeves on behalf of the organization in a satisfying, fulfilling way.

A grounded vision can be created by groups as large as 125 – in half a day or less.

- Spark group action that leads to significant accomplishment.
- Create sharing between patrons, artists, and the public.
- Lead and serve as pioneers in creativity, art, and craft.
- Enjoy endless opportunities to learn something new.

4. Share your dreams

By this point, the energy in the room has shifted dramatically. People are engaged, proud, and relaxed. Now we're ready to share our dreams with each other.

We ask each individual to write three dreams for the organization's future on three adhesive notes, come to the front of the room, and read them aloud. By this simple action, everyone takes responsibility for contributing their deepest hopes.

Before they sit down, they post their notes on large sheets of butcher paper. The first few people have the easiest job, since they can post theirs anywhere. Everyone after them has to decide whether their idea echoes an existing one; if so, they place it nearby. And so,

step by step, with little or no consultant intervention, a shared vision, created by physical clusters of like ideas, begins to appear.

Watching from the audience is like seeing a photograph emerge from its chemical bath. Fuzzy at first, it becomes clearer and clearer with time. It's exciting to watch.

After all the dreams are posted, we review them briefly and make sure they're all in the right place. For every cluster, we ask the group for a name that summarizes the shared idea and add it as a header. After sorting like this with the Society of Arts and Crafts, 17 themes emerged. Among them:

- Secure an appropriate facility.
- Network more with other crafts organizations.
- Build the brand.
- Support emerging artists.
- Educate the public.

5. Select the best

It's hard to get large, diverse groups to reach consensus quickly, but to get results fast, we must. So we take a shortcut called "multi-voting." Every participant gets a supply of adhesive dots, roughly equal in number to one third of their options. So the Society of Arts and Crafts folks, in choosing among 17 options, got six dots, or votes.

We ask everyone, while still in their seats, to choose which themes in the emerging shared vision seem most compelling and promising. Then we have everyone come up and vote by placing their dots, all at once so as not to influence each other. In just a few short minutes, it's done.

The Society of Arts and Crafts' voting revealed a top tier envisioning:

- Secure an appropriate facility.
- Achieve financial security.

The votes also pinpointed these second tier visions:

- Educate the public.
- Support emerging artists.
- Support artists.
- Host craft show.
- Build brand.

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These results give you a straw poll, not a consensus. But often they're vivid enough to quickly lead to consensus. In the Society of Arts and Crafts' case, two things jumped off the walls. The idea – tossed about for years – that the organization should create a museum was dead – instantly. There were almost no votes for it. And so the organization was able to say “No” to a long considered strategic direction.

At the same time, the votes revealed that many people hoped the organization would one day convene a major crafts fair — to raise money, support artists, and build brand. No one had realized that others shared this vision. Yet when it became apparent that many did, the enthusiasm for it was immediate and palpable.

6. Plan next steps

At this point, if we're out of time, we'll ask for volunteer commitments to explore priority items at a future date, perhaps in teams. Given more time we'll ask interested parties, right then, to form working groups around priority

goals and create action plans on the spot.

For the Society of Arts and Crafts, the idea of hosting a craft fair took off. Less than a year later, the Society premiered CraftBoston, a four-day, juried show of 145 studio artists, which attracted 5,000 visitors and returned a substantial profit. The following year it attracted even more artists and visitors, and it's still going strong. Through a stunning synergy, CraftBoston realized many aspects of the shared vision:

- Build brand by becoming recognized as the leading show and exhibition of fine contemporary craft in New England and one of the top craft shows in the United States.
- Support artists and emerging artists through enhanced opportunities for hundreds of artists to show and sell their work, earning up to \$55,000 per artist per show.
- Achieve greater financial security by contributing 43% of the organization's budget and a six-figure net contribution. In fact, CraftBoston saved the organization during the recent economic downturn.
- Educate the public through lectures and other educational programs.

CraftBoston is a perfect match with the organization's mission and the stakeholders' shared vision. And it emerged in 3½ hours, including dinner and a break.

One last thing. You'll remember we ask four questions in our quick spark interviews. What do we do with the answers to the fourth – the reasons for optimism? As our last activity, with the excitement of big dreams still fresh in the air, we end our meeting by asking folks to call out their reasons for

optimism that their compelling shared vision can actually come to pass. It's a final affirmation that their vision is grounded in reality.

People support what they help create.

OBTAIN RESULTS IN RECORD TIME

A grounded vision is a shared dream of the future that's based in the realities of how the organization is at its very best. Stories about high points in people's experience of the organization take us there, and sharing dreams for the organization leads us forward. A grounded vision can be created by groups as large as 125 – in half a day or less. The process is engaging, intuitive, and fun, and consistently creates results in record time. We've used it successfully dozens of times.

So when you're feeling hazy about your future, don't despair! Just gather the troops, tell some stories, dream together, and create a grounded vision. ■

Resources

Eadie, Doug, “Putting Vision to Powerful Use in Your Organization,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 4.

Jenson, Donna, “Sharing the Vision: Every Leader's Obligation,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 5.

Jones, Richard L. & Douglas C. Eadie, “Fostering Innovation & Growth,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 1.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

Jay W. Vogt founded Peoplesworth (jay@peoplesworth.com, www.peoplesworth.com), a consulting practice, in 1982 to help organizations develop shared leadership, continuous learning, and successful collaboration. He is author of the forthcoming book Recharge Your Team: The Grounded Visioning Approach, to be published by Praeger Press later this year.
