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## Business Direction: Vision

**I**S THERE A SENSE of direction in your business?”

“Are certain basic values commonly held by the people with whom you work?”

“Are they effectively communicated so that there is ‘buy-in’ throughout the organization?”

These probing questions were posed to our senior management team a few years ago as we met with one of our company’s outside board members. As we considered each, we concluded we had a challenge before us. What we had as a written vision was sketchy and cumbersome. He put us to work. We’re grateful now for his prodding, but at the time it was a much larger task than we expected.

We realized through this effort that it is not enough to have vague ideas of direction in the minds of a few key executives. The company’s vision and values need to be thought through, written

out, then brought to life for others in the business. Vision is the focus of this chapter; values, the next.

### **Two Compelling Visions**

Vision is the big picture, describing the destiny of an undertaking. Here are two compelling examples formulated by former heads of state.

In 1960, President John F. Kennedy delivered this memorable challenge: “I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth.”

A computer scientist with the Apollo space program describes the impact this clear, focused and demanding goal had on his colleagues:

I have never seen a group of people work with such absolute focus and fervor as these people, who saw it as their own personal mission to send astronauts to the moon. They worked incredibly long hours, under intense pressure, and they loved it. They had something that added meaning and value to their own lives, and they gave 200 percent to make it come true.  
(Charles Garfield, *Peak Performers*)

President Ronald Reagan was unexcelled in our time in communicating a clearly stated vision. Standing before the long-closed Brandenburg Gate and the Berlin Wall in 1987, he declared: “This wall will fall. Beliefs become reality. You, across Europe, this wall will fall. For it cannot withstand faith; it cannot withstand truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom.”

Never mind that the source of this memorable statement was

graffiti scrawled on the wall itself. President Reagan gave it life for a people yearning for change, regardless of the personal sacrifice required.

Less than two years later the wall came down. Soon after, communism's seventy-year totalitarian legacy ended (Peter Hanaford and Charles D. Hobbs, *Remembering Reagan*).

### **True Direction**

I believe the Bible can help those of us in business to have a clear sense of direction. In fact, one way to look at the Bible is that it is entirely about vision. It is about a holy God defining reality for men and women, calling us out of our circumstances toward his destiny—or, in the words of T. S. Eliot, “the permanent things,” those which are enduring, noble, full of hope.

A proverb says: “Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint [or wander aimlessly].” Does this not vividly describe the problem so many individuals and organizations—even nations—face today? It is the picture to me of a ship whose rudder is broken—adrift without a compass, caught in a pea-soup fog! But make the rudder sure, install the compass, and we find the answer to Winston Churchill's probing question: “Why is it the ship beats the waves when the waves are so many and the ship is one?” asked Churchill. “The reason is that the ship has a purpose.”

### **Biblical Vision: A Sense of Purpose**

The Bible describes many people who were impacted by God-given vision and a sense of purpose, or who suffered greatly by

its lack. Our own vision can be enlarged as we glimpse at a few examples:

□ Abraham was called and guided by God out of a prosperous city to a promised but desolate land where he would become the father of a new nation with descendants “as populous as the stars in the heavens.”

□ Nehemiah, while exiled in Persia where he was in service to the Persian king, was told that his beloved Jerusalem was lying in ruins, prompting a bold vision for the city to be rebuilt and restored. Then he became involved in implementing the vision. “Send me,” he requested of the king, “that I may rebuild it.”

□ The prophet Habakkuk was given a magnificent vision that the earth would one day be filled with the glory of the Lord. In order that the vision not be lost, God emphatically impressed him to “write the vision, and make it plain . . . that he may run who reads it.”

□ And consider Jesus. While a watching world saw ultimate defeat in the shame of the cross, Jesus saw a towering victory over Satan—and beyond the cross, life in God’s eternal kingdom for all who would follow him. The book of Hebrews tells us that he endured the cross “for the joy set before him”—the vision of the victory that his suffering would accomplish.

□ At the end of this present age, the Scriptures indicate, most people will see only disjointed and random events about them. But the apostle Paul encourages us that God will be very active in a systematic summing-up process, “gathering together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him.”

These few examples should remind us of the importance of vision and encourage us that the same God who has imparted vision throughout recorded history can direct us as well.

**Without a Vision . . .**

But sadly, there are many accounts in the Scriptures of those who were unable to lay hold of the vision given them. Three examples make the point:

- Esau put his appetite ahead of destiny and sold his birthright to Jacob, his younger brother, for a mere bowl of stew. Though he pleaded to have his inheritance restored, his self-serving impulsiveness brought an irreversible result. (It is essential that our success in business never be at the expense of our soul.)
- King Saul, Israel's first king, quickly lost vision for the nation he was leading. Driven by fear and confusion, he instead became obsessed with destroying the remarkable young man David, who was Saul's faithful admirer and the one God had appointed as his successor to the throne.
- Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, was unable to grasp that the person he had followed and learned from for three years was actually God's own Son. In the end, Judas betrayed Jesus, handing him over to his persecutors for a paltry thirty pieces of silver.

These all had a short-term, self-serving perspective, and tragically each one failed to catch a vision for God's enduring purposes.

**The Application to Business**

Vision that is inspired and embraced can focus and mobilize any

undertaking, including our businesses.

In the process initiated by our board member, our senior management team began a process of defining our corporate direction. In due course, we developed this statement of vision:

Our Vision is to build a family of exceptional companies—each of which serves its customers in distinctive and important ways—and each of which reflects the practical application of biblical values throughout.

This theme provides continuity of culture and commonality of purpose for our more than five hundred employees in three different but related businesses. Some key words are *build, exceptional, serve, customers, biblical values*. Using these as a foundation, we are able to reinforce the major ideas and focus that will help us all move in the same direction.

### **Why the Bible?**

Some may question our forthright reference to *biblical values*, and for many this will not be appropriate. For ourselves (and we are a privately held company), we believe this emphasis helps set the boundaries within which we want to function. As we point out in explaining our Vision to employees, every enterprise is guided by *some* point of view, some undergirding philosophy. Our management has elected to have biblical tenets and principles serve as that guide.

Employees are not obligated to agree, though virtually all see this emphasis as wholesome and positive, governing our approach toward people, finances, policies and practices. We are careful to be inclusive of any employee's faith, making sure

religious beliefs have no bearing on his or her opportunity to work with or advance in our companies; rather, we seek to view all with equal appreciation and respect.

We speak of Vision and Values, but the terms are not so important. Some refer to Mission, Goals, Plans, Objectives or use other terms. What is important is that statements of direction be individually tailored, generated with the thoughtful involvement of leadership and broadly communicated to those who must “walk them out” in everyday life.

Here are a few guides for formulating statements of direction:

- They are brief.
- They are in writing and available.
- They define the sphere of activity.
- They are easy to understand and remember.
- They inspire, calling forth commitment and energy.
- They are subject to change, but not without careful consideration.
- They are consistent with, not contrary to, the principles and values in the Scriptures.

Gaining and articulating clarity of vision is the foremost responsibility of corporate leadership. From vision comes direction, helping build the values base that shapes corporate character. This values base is the focus of the next chapter.