
Reaching for a Star

By Lark McDonald



It was fall of 1996, a bright afternoon. We stood on a hillside of tall brush. I was a consultant, new to wildland fire, used to working with Army soldiers and air crews. He was a Hotshot superintendent. Together, we watched his crew work in teams to clear brush for a project. He introduced his subordinate crew leaders by pointing at them as they worked in the distance—proud of the organization he had built, and of this year's crew.

He pointed at the closest leader, “Bob—now Bob's got it”. I looked at “Bob,” but to my untrained eye he pretty much looked like the rest of them—dusty, dirty and splattered with chainsaw oil. Bob seemed to point a lot more than the others.

We walked on. Approaching another group of young men and women swamping branches behind a saw, he again pointed to another young firefighter. “That's 'Frank'—he's been with me four years. Frank's getting there—he's almost got it.” Next was “Jim”. Jim wasn't there yet, but he was “...working on it.”

I remained clueless as to what he was talking about. More walking, another crew leader, again the reference to “IT.” I continued to wait for an explanation that just didn't come.

I blinked first. “So, what exactly are you talking about when you say *IT*?” I asked. At first he gave me a look that was almost disbelieving, but I was an “outsider” and he checked himself.

Then, to the surprise of both of us—he found himself unable to articulate the answer. For a bit, he seemed at a loss for words to describe the thing that he inherently and personally understood so well. IT is his mental picture of what a crew should be—something that he understood intuitively, yet by his own admission, many of the crew leads did not. IT was his vision for his crew and his program.

The question launched the rest of our day, and on the following days the superintendent assembled the crew leads for the specific purpose of discussing IT. The problem: how can you expect people to get IT, when you can't tell them what IT is.

IT is the vision, the future. As a metaphor, the vision is the guiding star that is beyond today's grasp, but perhaps within tomorrow's reach. The vision of the future crew.

What is a Vision?

Usually, a vision is known as something that management wrestles with. The story is common in corporate America: a set of managers go into a conference room in some coastal hotel for three days and then suddenly some phrase like *Raping the land and abusing the people* appears on the top of every briefing PowerPoint slide for the next three months.

This, management says, is the “vision statement.” The operators look at management in puzzlement, neither buying in nor for that matter, understanding what the vision statement means to their jobs and to them.

Through such episodes, vision as a leadership tool has been given a bad rap. The vision isn't just for management, it is critical tool for all levels of leadership.

Focus and intent

As you might recall, leader's intent enables subordinates to accomplish the mission and to achieve the desired end even in the absence of specific orders or direction. Knowing the end state enables competent subordinates to achieve the goal creatively and adaptively.

The leader's intent explains what needs to be done, not how to do it. A communicated vision is the ultimate leader's intent for an organization, containing both the higher-level targets and the operating values under which future ethical decisions will be made. Upstream of things like standard operating procedures and policies, clearly communicating a crew vision is where many crew leaders stumble.

Resiliency

Beyond focusing the crew members and providing high-level intent, the vision is a first step toward solidifying the identity of the crew through defining who they aspire to be, usually independent from the mission they perform. Here, the vision statement and the mission statement differ in their focus.

The vision describes the **who** the crew aspires to be, generally independent of the mission. The mission statement describes **what** the crew does. The separation is important, especially in these times of change. Over the course of the season, most would agree that the core values of a crew shouldn't change. However, what the crew does for the organization may change as the mission of the organization changes.

These transitions can be difficult for crew members who can't see a clear delineation between who they are and what they do. As the organization tries to change the job description to meet new demands, the change can be perceived by the individual as an attempt to change who they are—with all the heartburn, stress and problems that monumental task implies. The crew's vision helps to separate the who and the what, enabling the crew to adapt and remain effective whether today's assigned mission be firefighting, search and rescue, project work or fuels reduction.

Making A Vision

The vision reflects the people it represents and guides. For that reason, the shape and form it takes can vary widely. While one crew may use a well formulated “vision statement,” others might develop a statement on their core values, or a symbol that represents the vision. My firm uses the latter. The vision and how it is communicated should be unique.

Step 1: The leader starts the vision.

The leader is responsible for balancing the needs of the organization with the needs of the crew. Because of that, the process of constructing a vision usually needs to start and be guided by the leaders. What is your vision? What will be your legacy? Will it survive after you leave or be washed away when you leave? These are questions that should be answered first.

Step 2: Identify and define the values.

The first real work in creating a vision is agreeing on the guiding values. This can end up being a long discussion, as concepts like integrity and professionalism are discussed and defined in concrete terms. Hint: don't get balled up wordsmithing the vision by committee. Agree on the guiding values then turn it over to the English major on your crew to transform those values into inspiring prose.

Step 3: Involve the crew.

Your vision won't be used unless your subordinates understand and adopt it. Within your vision, the crew must see their roles, their job, and their values. For that reason, you must find ways to help them visualize how the values link to you, the crew and the organization. The values that are encompassed in the vision must be ones that the crew members can adopt and work by. To assist this process, the vision should be positive and inspiring.

Step 4: Focus on the future.

Like a star, a vision represents something that is beyond your immediate reach. In a car, you cannot drive to a destination by looking either in the rear view mirror or inside the car—rather, you must look out the front windshield. The same principles apply to the crew vision. Define who you want to be, not just who you are or who you have been.

Making The Vision Work

Although constructing a vision takes effort, the real work comes in communicating the vision and keeping it tied to daily reality.

- The vision should be part of your indoctrination process for new crew members, communicated from the very beginning as a framework.
- Post the vision in a place that reinforces your leadership. Don't hang it in a backwater spot over the water fountain or in the hallway to the equipment room. Post it where the decisions are made—your office, the briefing room, in the crew haul or engine. The vision should be seen in context of the operational environment whenever possible.

- Incorporate components of the vision in normal operations. Briefings and debriefings are great opportunities to reinforce the vision. For example, let's say that you have a vision statement that includes the word "professional." Every crew member should be able to answer questions like "What does the word "professional" mean while on the line, while at camp," etc.
- Communicate and reinforce your vision through your actions. Demonstrate that your vision isn't just another piece of mental fluff. Try to live it.

Questions

Do you have a vision for your organization?

Is it appropriate? Inspiring? Suited to the people in your organization?

Does it link to and support the higher organization's vision?

How have you communicated your vision?

What could you do better?