If the Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work For survey and the plethora of research that exists is anything to go by, one would say there is now clear and convincing evidence that there is a strong correlation between translation of visionary goals, good people management and business results. Don't take my word for it. A comparison of just the publicly quoted companies in the Top 100 Best Companies against the FTSE 100 index shows a better than 60 points performance difference.

Unfortunately, many company vision statements aren't visionary, and they simply aren't compelling! They don't really grab the hearts and minds of the people they are trying to appeal to – their workforce. Very often the vision statement isn't understood and doesn't translate easily to a Tuesday afternoon (or any other time for that matter) for the average worker. Worse, the gap between senior rhetoric about values and principles, and the day-to-day behaviour experienced by the workforce, tends to be a very large one.

Yet, this vision and values thing has become a major preoccupation and pastime for businesses for more than a decade. As companies become flatter, more decentralised, leaner and meaner, more matrix managed, more devolved, and in many cases diversified (take General Electric in the US as an example), how can people at the edges attain a coherent, co-ordinated sense of where they are heading and the effort required? Hence organisational vision and values statements have come to represent company headquarters and several hundred HR man-hours attempt at answering the problem.

What is a Vision statement?

Let's be clear. What are we actually talking about? A company vision statement should be a short, succinct, compelling and values-laden statement of what an organisation wants to become and achieve at some future point in time. Take President John Kennedy's vision for NASA: "By the end of the decade, we will put a man on the moon and return him safely to earth." This vision spoke powerfully to values that Americans held dear: America as a pioneer and America as a world leader.

In the corporate world in the UK we have great companies such as Mothercare: "To meet the needs and aspirations of parents for their children, worldwide" or Cadbury-Schweppes: "Working together to create brands people love". Although the vision statement may have external marketing and PR value, the main target audience for the company vision is the workforce, from the most senior executive to the most junior contributor.

At the very heart of a vision statement's inspiring appeal is its value-laden significance; its emotional pull that people can identify with, relate to and connect with. This is part of the substance that calls out to people to give that

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extra bit of discretionary effort. And if it doesn't, they won't. Key to creating a vision statement that everyone wants to head towards, therefore, is a description of the values that underpin the vision of the future.

Key steps

There are some key steps required in creating a vision statement:

- Development and articulation of the shared core principles and values that the company would stand by in generations to come – values that people would live by even if there were no business. This is best done not top down, but by fully engaging all levels of the organisation to contribute and define.
- A description of what it would be recognised or remembered for in the ideal world.
- A description of the culture, climate and working atmosphere required to make it a great enterprise.
- Development of the statement itself, making adjustments, fine tuning and amending as necessary until it is perceived to be truly representative of what the company stands for and what it would like to be true of itself at some future point in time.

What the Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work For survey clearly reinforces through the criteria it measures is that turning a vision into reality takes effort. The greatest challenge senior leaders and managers face is sustaining organisational values, and translating the vision so that it is palpable everyday for the entire workforce and not simply meaningless words on internal communications. Some of the factors they need to consider are:

- How is the culture of the company in terms of how it does things – its style, supported by its leadership and senior managers?
- How do managers create an environment in which people feel positive towards their company generally, their colleagues and immediate boss specifically?
- How clearly communicated and understood the company strategy and goals really are?
- How those goals and objectives are managed in terms of priorities for teams and individuals?
- How engaged and involved are people in the major decisions that affect them?
- What levels of co-operation and cross-functional collaboration exist within the company?
- What opportunities exist for personal growth within jobs and the company generally?
- How empowered are employees to deliver discretionary effort and how well recognised are they for it?

Is it worth it?

The evidence is that companies who manage to translate their vision and values into meaningful reality for their workforce not only weather times of economic downturn more effectively, they also come out of recessions faster and more robust than many of their competitors and out perform their market.

But if it's true that communicating a well articulated and compelling organisational vision, and then creating a well managed work environment in which people feel engaged and committed to contribute makes such a difference to company performance, the question remains, why aren't more companies reaping the benefits of this effort?

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