You may remember the movie *Spartacus*, an adaptation of the story of a Roman gladiator/slave who led an army of slaves in an uprising in 71 B.C. They defeated the Roman legions twice, but were finally conquered by the general Marcus *Crassus* after a long siege and battle. In the movie, *Crassus* tells the thousand survivors in *Spartacus’s* army, “You have been slaves. You will be slaves again. But you will be spared your rightful punishment of crucifixion by the mercy of the Roman legions. All you need to do is turn over to me the slave Spartacus, because we do not know him by sight.”

After a long pause, Spartacus (played by Kirk Douglas) stands up and says, “I am Spartacus.” Then the man next to him stands up and says, “I am Spartacus.” The next man stands up and also says, “No, I am Spartacus.” Within a minute, everyone in the army is on his feet.

It does not matter whether this story is apocryphal or not; it demonstrates a deep truth. Each man, by standing up, chose death. But
the loyalty of Spartacus’s army was not to Spartacus the man. Their
loyalty was to a shared vision which Spartacus had inspired—the
idea that they could be free men. This vision was so compelling that
no man could bear to give it up and return to slavery.

A shared vision is not an idea. It is not even an important idea
such as freedom. It is, rather, a force in people’s hearts, a force of
impressive power. It may be inspired by an idea, but once it goes
further—if it is compelling enough to acquire the support of more
than one person—then it is no longer an abstraction. It is palpable.
People begin to see it as if it exists. Few, if any, forces in human
affairs are as powerful as shared vision.

At its simplest level, a shared vision is the answer to the question,
“What do we want to create?” Just as personal visions are pictures
or images people carry in their heads and hearts, so too are shared
visions pictures that people throughout an organization carry. They
create a sense of commonality that permeates the organization and
gives coherence to diverse activities.

A vision is truly shared when you and I have a similar picture and
are committed to one another having it, not just to each of us, indi-
vidually, having it. When people truly share a vision they are con-
nected, bound together by a common aspiration. Personal visions
derive their power from an individual’s deep caring for the vision.
Shared visions derive their power from a common caring. In fact, we
have to come to believe that one of the reasons people seek to build
shared visions is their desire to be connected in an important under-
taking.

Shared vision is vital for the learning organization because it pro-
vides the focus and energy for learning. While adaptive learning is
possible without vision, generative learning occurs only when people
are striving to accomplish something that matters deeply to them. In
fact, the whole idea of generative learning—“expanding your ability
to create”—will seem abstract and meaningless until people become
excited about some vision they truly want to accomplish.

Today, “vision” is a familiar concept in corporate leadership. But
when you look carefully you find that most “visions” are one per-
son’s (or one group’s) vision imposed on an organization. Such vi-
sions, at best, command compliance—not commitment. A shared
vision is a vision that many people are truly committed to, because
it reflects their own personal vision.
WHY SHARED VISIONS MATTER

It is impossible to imagine the accomplishments of building AT&T, Ford, or Apple in the absence of shared vision. Theodore Vail had a vision of universal telephone service that would take fifty years to bring about. Henry Ford envisioned common people, not just the wealthy, owning their own automobiles. Steven Jobs, Steve Wozniak, and their Apple cofounders saw the power of the computer to empower people. It is equally impossible to imagine the rapid ascendency of Japanese firms such as Komatsu (which grew from one third the size of Caterpillar to its equal in less than two decades), Canon (which went from nothing to matching Xerox’s global market share in reprographics in the same time frame), or Honda had they not all been guided by visions of global success.* What is most important is that, these individuals’ visions became genuinely shared among people throughout all levels of their companies-focusing the energies of thousands and creating a common identity among enormously diverse people.

Many shared visions are extrinsic—that is, they focus on achieving something relative to an outsider, such as a competitor. Pepsi’s vision is explicitly directed at beating Coca-Cola; Avis’s vision at Hertz. Yet, a goal limited to defeating an opponent is transitory. Once the vision is achieved, it can easily migrate into a defensive posture of “protecting what we have, of not losing our number-one position.” Such defensive goals rarely call forth the creativity and excitement of building something new. A master in the martial arts is probably not focused so much on “defeating all others” as on his own intrinsic inner standards of “excellence.” This does not mean that visions must be either intrinsic or extrinsic. Both types of vision can coexist. But reliance on a vision that is solely predicated on defeating an adversary can weaken an organization long term.

Kazuo Inamori of Kyocera entreats employees “to look inward,” to discover their own internal standards. He argues that, while striving to be number one in its field, a company can aim to be “better” than others or “best” in its field. But his vision is that Kyocera should always aim for “perfection” rather than just being “best.” (Note Inamori’s application of the principle of creative tension—“it’s not what the vision is, but what it does...”)

A shared vision, especially one that is intrinsic, uplifts people’s aspirations. Work becomes part of pursuing a larger purpose...
ied in the organizations’ products or services—accelerating learning through personal computers, bringing the world into communication through universal telephone service, or promoting freedom of movement through the personal automobile. The larger purpose can also be embodied in the style, climate, and spirit of the organization. Max de Pree, retired CEO of the Herman Miller furniture company said his vision for Herman Miller was “to be a gift to the human spirit”—by which he meant not only Herman Miller’s products, but its people, its atmosphere, and its larger commitment to productive and aesthetic work environments.4

Visions are exhilarating. They create the spark, the excitement that lifts an organization out of the mundane. “No matter how problematic the competition or our internal troubles,” wrote John Sculley about Apple’s renowned visionary product, “my spirit rebounded when I strolled into the Macintosh Building. We knew we would soon bear witness to an event of historical proportions.”5

In a corporation, a shared vision changes people’s relationship with the company. It is no longer “their company;” it becomes “our company.” A shared vision is the first step in allowing people who mistrusted each other to begin to work together. It creates a common identity. In fact, an organization’s shared sense of purpose, vision, and operating values establish the most basic level of commonality. Late in his career, the psychologist Abraham Maslow studied high-performing teams. One of their most striking characteristics was shared vision and purpose. Maslow observed that in exceptional teams

the task was no longer separate from the self . . . but rather he identified with this task so strongly that you couldn’t define his real self without including that task.6

Shared visions compel courage so naturally that people don’t even realize the extent of their courage. Courage is simply doing whatever is needed in pursuit of the vision. In 1961, John Kennedy articulated a vision that had been emerging for many years among leaders within America’s space program: to have a man on the moon by the end of the decade.’ This led to countless acts of courage and daring. A modern-day Spartacus story occurred in the mid-1960s at MIT’s Draper Laboratories. The lab was the lead contractor with NASA for the inertial navigation and guidance system to guide the Apollo astronauts to the moon. Several years into the project, the lab directors became convinced that their original design specifications were
wrong. This posed considerable potential embarrassment, since several million dollars had already been spent. Instead of trying to jerry-rig an expedient solution, they asked NASA to disband the project and start over again. They risked not just their contract but their reputation. But no other action was possible. Their entire reason for being was embodied in one simple vision—having a man on the moon by the end of the decade. They would do whatever it took to realize that vision.

Apple Computer during the mid-1980s, when the entire small computer industry rallied behind the IBM PC, persevered with its vision of a computer which people could understand intuitively, a computer which represented the freedom to think on one’s own. Along the way, Apple not only refused the “sure thing” opportunity to be a leading PC “clone” manufacturer, but its leaders gave up an innovation which they had pioneered: open architecture, where people could add their own components. This did not fit with a computer that was easy to use. Strategically, the change paid off in a company profile and reputation which even the foremost “clone” makers, such as Compaq, have never been able to equal. Apple’s Macintosh was not only easy to use, it became a new industry standard and made having fun a priority in personal computing.

You cannot have a learning organization without shared vision. Without a pull toward some goal which people truly want to achieve, the forces in support of the status quo can be overwhelming. Vision establishes an overarching goal. The loftiness of the target compels new ways of thinking and acting. A shared vision also provides a rudder to keep the learning process on course when stresses develop. Learning can be difficult, even painful. With a shared vision, we are more likely to expose our ways of thinking, give up deeply held views, and recognize personal and organizational shortcomings. All that trouble seems trivial compared with the importance of what we are trying to create. As Robert Fritz puts it, “In the presence of greatness, pettiness disappears.” In the absence of a great dream, pettiness prevails.

Shared vision fosters risk taking and experimentation. “When you are immersed in a vision,” says Herman Miller’s president Ed Simon, “You know what needs to be done. But you often don’t know how to do it. You run an experiment because you think it’s going to get you there. It doesn’t work. New input. New data. You change direction and run another experiment. Everything is an experiment, but there is no ambiguity at all. It’s perfectly clear why
you are doing it. People aren’t saying, ‘Give me a guarantee that it will work.’ Everybody knows that there is no guarantee. But the people are committed nonetheless.”

Lastly, shared vision addresses one of the primary puzzles that has thwarted efforts to develop systems thinking in management: “How can a commitment to the long term be fostered?”

For years, systems thinkers have endeavored to persuade managers that, unless they maintained a long-term focus, they will be in big trouble. With great vigor we have proselytized the “better before worse” consequences of many interventions, and the “shifting the burden” dynamics that result from symptomatic fixes. Yet, I have witnessed few lasting shifts to longer term commitment and action. Personally, I have come to feel that our failure lies not in unpersuasiveness or lack of sufficiently compelling evidence. It may simply not be possible to convince human beings rationally to take a long-term view. People do not focus on the long term because they have to, but because they want to.

In every instance where one finds a long-term view actually operating in human affairs, there is a long-term vision at work. The cathedral builders of the Middle Ages labored a lifetime with the fruits of their labors still a hundred years in the future. The Japanese believe building a great organization is like growing a tree; it takes twenty-five to fifty years. Parents of young children try to lay a foundation of values and attitude that will serve an adult twenty years hence. In all of these cases, people hold a vision that can be realized only over the long term.

Strategic planning, which should be a bastion of long-term thinking in corporations, is very often reactive and short-term. According to two of the most articulate critics of contemporary strategic planning, Gary Hamel of the London Business School and C. K. Prahalad of the University of Michigan:

Although strategic planning is billed as a way of becoming more future oriented, most managers, when pressed, will admit that their strategic plans reveal more about today’s problems than tomorrow’s opportunities.*

With its emphasis on extensive analysis of competitors’ strengths and weaknesses, of market niches and firm resources, typical strategic planning fails to achieve the one accomplishment that would foster longer range actions—in Hamel’s and Prahalad’s terms, setting “a goal that is worthy of commitment.”
With all the attention given to this component of corporate learning, however, vision is still often regarded as a mysterious, uncontrollable force. Leaders with vision are cult heroes. While it is true that there are no formulas for “how to find your vision,” there are principles and guidelines for building shared vision. There is a discipline of building vision that is emerging, and practical tools for working with shared visions. This discipline extends principles and insights from personal mastery into the world of collective aspiration and shared commitment.

THE DISCIPLINE OF BUILDING SHARED VISION

ENCOURAGING PERSONAL VISION

Shared visions emerge from personal visions. This is how they derive their energy and how they foster commitment. As Bill O’Brien of Hanover Insurance observes, “My vision is not what’s important to you. The only vision that motivates you is your vision.” It is not that people care only about their personal self-interest—in fact, people's personal visions usually include dimensions that concern family, organization, community, and even the world. Rather, O’Brien is stressing that caring is personal. It is rooted in an individual’s own set of values, concerns, and aspirations. This is why-genuine caring about a shared vision is rooted in personal visions. This simple truth is lost on many leaders, who decide that their organization must develop a vision by tomorrow!

Organizations intent on building shared visions continually encourage members to develop their personal visions. If people don’t have their own vision, all they can do is “sign up” for someone else’s. The result is compliance, never commitment. On the other hand, people with a strong sense of personal direction can join together to create a powerful synergy toward what I/we truly want.

Personal mastery is the bedrock for developing shared visions. This means not only personal vision, but commitment to the truth and creative tension—the hallmarks of personal mastery. Shared vision can generate levels of creative tension that go far beyond individuals’ “comfort levels.” Those who will contribute the most toward realizing a lofty vision will be those who can “hold” this creative tension: remain clear on the vision and continue to inquire
into current reality. They will be the ones who believe deeply in their ability to create their future, because that is what they experience personally.

In encouraging personal vision, organizations must be careful not to infringe on individual freedoms. As was discussed in chapter 9, “Personal Mastery,” no one can give another “his vision,” nor even force him to develop a vision. However, there are positive actions that can be taken to create a climate that encourages personal vision. The most direct is for leaders who have a sense of vision to communicate that in such a way that others are encouraged to share their visions. This is the art of visionary leadership—how shared visions are built from personal visions.

FROM PERSONAL VISIONS TO SHARED VISIONS

How do individual visions join to create shared visions? A useful metaphor is the hologram, the three-dimensional image created by interacting light sources.

If you cut a photograph in half, each part shows only part of the whole image. But if you divide a hologram, each part shows the whole image intact. Similarly, as you continue to divide up the hologram, no matter how small the divisions, each piece still shows the whole image. Likewise, when a group of people come to share a vision for an organization, each person sees his own picture of the organization at its best. Each shares responsibility for the whole, not just for his piece. But the component “pieces” of the hologram are not identical. Each represents the whole image from a different point of view. It’s as if you were to look through holes poked in a window shade; each hole would offer a unique angle for viewing the whole image. So, too, is each individual’s vision of the whole unique. We each have our own way of seeing the larger vision.

When you add up the pieces of a hologram, the image of the whole does not change fundamentally. After all, it was there in each piece. Rather the image becomes more intense, more lifelike. When more people come to share a common vision, the vision may not change fundamentally. But it becomes more alive, more real in the sense of a mental reality that people can truly imagine achieving. They now have partners, “cocreators”; the vision no longer rests on their shoulders alone. Early on, when they are nurturing an individual vision, people may say it is “my vision.” But as the shared vision develops, it becomes both “my vision” and “our vision.”
The first step in mastering the discipline of building shared visions is to give up traditional notions that visions are always announced from “on high” or come from an organization’s institutionalized planning processes.

In the traditional hierarchical organization, no one questioned that the vision emanated from the top. Often, the big picture guiding the firm wasn’t even shared—all people needed to know were their “marching orders,” so that they could carry out their tasks in support of the larger vision. Ed Simon of Herman Miller says, “If I was the president of a traditional authoritarian organization and I had a new vision, the task would be much simpler than we face today. Most people in the organization wouldn’t need to understand the vision. People would simply need to know what was expected of them.”

That traditional “top-down” vision is not much different from a process that has become popular in recent years. Top management goes off to write its “vision statement,” often with the help of consultants. This may be done to solve the problem of low morale or lack of strategic direction. Sometimes the process is primarily reflective. Sometimes it incorporates extensive analysis of a firm’s competitors, market setting, and organizational strengths and weaknesses. Regardless, the results are often disappointing for several reasons.

First, such a vision is often a “one-shot” vision, a single effort at providing overarching direction and meaning to the firm’s strategy. Once it’s written, management assumes that they have now discharged their visionary duties. Recently, one of my Innovation Associates colleagues was explaining to two managers how our group works with vision. Before he could get far, one of the managers interrupted. “We’ve done that,” he said. “We’ve already written our vision statement.” “That’s very interesting,” my colleague responded. “What did you come up with?” The one manager turned to the other and asked, “Joe, where is that vision statement anyhow?” Writing a vision statement can be a first step in building shared vision but, alone, it rarely makes a vision “come alive” within an organization.

The second problem with top management going off to write their vision statement is that the resulting vision does not build on people’s personal visions. Often, personal visions are ignored altogether in the search for a “strategic vision.” Or the “official vision” reflects only the personal vision of one or two people. There is little opportunity for inquiry and testing at every level so that people feel they,
understand and own the vision. As a result, the new official vision also fails to foster energy and commitment. It simply does not inspire people. In fact, sometimes, it even generates little passion among the top management team who created it.

Lastly, vision is not a “solution to a problem.” If it is seen in that light, when the “problem” of low morale or unclear strategic direction goes away, the energy behind the vision will go away also. Building shared vision must be seen as a central element of the daily work of leaders. It is ongoing and never-ending. It is actually part of a larger leadership activity: designing and nurturing what Hanover’s Bill O’Brien calls the “governing ideas” of the enterprise—not only its vision per se, but its purpose and core values as well. As O’Brien says, “The governing ideas are far more important and enduring than the reporting chart and the divisional structure that so often preoccupy CEOs.”

Sometimes, managers expect shared visions to emerge from a firm’s strategic planning process. But for all the same reasons that most “top-down” visioning processes fail, most strategic planning also fails to nurture genuine vision. According to Hamel and Prahalad:

Creative strategies seldom emerge from the annual planning ritual. The starting point for next year’s strategy is almost always this year’s strategy. Improvements are incremental. The company sticks to the segments and territories it knows, even though the real opportunities may be elsewhere. The impetus for Canon’s pioneering entry into the personal copier business came from an overseas sales subsidiary—not from planners in Japan.

This is not to say that visions cannot emanate from the top. Often, they do. But sometimes they emanate from personal visions of individuals who are not in positions of authority. Sometimes they just “bubble up” from people interacting at many levels. The origin of the vision is much less important than the process whereby it comes to be shared. It is not truly a “shared vision” until it connects with the personal visions of people throughout the organization.

For those in leadership positions, what is most important is to remember that their visions are still personal visions. Just because they occupy a position of leadership does not mean that their personal visions are automatically “the organization’s vision.” When I hear leaders say “our vision” and I know they are really describing “my vision,” I recall Mark Twain’s words that the official “we” should be reserved for “kings and people with tapeworm.”
Ultimately, leaders intent on building shared visions must be willing to continually share their personal visions. They must also be prepared to ask, “Will you follow me?” This can be difficult. For a person who has been setting goals all through his career and simply announcing them, asking for support can make him feel very vulnerable.

John Kryster was the president of a large division of a leading home products company who had a vision that his division should be preeminent in its industry. This vision required not only excellent products but that the company supply the product to their “customer” (retail grocers), in a more efficient and effective manner than anyone else. He envisioned a unique worldwide distribution system that would get product to the customer in half the time and with a fraction of the cost in wastage and reshipments. He began to talk with other managers, with production workers, with distribution people, with grocers. Everyone seemed enthusiastic, but pointed up that many of his ideas could not be achieved because they contradicted so many traditional policies of the corporate parent.

In particular, Kryster needed the support of the head of product distribution, Harriet Sullivan, who—while technically Kryster’s peer in the firm’s matrix organization—had fifteen years more experience. Kryster prepared an elaborate presentation for Sullivan to show her the merits of his new distribution ideas. But for every piece of supporting data he offered, Sullivan had a countering criticism. Kryster left the meeting thinking that the doubters were probably right.

Then he conceived of a way to test the new system out in only one geographic market. The risk would be less, and he could gain the support of the local grocery chain which had been especially enthusiastic about the concept. But what should he do about Harriet Sullivan? His instincts were just not to tell her. After all, he had the authority to undertake the experiment himself, using his own distribution people. Yet, he also valued Sullivan’s experience and judgment.

After a week of mulling it over, Kryster went back to ask for Sullivan’s support. This time, though, he left his charts and data at home. He just told her why he believed in the idea, how it could forge a new partnership with customers, and how its merits could be tested with low risk. To his surprise, the crusty distribution chief started to offer help in designing the experiment. “When you came to me last week,” she said, “you were trying to convince me. Now, you’re willing to test your idea. I still think it’s wrongheaded, but I
can see you care a great deal. So, who knows, maybe we’ll learn something.”

That was five years ago. Today, John Kryster’s innovative distribution system is used worldwide by almost all the corporation’s divisions. It has significantly reduced costs and been part of broad strategic alliances the corporation is learning to forge with retail chains.

When visions start in the middle of an organization the process of sharing and listening is essentially the same as when they originate at the top. But it may take longer, especially if the vision has implications for the entire organization.

Bart Bolton was a middle manager in IS (Information Systems) at Digital Equipment Corporation when, back in 1981, he and a small group of colleagues began to form an idea of Digital as an interconnected organization. “A group of us had been together at a work-shop, and when we came back we just started talking about how we were going to turn around IS. The fundamental problem as we all saw it was that there simply was no IS vision. Everyone argued about the ‘how to’s’ but no one knew the ‘what.’ Yet, we felt we could see an end result that was really worth going for. We didn’t know exactly what it would look like, but the idea of tying the organization together electronically just felt ‘right.’ Given our products and technology we could become one of the first, if not the first large corporation that was totally and completely electronically interconnected.” The idea was so exciting that he couldn’t sleep much for several days as he thought about the implications.

But in 1981, no one had any idea how this could be done. “It was simply beyond the realm of what was possible at that time. We could transfer files between computers, but we couldn’t network. There was some networking software under development but there were lots of problems with it. Perhaps, if we worked really hard at it we could interconnect ten or twenty machines, but no one even dreamed of interconnecting a hundred machines, let alone thousands. Looking back, it was like they say about Kennedy when he announced the ‘Man on the Moon’ vision- we knew about 15 percent of what we needed to know to get there. But we knew it was right.”

Bolton and his compatriots had no “authority” to pursue the idea, but they couldn’t stop thinking about it. In November 1981, he wrote a short paper which he read to all the senior IS people at a staff meeting. In it he said that the organization of the future would involve new IS technologies, would see “data as a resource just like
the organization of the past saw capital and people as resources,” and that “networks would tie together all the functions.” “When I finished, no one spoke. It was like being in church. I really thought I’d blown it. My boss, Al Crawford, the head of IS, suggested a ten-minute break. When people came back, all they wanted to know was, ‘How do we promote it? How can we make it happen?’ My only response was, ‘This has got to be your vision not mine, or it will never happen.’ ”

“I knew the guys at the top had to be ‘enrolled,’ and my job was to help them lead. By enrolling others, they too would become messengers.” An IS group prepared a 35-mm slide show to be used by Crawford throughout the organization. “He came up with the image of “wiring up the corporation.” “It became incredibly exciting,” says Bolton, “to watch the vision build, each person adding something new, refining it and making it come alive. We literally began talking about the ‘copper wires running around the world.’ ”

Crawford presented the slide show to all Digital’s major functional staffs in 1982. The idea, “the what,” started to take hold. Then the IS organization created five overlapping programs to tackle the “how to’s”: a network program, a data program, an office automation program, a facilities program, and an applications program. By 1985 the first network was in place. By 1987, over 10,000 computers were on line. Today, Digital has over 600 facilities in over 50 countries and they are all interconnected. There are over 43,000 computers interconnected. Digital is now seen by experts as one of the pioneer “networked organizations.” Moreover, the “networked organization” is a dominant theme in Digital’s marketing strategy and advertising.

Organizational consultant Charlie Kiefer says that, “Despite the excitement that a vision generates, the process of building shared vision is not always glamorous. Managers who are skilled at building shared visions talk about the process in ordinary terms. ‘Talking about our vision’ just gets woven into day-to-day life. Most artists don’t get very excited about the process of creating art. They get excited about the results.” Or, as Bill O’Brien puts it, “Being a visionary leader is not about giving speeches and inspiring the troops. How I spend my day is pretty much the same as how any executive spends his day. Being a visionary leader is about solving day-to-day problems with my vision in mind.”

Visions that are truly shared take time to emerge. They grow as a by-product of interactions of individual visions. Experience suggests
that visions that are genuinely shared require ongoing conversation where individuals not only feel free to express their dreams, but learn how to listen to each others' dreams. Out of this listening, new insights into what is possible gradually emerge.

Listening is often more difficult than talking, especially for strong-willed managers with definite ideas of what is needed. It requires extraordinary openness and willingness to entertain a diversity of ideas. This does not imply that we must sacrifice our vision “for the larger cause.” Rather, we must allow multiple visions to coexist, listening for the right course of action that transcends and unifies all our individual visions. As one highly successful CEO expressed it: “My job, fundamentally, is listening to what the organization is trying to say, and then making sure that it is forcefully articulated.”

SPREADING VISIONS:
ENROLLMENT, COMMITMENT, AND COMPLIANCE

Few subjects are closer to the heart of contemporary managers than commitment. Prodded by studies showing that most American workers acknowledge low levels of commitment and by tales of foreign competitors’ committed work forces, managers have turned to “management by commitment,” “high commitment work systems,” and other approaches. Yet, real commitment is still rare in today’s organizations. It is our experience that, 90 percent of the time, what passes for commitment is compliance.

Today, it is common to hear managers talk of getting people to “buy into” the vision. For many, I fear, this suggests a sales process, where I sell and you buy. Yet, there is a world of difference between “selling” and “enrolling.” “Selling” generally means getting someone to do something that he might not do if they were in full possession of all the facts. “Enrolling,” by contrast, literally means “placing one’s name on the roll.” Enrollment implies free choice, while “being sold” often does not.

“Enrollment is the process,” in Kiefer’s words, “of becoming part of something by choice.” “Committed” describes a state of being not only enrolled but feeling fully responsible for making the vision happen. I can be thoroughly enrolled in your vision. I can genuinely want it to occur. Yet, it is still your vision. I will take actions as need arises, but I do not spend my waking hours looking for what to do next.
For example, people are often enrolled in social causes out of genuine desire, for example, to see particular inequities righted. Once a year they might make a donation to help in a fund-raising campaign. But when they are committed, the “cause” can count on them. They will do whatever it takes to make the vision real. The vision is pulling them to action. Some use the term “being source” to describe the unique energy that committed people bring toward creating a vision.

In most contemporary organizations, there are relatively few people enrolled—and even fewer committed. The great majority of people are in a state of “compliance.” “Compliant” followers go along with a vision. They do what is expected of them. They support the vision, to some degree. But, they are not truly enrolled or committed.

Compliance is often confused with enrollment and commitment. In part, this occurs because compliance has prevailed for so long in most organizations, we don’t know how to recognize real commitment. It is also because there are several levels of compliance, some of which lead to behavior that looks a great deal like enrollment and commitment:

**POSSIBLE ATTITUDES TOWARD A VISION**

**Commitment:** Wants it. Will make it happen. Creates whatever “laws” (structures) are needed.

**Enrollment:** Wants it. Will do whatever can be done within the “spirit of the law.”

**Genuine compliance:** Sees the benefits of the vision. Does everything expected and more. Follows the “letter of the law.” “Good soldiers.”

**Formal compliance:** On the whole, sees the benefits of the vision, Does what’s expected and no more. “Pretty good soldier.”

**Grudging compliance:** Does not see the benefits of the vision. But, also, does not want to lose job. Does enough of what’s expected because he has to, but also lets it be known that he is not really on board.
**Noncompliance:** Does not see benefits of vision and will not do what’s expected. “I won’t do it; you can’t make me.”

**Apathy:** Neither for nor against vision. No interest. No energy. “Is it five o’clock yet?”

The speed limit is fifty-five in most states in the United States today. A person who was genuinely compliant would never drive more than fifty-five. A person formally compliant could drive sixty to sixty-five because in most states you will not get a ticket so long as you are below sixty-five. Someone grudgingly compliant would stay below sixty-five and complain continually about it. A noncompliant driver would “floor it” and do everything possible to evade troopers. On the other hand, a person who was genuinely committed to a fifty-five mph speed limit would drive that speed even if it were not the legal limit.

In most organizations, most people are in states of formal or genuine compliance with respect to the organization’s goals and ground rules. They go along with “the program,” sincerely trying to contribute. On the other hand, people in noncompliance or grudging compliance usually stand out. They are opposed to the goals or ground rules and let their opposition be known, either through inaction or (if they are grudgingly compliant) through “malicious obedience”—“I’ll do it just to prove that it won’t work.” They may not speak out publicly against the organization’s goals, but their views are known nonetheless (They often reserve their truest sentiments for the rest room or the cocktail lounge.)

Differences between the varying states of compliance can be subtle. Most problematic is the state of genuine compliance, which is often mistaken for enrollment or commitment. The prototypical “good soldier” of genuine compliance will do whatever is expected of him, willingly. “I believe in the people behind the vision; I’ll do whatever is needed, and more, to the fullest of my ability.” In his own mind, the person operating in genuine compliance often thinks of himself as committed. He is, in fact, committed, but only to being “part of the team.”

In fact, from his behavior on the job, it is often very difficult to distinguish someone who is genuinely compliant from someone who
is enrolled or committed. An organization made up of genuinely compliant people would be light-years ahead of most organizations in productivity and cost effectiveness. ‘People would not have to be told what to do more than once. They would be responsive. They would be upbeat and positive in their attitude and manner. They might also be a bit “drone-like,” but not necessarily. If what was expected of high performers was to “take initiative” and be “proactive,” they would exhibit those behaviors as well. In short, people in genuine compliance would do whatever they could to play by the “rules of the game,” both the formal and subtle rules.

Yet, there is a world of difference between compliance and commitment. The committed person brings an energy, passion, and excitement that cannot be generated if you are only compliant, even genuinely compliant. The committed person doesn’t play by the “rules of the game.” He is responsible for the game. If the rules of the game stand ‘in the way of achieving the vision, he will find ways to change the rules. A group of people truly committed to a common vision is an awesome force. They can accomplish the seemingly impossible.

Tracy Kidder, in his Pulitzer-prize-winning book The Soul of a New Machine, tells the story of a product development team at Data General, brought together by a talented team leader to create an ambitious new computer. Against a business atmosphere of urgency bordering on crisis, the team turned out a ground-breaking computer in remarkable time. Visiting with the team manager Tbm West in the book, and team members several years later, I learned just how remarkable their feat was. They told me of a stage in their project where certain critical software was several months behind schedule. The three engineers responsible came into the office one evening and left the next morning. By all accounts they accomplished two to three months of work that evening—and no one could explain how. These are not the feats of compliance.

What then is the difference between being genuinely compliant and enrolled and committed? The answer is deceptively simple. People who are enrolled or committed truly want the vision. Genuinely compliant people accept the vision. They may want it in order to get something else—for example, to keep their job, or to make their boss happy, or to get a promotion. But they do not truly want the vision in and of itself. It is not their own vision (or, at least, they do not know that it is their own vision).

Highly desired, shared commitment to a vision can be an elusive
goal. One executive VP at a consumer goods company deeply desired to turn the very traditional organization into a world-class competitor by developing shared commitment to a new business vision. But after a year’s effort, people continued to follow orders and do what they were told.

At this point he began to see the depth of the problem. People in his organization had never been asked to commit to anything in their careers. All they had ever been asked to do was be compliant. That was all they knew how to do. That was their only mental model. No matter what he said about developing a real vision, about being truly committed, it didn’t matter because they heard it within their model of compliance.

Once he grasped this, he shifted tactics. He asked, “What might people be able to commit to?” He initiated a “wellness” program, reasoning if there was anything to which people might become committed, it would be their own health. Over time, some did. They began to see that true commitment was possible in the workplace, and a near “ear” for the vision was opened.

Traditional organizations did not care about enrollment and commitment. The command and control hierarchy required only compliance. Still, today, many managers are justifiably wary of whether the energy released through commitment can be controlled and directed. So, we settle for compliance and content ourselves with moving people up the compliance ladder.

GUIDELINES FOR ENROLLMENT AND COMMITMENT

Enrollment is a natural process that springs from your genuine enthusiasm for a vision and your willingness to let others come to their own choice.

- **Be enrolled yourself.** There is no point attempting to encourage another to be enrolled when you are not. That is “selling,” not enrolling and will, at best, produce a form of superficial agreement and compliance. Worse, it will sow the seeds for future resentment.
- **Be on the level.** Don’t inflate benefits or sweep problems under the rug. Describe the vision as simply and honestly as you can.
- **Let the other person choose.** You don’t have to “convince” another of the benefits of a vision. In fact, efforts you might make
to persuade him to “become enrolled” will be seen as manipulative and actually preclude enrollment. The more willing you are for him to make a free choice, the freer he will feel. This can be especially difficult with subordinates, who are often conditioned to feel as though they must go along. But you can still help by creating the time and safety for them to develop their own sense of vision.

There are many times when managers need compliance. They may want enrollment or commitment, but cannot accept anything below formal compliance. If that is the case, I recommend that you be on the level about it: “I know you may not agree wholeheartedly with the new direction, but at this juncture it is where the management team is committed to heading. I need your support to help it happen.” Being open about the need for compliance removes hypocrisy. It also makes it ‘easier for people to come to their choices, which may, over time, include enrollment.

The hardest lesson for many managers to face is that, ultimately, **there is nothing you can do to get another person to enroll or commit.** Enrollment and commitment require freedom of choice. The guidelines above simply establish conditions most favorable to enrollment, but they do not cause enrollment. Commitment likewise is very personal; efforts to force it will, at best, foster compliance.

**ANCHORING VISION IN A SET OF GOVERNING IDEAS**

Building shared vision is actually only one piece of a larger activity: developing the “governing ideas” for the enterprise, its vision, purpose or mission, and core values. A vision not consistent with values that people live by day by day will not only fail to inspire genuine enthusiasm, it will often foster outright cynicism.

These governing ideas answer three critical questions: “What?” “Why?” and “How?”

- Vision is the “What?” - the picture of the future we seek to create.
- Purpose (or “mission”) is the “Why?” the organization’s answer to the question, “Why do we exist?” Great organizations have a larger sense of purpose that transcends providing for the needs
of shareholders and employees. They seek to contribute to the world in some unique way, to add a distinctive source of value.

Core values answer the question “How do we want to act, consistent with our mission, along the path toward achieving our vision? “A company’s values might include integrity, openness, honesty, freedom, equal opportunity, leanness, merit, or loyalty. They describe how the company wants life to be on a day-to-day basis, while pursuing the vision.

Taken as a unit, all three governing ideas answer the question, “What do we believe in?” When Matsushita employees recite the company creed: “To recognize our responsibilities as industrialists, to foster progress, to promote the general welfare of society, and to devote ourselves to the further development of world culture,” they’re describing the company purpose. When they sing the company song, about “sending our goods to the people of the world, endlessly and continuously, like water gushing from a fountain,” they’re proclaiming the corporate vision. And when they go to in-house training programs that cover such topics as “fairness,” “harmony and cooperation,” “struggle for betterment,” “courtesy and humility,” and “gratitude,” the employees are learning the company’s deliberately constructed values. (Matsushita, in fact, calls them its “spiritual values.”)

At Hanover Insurance, articulating all three of these “governing ideas” made an enormous difference in the firm’s revival from near bankruptcy to a leader in the property and liability industry. Hanover’s experience also illustrates the interdependencies among vision, values, and purpose.

“Early on,” says O’Brien, “we recognized that there is a burning need for people to feel part of an ennobling mission. If it is absent many will seek fulfillment only in outside interests instead of in their work.

“But we also discovered that stating a mission or purpose in words was not enough. It ends up sounding like ‘apple pie and motherhood.’ People need visions to make the purpose more concrete and tangible. We had to learn to ‘paint pictures’ of the type of organization we wanted to be. My simple vision for the company is ‘unquestioned superiority.’ This simple term has great meaning for me. It leads me to envision an organization that serves the customer in unique ways, maintains a reputation for quality and responsibility, and creates a unique environment for its employees.
“Core values are necessary to help people with day-to-day decision making. Purpose is very abstract. Vision is long term. People need ‘guiding stars’ to navigate and make decisions day to day. But core values are only helpful if they can be translated into concrete behaviors. For example, one of our core values is ‘openness,’ which we worked long and hard to understand—finally recognizing that it requires the skills of reflection and inquiry within an overall context of trusting and supporting one another.”

**POSITIVE VERSUS NEGATIVE VISION**

“What do we want?” is different from “What do we want to avoid?” This seems obvious, but in fact negative visions are probably more common than positive visions. Many organizations truly pull together only when their survival is threatened. They focus on avoiding what people don’t want—being taken over, going bankrupt, losing jobs, not losing market share, having no downturns in earnings, or “not letting our competitors beat us to market with our next new product.” Negative visions are, if anything, even more common in public leadership, where societies are continually bombarded with visions of “anti-drugs,” “anti-smoking,” “anti-war,” or “anti-nuclear energy.”

Negative visions are limiting for three reasons. First, energy that could build something new is diverted to “preventing” something we don’t want to happen. Second, negative visions carry a subtle yet unmistakable message of powerlessness: our people really don’t care. They can pull together only when there is sufficient threat. Lastly, negative visions are inevitably short term. The organization is motivated so long as the threat persists. Once it leaves, so does the organization’s vision and energy.

There are two fundamental sources of energy that can motivate organizations: fear and aspiration. The power of fear underlies negative visions. The power of aspiration drives positive visions. Fear can produce extraordinary changes in short periods, but aspiration endures as a continuing source of learning and growth.
In Chapter 9 ("Personal Mastery"), I argued that personal vision, by itself, is not the key to more effective creativity. The key is "creative tension," the tension between vision and reality. The most effective people are those who can "hold" their vision while remaining committed to seeing current reality clearly.

This principle is no less true for organizations. The hallmark of a learning organization is not lovely visions floating in space, but a relentless willingness to examine "what is" in light of our vision.

IBM in the early 1960s, for example, carried out an extraordinary series of experiments in pursuit of a daring vision, a single family-of computers that would make virtually all its previous machines obsolete. In the words of a Fortune writer, IBM staked "its treasure, its reputation, and its position of leadership in the computer field" on a radical new concept: a series of compatible machines serving the broadest possible range of applications, from the most sophisticated scientific applications to the relatively small business needs.  

Jay Forrester once remarked that the hallmark of a great organization is "how quickly bad news travels upward." IBM’s capacity to recognize and learn from its mistakes proved pivotal during this period. One of the most discouraging was an early attempt at a high-end machine called "Stretch," introduced in 1960. IBM CEO Tom Watson, Jr., effectively killed the project in May 1961, after only a few had been sold. (Watson cut Stretch’s hefty $13.5 million price tag almost in half, thereby making it uneconomical to produce.) To him, there was little choice: the machine did not satisfy its customers, never achieving more than 70 percent of its promised specifications. A few days later, Watson spoke candidly to an industry group. "Our greatest mistake in Stretch," he said, "is that we walked up to the plate and pointed at the center field stands. When we swung, it was not a homer but a hard line drive to the outfield. We’re going to be a good deal more careful about what we promise in the future."

Indeed they were. Under the direction of many of the same men who had learned from Stretch, IBM introduced the System 360 three years later, which proved to be the platform for its extraordinary growth over the next ten years.
Many visions never take root and spread—despite having intrinsic merit. Several "limits to growth" structures can come into play to arrest the building of momentum behind a new vision. Understanding these structures can help considerably in sustaining the "visioning process".*

Visions spread because of a reinforcing process of increasing clarity, enthusiasm, communication and commitment. As people talk, the vision grows clearer. As it gets clearer, enthusiasm for its benefits builds.

And soon, the vision starts to spread in a reinforcing spiral of communication and excitement. Enthusiasm can also be reinforced by early successes in pursuing the vision (another potential reinforcing process, not shown on this diagram).

If the reinforcing process operated unfettered, it would lead to continuing growth in clarity and shared commitment toward the vision, among increasing numbers of people. But any of a variety of limiting factors can come into play to slow down this virtuous cycle.

The visioning process can wither if, as more people get involved, the diversity of views dissipates focus and generates unmanageable conflicts. People see different ideal futures. Must those who do not agree immediately with the emerging shared vision change their views? Do they conclude that the vision is "set in stone" and no longer influenceable? Do they feel that their own visions even matter? If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," the enrolling process can grind to a halt with a wave of increasing polarization.
This is a classic “limits to growth” structure, where the reinforcing process of growing enthusiasm for the vision interacts with a “balancing process” that limits the spread of the visions, due to increasing diversity and polarization:

Reading clockwise around the balancing circle, from the top: as enthusiasm builds, more people are talking about the vision, the diversity of views increases, leading to people expressing potentially conflicting visions. If other people are unable to allow this diversity to be expressed, polarization increases, reducing the clarity of the shared visions, and limiting the growth of enthusiasm.

In limits to growth structures, leverage usually lies in understanding the “limiting factor,” the implicit goal or norm that drives the balancing feedback process. In this case, that limiting factor is the ability (or inability) to inquire into diverse visions in such a way that deeper, common visions emerge. Diversity of visions will grow until it exceeds the organization’s capacity to “harmonize” diversity.

The most important skills to circumvent this limit are the “reflection and inquiry” skills developed in Chapter 10, “Mental Models.” In effect, the visioning process is a special type of inquiry process. It is an inquiry into the future we truly seek to create. If it becomes a pure advocacy process, it will result in compliance, at best, not commitment.

Approaching the visioning as an inquiry process does not mean that I have to give up my view. On the contrary, visions need strong advocates. But advocates who can also inquire into others’ visions open the possibility for the vision to evolve, to become “larger” than our individual visions. That is the principle of the hologram.

Visions can also die because people become discouraged by the apparent difficulty in bringing the vision into reality. As clarity about
the nature of the vision increases so does awareness of the gap between the vision and current reality. People become disheartened, uncertain, or even cynical, leading to a decline in enthusiasm. The limits to growth structure for “organizational discouragement” looks like this:

In this structure, the limiting factor is the capacity of people in the organization to “hold” creative tension, the central principle of personal mastery. This is why we say that personal mastery is the “bedrock” for developing shared vision—organizations that do not encourage personal mastery find it very difficult to foster sustained commitment to a lofty vision.

Emerging visions can also die because people get overwhelmed by the demands of current reality and lose their focus on the vision. The limiting factor becomes the time and energy to focus on a vision:

In this case, the leverage must lie in either in finding ways to focus less time and effort on fighting crises and managing current reality, or to break off those pursuing the new vision from those responsible for handling “current reality.” In many ways, this is the strategy of
“skunk works,” small groups that quietly pursue new ideas out of the organizational mainstream. While this approach is often necessary, it is difficult to avoid fostering two polar extreme “camps” that no longer can support one another. For example, the group that developed the Macintosh computer in the early 1980s broke off almost completely from the rest of Apple, most of whom were focused on the more mundane Apple II. While the separation resulted in a significant breakthrough product, it also created a significant organizational rift which took considerable time to heal and led John Sculley to reorganize Apple into a more conventionally functional hierarchy.

Lastly, a vision can die if people forget their connection to one another. This is one of the reasons that approaching visioning as a joint inquiry is so important. Once people stop asking “What do we really want to create?” and begin proselytizing the “official vision,” the quality of ongoing conversation, and the quality of relationships nourished through that conversation, erodes. One of the deepest desires underlying shared vision is the desire to be connected, to a larger purpose and to one another. The spirit of connection is fragile. It is undermined whenever we lose our respect for one another and for each other’s views. We then split into insiders and outsiders—those who are “true believers” in the vision and those who are not. When this happens, the “visioning” conversations no longer build genuine enthusiasms toward the vision:

The limiting factor when people begin proselytizing and lose their sense of relationship can be time or skills. If there is great urgency to “sign up” for the new vision, people may just not perceive that there is time to really talk and listen to one another. This will be especially likely if people are also unskilled in how to have such a conversation, how to share their vision in such a way that they are not proselytizing, but are encouraging others to reflect on their own visions.
THE MISSING SYNERGY:

SHARED VISION AND SYSTEMS THINKING

I believe that the discipline of building shared vision lacks a critical underpinning if practiced without systems thinking. Vision paints the picture of what we want to create. Systems thinking reveals how we have created what we currently have.

In recent years, many leaders have jumped on to the vision bandwagon. They’ve developed corporate vision and mission statements. They’ve worked to enroll everyone in the vision. Yet, the expected surges in productivity and competitiveness often fail to arrive. This has led many to become disaffected with vision and visioning. The fad cycle has run its course, and the “baby” is about to be “thrown out with the bath water.”

The problem lies not in shared visions themselves, so long as they are developed carefully. The problem lies in our reactive orientation toward current reality. Vision becomes a living force only when people truly believe they can shape their future. The simple fact is that most managers do not experience that they are contributing to creating their current reality. So they don’t see how they can contribute toward changing that reality. Their problems are created by somebody “out there” or by “the system.”

This attitude can be elusive to pin down because in many organizations the belief “We cannot create our future” is so threatening that it can never be acknowledged. There is a strong “espoused view” that being a good manager and leader means being “proactive,” being in charge of your own destiny. A person who questions publicly that the organization can achieve what it has set out to do is quickly labeled as “not on board” and seen as a problem.

Yet, this “can do” optimism is a thin veneer over a fundamentally reactive view, because most organizations are dominated by linear thinking, not systems thinking. The dominance of the “event mentality” tells people that the name of the game is reacting to change, not generating change. An event orientation will eventually drive out real vision, leaving only hollow “vision statements,” good ideas that are never taken to heart.

But as people in an organization begin to learn how existing policies and actions are creating their current reality, a new, more fertile soil for vision develops. A new source of confidence develops; rooted in deeper understanding of the forces shaping current reality
and where there is leverage for influencing those forces. I’ll always remember a manager emerging from an extended “microworld” session at one of the companies in our research program. When asked what he had learned, he replied: “I discovered that the reality we have is only one of several possible realities.”