



Why Focusing on Your Company Vision Still Matters

By Tim Tokarczyk and Emily Livorsi

Watching, waiting and ignoring changes until the COVID-19 pandemic is over isn't going to work. Here's why.

It's been 26 years since Jim Collins and Jerry Porras published their landmark study in ["Built to Last,"](#) and the world has changed significantly since October 26, 1994. We've seen dot-com bubbles burst, terrorism emerge as a global threat and the pace of technological change skyrocket. We've navigated through the Great Recession of 2008, and we've seen the proliferation of disinformation propelled by social media.

Today we're in the midst of a global pandemic and economic downturn, the likes of which we've never experienced in our lifetimes. Industry leaders would be forgiven for asking this question: Does vision still matter when we cannot even predict what will happen tomorrow, let alone months or years from now?

The answer is: Yes, vision still matters. And as we see when returning to the insights in ["Built to Last,"](#) leaders still need to set the foundation and goals that will guide their organizations for the coming years despite continuous uncertainty. To do that, we need to remind ourselves of what vision is and how it can be a transformative tool for our organizations.

Holding Steady Amid Uncertainty

"Built to Last" introduced the world to the concept of "preserve the core and stimulate progress." This is the foundational principle that makes vision such a powerful tool. The first part of vision, defined by a core purpose and core values, is meant to identify the aspects of an organization that should never change. Having a clear purpose and core values provides stability and a reference for everyone to use when making business decisions.

In our current climate, employees need to know that your company's defining characteristics won't change. This is important because your core purpose (why the company exists beyond making money) and your core values (the enduring tenants of behavior) provide guidance for your people. The problem is that the words themselves do not accomplish anything.

To transform your company and build it into an enduring organization requires more than nice-sounding words. Many organizations have a written vision, but few have taken the steps to become truly visionary companies.

To overcome this issue, core values and purposes must be communicated frequently across the organization. Employees need to receive feedback on how they are performing relative to the purpose and values, and they need to understand what they should be doing and changing.

Putting it to the Test

To test how well you have embedded your core purpose and core values into your organization, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do you have a clearly defined core purpose and core values?
2. When was the last time you celebrated someone for aligning with your purpose and values?
3. What training does your organization conduct to align people with your purpose and values?
4. Do you ask interview questions of potential hires to evaluate whether they align with your culture?

5. How do you handle it when workers perform well in their jobs, but do so in ways that don't align with your purpose and values? Do you ignore it because they're high performers, or do you address it directly?

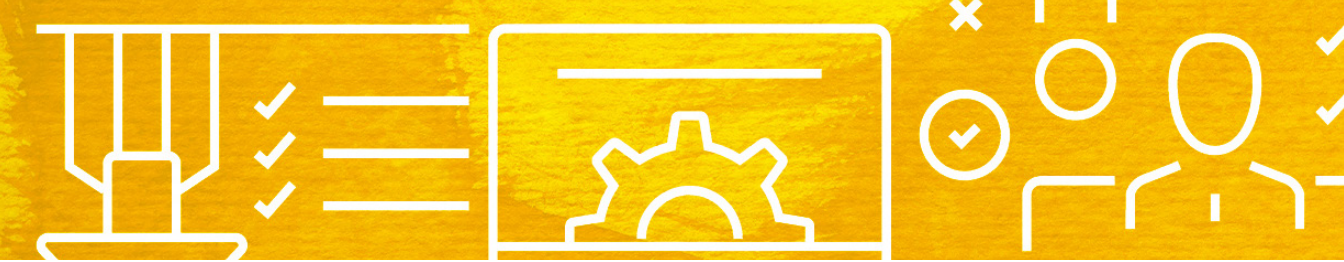
The answers to these questions will help you determine how well you're preserving the core, which is critical to building an enduring organization. In times of uncertainty, this foundation will center your employees and help them stay focused.

In 2019 [FMI interviewed industry executives](#) who led through the Great Recession and asked leaders what factors and leadership moves helped them weather the storm. Many leaders identified having a clear core ideology—and not straying from it—as critical to the health of the business.

Stimulating Progress

Next, Collins and Porras stated that companies need to stimulate progress to accomplish their goals. This often takes the form of a big, hairy, audacious goal (BHAG), with a clear description and understanding of what the organization is trying to accomplish with this goal.

The BHAG unifies the organization around a single goal—a long-term strategic objective that requires change. The core purpose and core values provide stability, but for an organization to survive, it must also change and adapt. In times of uncertainty, your people need to know where the organization is going.



A long-term strategic goal gives your employees direction and guides day-to-day work toward accomplishing that vision. Whether this direction concerns organizational growth, expanding into new markets or segments, redesigning the organization from the inside out, transforming your talent to be best in class, or revolutionizing the industry, your people need to know where the company is heading and how their contributions support those efforts.

To test how well you've clarified your long-term strategic direction, ask yourself the following questions:

- Can your employees clearly define the organization's long-term (10- to 20-year) goals and direction?
- Do your employees understand what they need to do today to help the organization achieve its long-term goals?
- Have you made considerable, measurable strategic progress over the past year?
- Have you celebrated and communicated this progress to the whole organization?
- Do you have a clear picture of what needs to happen over the next year to drive the organization forward? How about over the next five years?

- Do you have clear metrics that allow you to measure progress and a plan to refocus if you get off track?

These are just a few of the key questions that leaders must consider when building a long-lasting culture and organization.

Visionary Versus Average Leaders

To help illustrate the differences between visionary leaders and average leaders, consider the thinking of two different leaders in the following scenarios:

Scenario A: Average Leader

I have no idea what the future looks like. Our backlog is strong going into 2021, so I feel good about that; but I'm not sure what 2022 will bring. We weathered the first wave of COVID-19 well, but I'm not sure what will happen in the next few months. It's better for us to focus on the day to day and just get through this. Eventually, things will quiet down, and we'll be able to get back on track then. At this point, I'll remind my people to focus on what they can control, do their jobs and we'll be ok.

Scenario B: Visionary Leader

I have no idea what the future looks like, but I'm confident that we're heading in the right direction. We have an exceptional culture, and we need to remind people that true success involves performing well day to day, but also aligning with our purpose and values. If we stay true to who we are, we'll be able to thrive in any environment. We



also need to keep our eye on the long-term goals of the organization. While we're dealing with uncertainty, we can't let up on the gas. We have big expectations of the organization and all employees, and there's much we need to accomplish in 2021 if we hope to achieve our BHAG by 2035. We need to leverage the collective experience and wisdom of our people for innovative ideas to overcome our current challenges.

The key difference between these two scenarios is that in times of crisis, average leaders hunker down. They focus on the tactical, the short term. They pause their long-term thinking until there is more certainty. Visionary leaders recognize that in challenging times, they must think strategically and refocus their people on what matters—the core purpose and core values.

Working Toward a Brighter Future

2020 has been a challenging year for all of us. Even businesses that are thriving have endured an uncommon level of stress and new obstacles. The industry has faced many challenges this year, including navigating new work-from-home policies, dealing with COVID outbreaks at the office or on job sites, and shifting focus as project work was paused or stopped, to name a few.

Without intentional focus, leaders will shift to the short-term tactics, pausing vision work in order to endure. Other leaders will take the visionary path and increase communication and refocus their people on the company's core purpose and core values. They'll think strategically about what the future of the organization looks like in a post-COVID world, collaborate more, leverage their people and chart a path forward to ensure continued business success. "Built to Last" was right all those years ago—vision really does matter.

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