



SUVCW LEADERSHIP COMMUNIQUE #1

WHY A VISION?

Donald D. Palmer, Jr
Commander-in-Chief
Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War
28 October 2011

Since the National Encampment in Reston, several Brothers have asked me, "Why do we need a vision?" This answer is simple, but needs some explanation. "Vision" is a widely used term, but not well understood in the context of business operations. Unfortunately, many leaders don't understand what vision is, or why it is important. Over the past few years, I researched this topic to a great extent and pulled together some information from various references to help answer that question. I will first tackle the general topic of "vision" and then expand on the vision defined for our organization as defined in my General Orders #1 dated 26 August 2011.

First, consider this excerpt from a SKY Magazine article by Mapes in 1991, as it applies to many organizations today:

"A specialist was hired to develop and present a series of half-day training seminars on empowerment and teamwork for the managers of a large international oil company. Fifteen minutes into the first presentation, he took a headlong plunge into the trap of assumption. With great intent, he laid the groundwork for what he considered the heart of empowerment-team-building, family, and community. He praised the need for energy, commitment, and passion for production. At what he thought was the appropriate time, he asked the group of 40 managers the simple question on which he was to ground his entire talk: "What is the vision of your company?" No one raised a hand. The speaker thought they might be shy, so he gently encouraged them. The room grew deadly silent. Everyone was looking at everyone else, and he had a sinking sensation in his stomach. "Your company does have a vision, doesn't it?" he asked. A few people shrugged, and a few shook their heads. He was dumbfounded. How could any group or individual strive toward greatness and mastery without a vision? That's exactly the point.....they can't. They can maintain, they can survive; but they can't expect to achieve greatness."

Much of the literature on vision focuses on “for-profit” businesses and corporations, but it clearly applies for “non-profit” organizations as well. One definition of vision comes from Burt Nanus, a well-known expert on the subject. Nanus defines a vision as a **realistic, credible, attractive future for [an] organization**. Let's dissect this definition:

- **Realistic:** A vision must be based in reality to be meaningful for an organization. For example, if you're developing a vision for a computer software company that has carved out a small niche in the market developing instructional software and has a 1.5 percent share of the computer software market, a vision to overtake Microsoft and dominate the software market is not realistic!
- **Credible:** A vision must be believable to be relevant. To whom must a vision be credible? Most importantly, to the members of the organization. If these people do not find the vision credible, it will not be meaningful or serve a useful purpose. Two purposes of a vision include inspiring those in the organization to achieve a level of excellence, and to provide purpose and direction for the work of those people. A vision that is not credible will accomplish neither.
- **Attractive:** If a vision is going to inspire and motivate those in the organization, it must be attractive. People must want to be part of this future that's envisioned for the organization.
- **Future:** A vision is not in the present, it is in the future. In this respect, the image of the leader gazing off into the distance to formulate a vision may not be a bad one. A vision is not where you are now, it's where you want to be in the future.

Nanus goes on to say that the right vision for an organization, one that is a *realistic, credible, attractive future for that organization*, can accomplish a number of things for the organization:

- **It attracts commitment and energizes people.** This is one of the primary reasons for establishing a vision for an organization...its motivational effect. When people can see that the organization is committed to a vision - and that entails more than just having a vision statement - it generates enthusiasm about the course the organization intends to follow, and increases the commitment of people to work toward achieving that vision.
- **It creates meaning in members' lives.** A vision allows people to feel like they are part of a greater whole, and hence provides meaning for their work. The right vision will mean something to everyone in the organization if they can see how their efforts contribute to that vision. Consider the difference between the hotel service worker who can only say, "I make beds and clean bathrooms," to the one who can also say, "I'm part of a team committed to becoming the worldwide leader in providing quality service to our hotel guests." The work is the same, but the context and meaning of the work is different.

- **It establishes a standard of excellence.** A vision serves a very important function in establishing a standard of excellence. In fact, a good vision is all about excellence. Tom Peters, the author of *In Search of Excellence*, talks about going into an organization where a number of problems existed. When he attempted to get the organization's leadership to address the problems, he got the defensive response, "But we're no worse than anyone else!" Peters cites this sarcastically as a great vision for an organization: "Acme Widgets: We're No Worse than Anyone Else!" A vision so characterized by lack of motivation would neither invigorate nor excite anyone about that organization. The standard of excellence also can serve as a continuing goal and stimulate quality improvement programs, as well as providing a measure of the worth of the organization.
- **It bridges the present and the future.** The right vision takes the organization out of the present and focuses it on the future. It's easy to get caught up in the crises of the day, and to lose sight of where you were heading. A good vision can orient you on the future, and provide positive direction. The vision alone isn't enough to move you from the present to the future, however. That's where a strategic plan comes in. A vision is the desired future state for the organization; the strategic plan is how to get from where you are now to where you want to be in the future.

Another definition of vision comes from Oren Harari: **"Vision should describe a set of ideals and priorities, a picture of the future, a sense of what makes the organization special and unique, a core set of principles that the organization stands for, and a broad set of compelling criteria that will help define organizational success."** Are there any differences between Nanus's and Harari's definitions of vision? What are the similarities? Do these definitions help clarify the concept of vision and bring it into focus?

Now, let's discuss our SUVCW vision as it is currently defined, which I refer to as Vision 2020....

"To be recognized by Government, academia and the general public as the leading source of information pertaining to: (1) history, genealogy and preservation initiatives associated with the Grand Army of the Republic and the Soldiers, Sailors and Marines who fought to preserve the Union and (2) patriotism, the duties of citizenship and honoring those that made the supreme sacrifice in defense of this Nation."

Our mission, as defined by our Federal Charter, is as follows...

- To perpetuate the memory of the Grand Army of the Republic and those who fought to save the Union 1861 to 1865;
- to assist in every practicable way in the preservation and making available for research of documents and records pertaining to the Grand Army of the Republic and its members;

- to cooperate in doing honor to all who have patriotically served our country in any war;
- to teach patriotism, and the duties of citizenship, the true history of our country, and the love and honor of our Flag;
- to oppose every tendency or movement that would weaken loyalty to, or make for the destruction or impairment of our constitutional Union;
- and to inculcate and broadly sustain the American principles of representative government, of equal rights, and of impartial justice for all

What does this all mean to us? In its simplest sense, it boils down to reaching the public...be it on Civil War history, genealogical research and information, or the elements of good citizenship. Have we fared well in reaching the public up to this point? In some aspects, we have. However, the largest segment of the public either mistakenly identifies the SUVCW with other organizations, or knows nothing about us at all. So given our current state, can we say...mission accomplished? Vision 2020 takes the key elements of our mission and defines where we want to be by the year 2020. How will we measure success? Among other things, we can certainly track volume of web site searches, official requests for information (Gov't, academia, youth groups, etc.), opportunities for community involvement (lectures, living history programs, etc.) and membership growth.

Now that the vision has been communicated, how do we go about implementing it? This is where **strategic planning** comes in. To describe the relationship between strategic visioning and strategic planning.....**visioning can be considered as establishing where we want the organization to be in the future; strategic planning determines how we get there.** Strategic planning links the present to the future, and shows how we intend to move toward our vision. The process of strategic planning first involves developing goals to help us achieve our vision, then identifying actions that will enable the organization to reach these goals. That's what we will be doing next. As you may be aware, I have established the special committee on Vision and Planning led by PCC David LaBrot to develop the strategic plan needed to implement this vision. During the next several months, this committee will be working with other committees and officers of this organization to help develop this strategic plan. At a minimum, this plan will include strategies for effective advertising to increase public awareness, increasing membership, improving cooperation between Allied Orders, growing youth programs, establishing stretch goals on key data gathering initiatives and developing sound financial strategies.

Hopefully, this provides a better understanding of our vision, why we established it, and what we will be doing to develop a plan to achieve it. My next communiqué will focus on "Branding"...what it is and why it is important for organizations with growth goals.