



Don't Make the Mistake of Vision-Setting Alone

Why you need to share your vision with your employees, and how to include them

BY LAURA MCQUILLAN

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hen it comes to vision-setting, have you ever been tempted to leave employees out of the loop for fear of what they might suggest?

While not every idea — like “beer in the vending machine” or “futons instead of office chairs” — will help shape the future direction of your business, engaging staff in the process can make or break goal-setting.

There’s no one-size-fits-all way to ensure all employees share your organization’s evolving vision, but there are many factors that can help, from hiring the right people to including them in the brainstorming process and empowering them to live your values every day on the job.

Your Workplace’s editorial board of seasoned experts in people management, leadership and change management share their insights into how organizations can maximize staff buy-in when transforming their vision, mission and values.

FIND THE PERFECT MATCH

A key part of the process happens long before your vision-setting does: recruiting talent that’s the right fit for your organization is one of the most crucial factors in ensuring employees share your vision and, perhaps even more importantly, keeping them on board when things change.

In defining what “fit” looks like, companies should already have a strong idea of the soft skills that they are looking for in an ideal candidate — whether that’s empathy, agility or leadership.

“What we actually hire for is more that people value the same things that we do because [we know then that] they’re going to succeed here,” says Julie Einarson, Director of Culture and Communications at group insurance and workplace solutions provider Benefits by Design (BBD).

“Fit doesn’t mean that you’re going to slap rabbit ears on at Easter and be the first person out doing the Easter egg hunt. Fit means that you’re going to be curious, and you’re always going to want to learn. Because adapting is one of our core principles, you’re always going to be energized by change and want to throw yourself into it to explore possibilities,” says Einarson, adding that HR professionals should be careful not to mistake “hiring for fit” with hiring in their own image. Diversity and fit are not mutually exclusive.

Communitech, an organization that helps tech start-ups launch and grow, has a detailed career page on its website that showcases its values to prospective talent to help them quickly gauge whether or not they’re the right match.

“In an environment where everyone goes all-in, you’re always ready to roll up your sleeves; you look good in multiple hats (or at least you enjoy wearing them) and you don’t take yourself too seriously; you embrace change and you don’t see risk as a four-letter word; you have the right attitude and you put in the effort to back it up. You sound awesome.” The page continues: “Want a stuffy work environment with suits and fixed

work hours? You’re awesome too, but Communitech probably isn’t the place for you.”

Communitech’s Executive HR Strategist Nancy Buck says getting the right people is “absolutely critical” — which is part of the reason why a member of the company’s culture club sits in on each and every job interview.

“We can look at our people and go, ‘Wow, they really do fit,’ ” she says. “Our roles change all the time because of the nature of our work, so having people who are okay with ambiguity [is crucial]. If you’re looking for a structured role, Communitech is not the place for you. We need people who are good with change, agility and flexibility.”

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—Nancy Buck

Sandra Carlton, Joint Vice-President and Chief Human Rights Officer of Kingston Health Sciences Centre and Providence Care, says that hiring the right people can ultimately help you avoid pushback when your company changes tack.

“You can train for skills; you can’t train for fit,” she says. “I always believe people have decisions to make if the organization happens to go in a direction that doesn’t feel aligned to them anymore. Then you have [to have] those open conversations about what that means for them. Do they fit anymore with the organization? If

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you've hired right at the beginning, and you stay true to who you are as an organization, you can have those conversations throughout."

PROMOTE PARTICIPATION

Both of the healthcare organizations Carlton works with are currently in the throes of strategic planning. She says that their leaders are dedicated to ensuring that everyone — from employees to the governing board to external stakeholders — supports their future vision.

They believe that consulting staff is "absolutely imperative," and so are using online surveys, focus groups and town halls to gather feedback — no small feat when there are 7,000 staff members working around the clock, seven days a week.

"I recognize not everybody will participate, but it's really important to me that everybody has the opportunity to participate, and to make that [process] adaptable, flexible, nimble, and simple enough, and to remove any barriers for them to do that. If people participate, they're engaged in the process, they've got some buy-in to it, so they can see themselves in the vision."

While it may be tempting for the C-suite to commandeer the vision-setting process, all of our experts say that asking employees to contribute their ideas and perspectives will maximize their engagement and alignment around the vision as "co-creators."

Senior leaders may feel it's their responsibility to design the vision — or simply want to do it themselves — but that makes it "very difficult" for staff to buy in, says leadership and organizational excellence expert Dr. Craig Dowden.

"If you're being asked to do something that you have had no part in contributing to, well, that is a bit of a challenge. Those crucial conversations, and having those open discussions, are really important because if you create the vision and don't include people ... they're either going to suffer in silence or they're going to be frustrated."

He suggests that it's much better to include people early on, letting them know where you want to go and hearing some of their challenges, and then proceed from there.

Sean Slater, Executive Vice-President of Sales and Marketing at Homewood Health, says even in organizations that feel a top-down approach is better for them, it's important to find ways to include staff.

Our experts agree
that there are no
wrong answers, only
"learning moments."

"Even if they don't have an opportunity to contribute necessarily to the development of the vision itself, maybe there's the opportunity to contribute to how that vision comes to life inside the organization," he says.

Slater is a fan of utilizing "evangelists" and early adopters to help communicate change and bring others along. He adds that even if HR feels frustrated by some staff digging their heels in, they should allow those staff to

express their hesitations and concerns.

“Don’t just park them or ignore them because they don’t fit in, but bring them into the conversation, bring their questions or concerns into the conversation, and try and work through them,” he says.

Our experts agree that there are no wrong answers, only “learning moments.”

“If there is a misalignment in terms of what an employee or employees think the vision of the future is and what the senior leadership thinks that it is, have a conversation. Figure out, ‘So, what data points are they using to come up with their vision for the future? How can we maximize alignment? And what do we need to do as senior leaders in our company in order to ensure that [alignment]?’” Dowden says.

TALK IT OVER

Once the vision is set, clearly communicating it to your staff in a way that resonates with them, and regularly reinforcing that message, will ensure that they’re clear on what they need to do every day on the job.

“Sometimes organizations’ vision statements are lofty and eloquent, and many employees just don’t see where they fit in it. It’s important that it really speaks to the minds and hearts of people [so] they can really see how the work that they do contributes to that vision of the organization,” Carlton says.

Slater adds that leaders and HR must be open to feedback and keep answering questions as they pop up. “Be prepared to continually communicate back against that original plan.”

And it’s not a one-and-done, our experts say.

For instance, at Communitel, staff meet every Tuesday just before lunch

to showcase what they’ve been working on, share information and hear from the CEO and other leaders.

At BBD, employees use the company’s tagline: “to help working Canadians,” whether in “boast posts” on the company intranet or in conversation, to reinforce the vision they’re supporting, shares Einarson.

“We actually don’t have this stuff written on our walls. I know a lot of people advocate for ‘put it on the wall,’ but that feels static to us, so we keep a heartbeat to it, and an ongoing rhythm, by keeping it very visible where our employees are going and interacting and transacting as part of their employee experience,” she says.

Likewise, at Kingston Health Sciences Centre and Providence Care, you won’t find any inspirational decals.

“We don’t want our mission, vision and values [to be something] that somebody sticks on a wall, and people walk by, but no one really knows it or it [isn’t] integral in what they’re doing,” Carlton says. “It’s a living document, it’s a living mission. It’s not just something posted on the walls, but it lives and breathes in the organization.”

To keep the momentum behind your mission, she suggests utilizing “cascading goals” — a process of translating goals from one level to the next to ensure alignment between organizational strategy and the activities and ambitions of individual employees. This can help staff see, and measure, how they’re making a difference.

And of course, knowing the “why” behind the “what” is critical.

Dowden cautions that if staff don’t know their purpose, they “will likely come up with their own whys — and chances are they may not be the most flattering,” he adds with a laugh.

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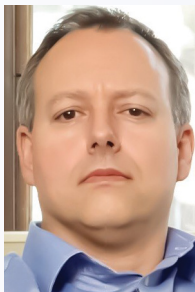
With much gratitude
to our departing
board member:



Steve Jackson,
CHRL, CHRE

Vice-President,
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And a warm
welcome to our new
member:



J. Scott Allinson
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“You can interpret a particular action in many different ways, and so I think communicating the why, and how the organization wants to live that why, is huge. We are meaning-driven creatures — we look for meaning in things, that’s just how we’re hard-wired — so we need to have that connection to purpose in order to be maximally engaged,” he says.

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—Craig Dowden

Communicating the “why” is even more important as more millennials and Gen Z join the workforce, seeking out meaningful work where they can make a difference.

“We know they don’t want just a statement on the wall. They have to really have some meaning,” Carlton says.

Carlton adds that creating a workplace that employees want to come to every day is not always easy in a 24/7 healthcare environment, but she adds she is a fan of always saying “What can we do?” rather than “We can’t do that.”

BBD’s vision — to help working Canadians — is continually reinforced: from its homepage to job interviews and throughout onboarding to ensure

everyone comes in each day knowing what it is they’re trying to achieve.

“We don’t want them coming to work saying, ‘Oh, I’m just working client service,’ or coming to work saying, ‘I’m processing quotes today.’ They walk through the door thinking, ‘Here I am, helping working Canadians be healthy and financially secure,’” Einarson says.

At Communitech, staff who attend conferences or meet with clients will bring their learnings back to the company to share with other staff, to “really help them understand where we’re trying to drive to and what we’re trying to do,” says Buck.

“Part of culture is really understanding the larger picture of ‘why you need my work’ and ‘how my job really contributes to the overall vision of the organization’ — that’s what really gets people jazzed up.”

THE TAKEAWAY

The future can be overwhelming. As the New Year unfolds, setting goals to achieve organizational vision will be front-of-mind for most managers and leaders. As you map out your plans for the coming year, don’t forget to include the greatest champions of your organization in the process — your employees can be your best collaborators and most valuable assets.

Our experts agree — if you want your people to share your vision you must hire for fit, actively engage employees to participate in the process and bake ongoing communication about your vision into your culture. **W**

Laura McQuillan is a freelance multimedia journalist who reports on business and social issues. Originally from New Zealand, she’s passionate about telling stories that matter, while exploring Canada.

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