

Measuring the Impact of a Shared Vision on the Perceived Meaningfulness

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Abstract: In this paper we describe an approach to assess the impact that a shared vision has on the perceived meaningfulness of work in an organization. Our measurement system is based on the essential principles of performance measurement. Building on this assessment logic, we present the process and respective scales that allow us to measure changes in perceived meaningfulness that occur through a shared vision development process. With this work, we provide a practically applicable measure to evaluate whether the creation of a shared vision is beneficial for an organization.

Keywords: Shared Vision, Meaningfulness, Performance Measurement, Sustainability, Purpose, Vision Development

1. Introduction

Corporate Visions are said to be an important aspect for the strategic alignment of organizations. In the realm of Knowledge Management (KM) for example, they establish a shared value system and guide the creation of new knowledge (Nonaka, 1995). This means that the vision of a company (or any organization) provides a frame of reference for all members of the organization and thereby connects its actions to its purpose. Additionally, the vision can also be used to restructure the existing knowledge system. Therefore, it is important to note that such a knowledge vision goes beyond mere considerations of the products or services a company has to offer, but it should create an image of what the company does and how it aspires to leave an impact in the world. Nonaka mentions that a (knowledge) vision serves to enhance personal commitment from middle managers and frontline workers as it provides meaning and a sense of direction to the tasks these people perform every day (Nonaka, 1995 p.228).

Acknowledging these claims, a vision seems to be a powerful tool in the arsenal of executives. Still, from a research standpoint we must admit that there has not been a lot of research conducted on the actual impact of a corporate vision. This is not to say that there has not been any research, as for example Kaiser et al. analyzed corporate vision statements of companies listed in the Forbes 2000 list and found that an elaborate vision statement seems to have a positive impact on the success of a company (Kaiser et al., 2022). However, the success of a company in this study was measured along the Forbes 2000 criteria, which is heavily focused on financial performance.¹ Apart from financial success, it stands to reason that a corporate vision also impacts other facets of the organization such as the already mentioned personal commitment or employee satisfaction, the perception of work as being meaningful, as well as the broad topic of organizational culture in general. All of these are worthwhile considering in an era of workforces increasing dissatisfaction with their jobs (consider for example a recent phenomenon known as the “anti work movement”²) and in times, where we witness an ongoing demand to shift from a profit driven to a more purpose driven way of organizing (Laloux, 2014; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2021).

These current developments result in a need for action for executives. Yet, reasonable management requires actions to be based on reasonable judgment of a given situation. This in particular includes the evaluation of actions taken in order to learn about and improve the condition of the organization - a process referred to as performance measurement. Concerning the evaluation of the impact of corporate visions, we argue that we currently lack adequate mechanisms or tools to measure precisely which effects the vision has on the organization in general, and the individuals engaged in the organization in particular - apart from eventual positive financial performance.

¹ Forbes compiles the Global 2000 list by a combination of sales, profits, assets and market value. See <https://www.forbes.com/2011/04/20/global-2000-11-methodology.html?sh=d3054382a225>.

² See for example <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220126-the-rise-of-the-anti-work-movement>.

With our contribution we, thus, pursue two main goals: firstly, we present an initial idea on how (and what) we could measure in order to evaluate the impact of a shared vision; and secondly, we aim to open up a scientific discussion on how we can practically measure the impact that a shared vision has on individuals in the context of the organization. Hence, in the following sections we clarify what we mean by the term shared vision and why (and how) we plan to measure it.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Performance Measurement

Performance Measurement is a term that is equivocal in the literature (Franco-Santos et al., 2007). All approaches have in common, however, that there are certain performance measures accompanied by some supporting infrastructure that records performance data respectively (Franco-Santos et al., 2007). Apart from the obvious goal of measuring performance and, thus, supporting the execution of strategy, a performance measurement system can also impact organizational learning processes and the overall improvement of the organization. Furthermore, it can influence corporate members' behavior as well as internal and external communication (Franco-Santos et al., 2007). Concerning the concrete measures of performance, there exist a variety of opinions about what should be included to depict the actual performance of an organization. Initially, measures were primarily concerned with financial performance (profit, ROI, productivity) and derived from accounting. This was until markets began to change in the late 80's when the rise of new technologies and production philosophies required performance measures to account for more subtle differences like timeliness of production, the efficiency of manufacturing strategy or operational measures which also lower management could use in their daily decisions (Ghalayini and Noble, 1996; Striteska and Spickova, 2012). This also shows in the fact that already in the late 90's, only a fraction of a company's market value could be depicted by traditional performance measures (Webber, 1999). A look at today's most valuable companies reinforces this image even more.

In an effort to capture and measure this new value in the so-called *New Economy* that stems from information and knowledge within a company, the notion of Intellectual Capital began to develop (Guthrie, 2001). It aims exactly at capturing what Petty and Guthrie describe as *knowledge-based* intangibles which include processes, organizational knowledge, and the capacity to solve problems (Petty and Guthrie, 2000). Research on intellectual capital has identified dimensions to subclassify and specify the superordinate concept into structural capital, human capital, relational capital and social capital (Ferenhof et al., 2015).

However, as we are looking for a measure to assess the impact of a shared vision, we are focusing less on measuring the value but rather the strategic implications for a shared vision. Thus, we built our approach for measurement along the principles of performance measurement. Still, it is worth noting that the process of creating a shared vision can be seen as a knowledge creating process in itself (Kaiser et al., 2013). Hence, it adds to the organizational knowledge base which can be described through Intellectual Capital.

2.2 Vision

A vision is different from a goal or an objective. A vision is a documented purpose that is detailed, customized, unique, and reasonable. A goal is a general statement of an intent that persists until it is achieved or no longer needed. An objective, on the other hand, is a specific and product-oriented statement of an intended accomplishment that is attainable, observable, and measurable by specifying the what, where, when and how. In contrast to an objective, a vision focuses on why. Therefore, a vision does not change but only becomes refined over time, whereas plans or strategies to pursue a vision (e.g., goals, objectives) remain flexible and changeable (Kim & Oki 2011, p.250).

There are various definitions for the term "vision". O'Connell condensed a majority of these definitions by stating that a vision "is an idealized goal state, a set of blueprints for the future, an agenda, a map for members to follow, and an image of what needs to be achieved. It may include both long-term, future-oriented goals and emotional appeals embedded in a set of values; it is focused on change and depicts a future that is credible, realistic, attractive, inspiring, and better than the status quo" (O'Connell et al. 2010, p.105).

For Collins and Porras for instance, a company's vision consists of two major components, namely a core ideology (yin) and an envisioned future (yan). The yin contains the unchanging reasons why we live and what defines us. The yan is our envisioned future, what we want to achieve in our lives and who we want to become (Collins &

Porras 1996, p.66). The authors stress that it is crucial to develop a vivid description of this envisioned future as it requires “such a big commitment that when people see what the goal will take, there’s an almost audible gulp” (Collins and Porras 1996, p.75).

Based on various definitions of a vision, our definition is the following: *a vision is a clear image of a fulfilling and desirable future which can be described to others and which is possible to be realized in any – maybe extremely challenging – way, shape or form*. This definition of a vision is the same for individuals as well as for social systems regardless of their size or dimension.

Literature suggests that there are four approaches to develop a vision (O’Connell et al. 2010, p.109f): In one approach, the leader creates the vision and communicates it to his or her followers. A second approach suggests that a key leader teams with a group of top managers to create and communicate a vision to followers. In the third approach, visions are co-created by a leader and followers in a sense-making and sense-giving process, where the leader proposes a vision which is being iteratively modified through exchanges between the leader and followers. Finally, a vision may be developed when the organization as a whole engages in a large group collaborative process.

2.3 Shared Vision

Literature on shared vision is largely separated into a “top-down” and a “bottom-up” camp. While the top-down camp argues that a leader’s vision is shared through communicating the vision top-down, the bottom-up camp (e.g. (Kaiser and Fordinal, 2010), (Senge, 1990), (Wang and Rafiq, 2009)) argues a vision should be developed or created bottom-up through sharing several personal visions in a group or organization.

The “top-down camp” sees a shared vision as resembling the leader's personal vision which is communicated in specific ways to followers in a top-down manner. This approach aims at followers taking over the vision of the leaders. Within research and practice, the emphasis is on the proper way of communicating the vision to followers (e.g. through mental imagery, vivid descriptions and authentic emotions) (Carton and Lucas, 2018), (Carton et al, 2014), (Venus et al., 2013) with the goal of creating a shared cognition. Empirical research, especially on the properties of vision communication, has been conducted extensively (Carton and Lucas, 2018), (Carton et al, 2014), (Eldor, 2019).

The “bottom-up camp” advocates behaviors that delegate “authority to employees, promoting their self-directed and autonomous decision-making, coaching, sharing information, and asking for input” (Sharma and Kirkman, 2015). This approach fosters the communication between leaders and followers and letting go of control from the sphere of the leaders towards the sphere of the followers (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2014), (Kearney et al, 2019), (Kim et al., 2018). Here, the importance of the single individual for the organization is advocated and the top management supports the individual self-expression within the organizational frame. Contrary to communicating visions top-down, shared visions are built bottom-up and emerge from each personal vision. In other words, the organizational vision is an emergent property of each personal vision.

3. Measuring the Impact of a Shared Vision (Research Design)

The authors of this paper have been involved in and facilitated many shared vision development processes in small, medium and large organizations, both in the profit and in the non-profit sector. From our anecdotal experience, most of the interventions turned out highly beneficial for the organizations we worked with and the feedback we received was usually positive throughout all the organization’s members. People, for example, reported that the process itself was an interesting experience and that they learned much about the organization and the needs that underlie the functioning of the whole system. We also observed an increase in commitment to the common cause realized through the organization during and after the development of a shared vision.

However, all these impressions are to date only personal and thus subjective observations that may well indicate that something in the organization must have changed, but do not precisely show what the actual outcome of an intervention was. For this reason, we were looking for adequate tools to better understand and eventually measure the impact of the development of a shared vision on an organization in order to evaluate our interventions. Such a tool should enable us to (1) see what has changed, (2) measure to what extent it has changed and (3) enable a comparison between different interventions and/or different organizations. As we could not find any existing tool that meets our requirements, we began thinking about developing an individual solution, based on the principles of performance measurement. Basically, every Performance Management

System must consist of at least a source of information (*information provision*), a measure (*measure design and selection*) and some sort of data storage (*data capture*) (Franco-Santos et al., 2007) to be considered a Performance Management system. Thus, our measurement system must also include at least three processes (measure design, data capture, information provision).

In the following we illustrate our initial approach to design such a system. We would like to note that our intention is not to create a new measurement scale, but to make use of already tried and tested, existing scales to build an appropriate performance measure that is both meaningful and easily applicable in the practical process of organizational vision development.

3.1 Measure design and selection

The toolbox of performance measures is manifold and offers measures for all sorts of variables. From a knowledge and learning perspective, however, we need to focus particularly on the individual members of an organization. This is reinforced against the background of a demand for purpose driven organizing that puts people at the core of strategy creation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2021). Following the claims that a vision should impact the sense of direction (Nonaka, 1995), give motivation (Mirvis et al., 2010), and - as an image of purpose - act as a guiding pillar for action (Laloux, 2014; Robertson, 2015), we ought to measure exactly that. A shared vision should, on the individual level, lead to the perception that the purpose of the organization is important and meaningful for every stakeholder of the organization. Contributing to that purpose of the organization should thus be perceived as meaningful by the members of the organization. Accordingly, we concluded to base our measure design on the measurement of meaningfulness on an individual level.

We acknowledge that this ultimately is a deliberate choice, nevertheless it appears as a promising way to get some insight into the supposed impact of a shared vision. In this regard we draw on researchers' intuition (Kump, 2022) and abductive reasoning as a starting point for the selection of appropriate data for empirical study (Behfar and Okhuysen, 2018). The rationale is, that when we consider what a vision ought to induce in an organization, we must favor the "soft" individual level over common financial measures.

3.2 Data capture

The logic of data capture for our measurement is straightforward and consists of an initial assessment before the creation of a shared vision in an organization, an assessment right after the intervention and one or more assessments after the shared vision has been created and communicated (roughly one year after the intervention). Respective scales for the measurement will be presented in the next section. A practically important criterion here, is the ease of use of the scale to enable its actual application in shared vision development processes.

To ensure applicability and the ease of use we intend to test data capture with groups of undergraduate students at our institution. This is to test whether the questions make sense to participants and also has the advantage that we can install different pre-conditions as a point of reference. For all groups, the three data collection points are the beginning of the course, shortly after the creation of a shared vision and after the final exam.

3.3 Information provision

The aspect of information provision aims to process the results of the performance measure and present them in an intelligible manner (Franco-Santos et al., 2007). In a company, this usually means the regular interpretation of the results in order to make decisions based on them. To do so, the results must be made accessible and comprehensible for the decision makers. In our case of a primarily research oriented project, however, the aspect of information provision plays a rather subordinate role. Yet, in case an organization would implement a regular measure of meaningfulness of work, the provision of information would rise in its importance.

4. Measuring Meaningfulness

Meaningfulness can be described as the perceived value of a purpose on the basis of subjective ideals and standards (Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012). Thus, measuring meaningfulness appears as a promising way to assess the impact of a shared vision. However, meaningfulness is obviously a latent variable and must be operationalized in terms of a reliable scale. In the literature, there exist six fundamental dimensions of meaningfulness in the context of work: balance, belonging, calling, enjoyment/enablement, significance, and work as an end and not as a means (Baumgartner and Kaiser, 2021).

Balance is characterized by balancing mental and physical health, especially in regard to reversed items such as „How often have you been emotionally exhausted?“ (COPSOQ) In order to perceive one’s work as meaningful, the balance of one's own needs and feelings, as well as needs of others is necessary (e.g., “I have a good balance between the needs of others and my own needs.”, CMWS)

Belonging is characterized by an encouraging and respectful community at work, in particular the relation to co-workers and the pleasant atmosphere provided by them. Items range from taking pleasure in working together to value systems, respectively shared values, in the form of moral decisions (e.g., “At work my sense of what is right and wrong gets blurred,” reversed, CMWS), and speaking openly about values.

Calling is characterized by the feeling to be "meant to" pursue a kind of work (e.g., “I am pursuing my current line of work because I believe I have called to do so.”, CVQ). It is not pivotal whether one has already been called to a line of work or is trying to discover one's calling.

Enjoyment and enablement are characterized by getting a sense of personal satisfaction when completing projects, solving problems, or losing track of time when working. Subtopics of this dimension include motivation and involvement, personal development (e.g., “I view my work as contributing to my personal growth”, WAMI), inspiration (e.g., “The vision we collectively work towards inspires me.”, CMWS), hope, and a good fit between work and life’s purpose.

Significance is characterized by perceiving work as impactful on society or customers (e.g., “I want to find a job that meets some of society’s needs.”, CVQ). Individuals define their work as significant when it serves a greater purpose or the common good, and makes a positive, truly important difference in the world.

Work as an end and not as a means is characterized by perceiving one's career as a path to purpose and life meaning. Items of this dimension include better understanding oneself and the world around oneself through work, feeling inspired and more alive during this activity, as well as viewing work as meaningful in general (e.g., “It is mainly through work that I will become what I was “meant to be” in life.”, EMWI).

We build our measurement of the impact of a shared vision on these six dimensions that can be assessed using the following scales:

- the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS; Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012),
- the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger, Dik, and Duffy, 2012),
- the Existential Meaning of Work Inventory (EMWI; Fairlie and Flett, 2004),
- the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ; Kristensen, Hannerz, Høgh and Borg, 2005),
- the Vocation Identity Questionnaire (VIQ; Dreher, Holloway and Schoenfelder, 2007), and
- the Calling and Vocation Questionnaire (CVQ; Dik, Eldridge, Steger, and Duffy, 2012).

However, not every dimension will be influenced to the same degree by a shared vision. *Table 1* shows which scales include items of the six dimensions, including the exact number of items:

Table 1: Distribution of items among scales, based on Baumgartner and Kaiser (2021)

Scale’s name	CMWS	WAMI	EMWI	COPSOQ	VIQ	CVQ
Number of dimensions targeted (out of 6)	6	3	4	4	3	4
Number of relevant items	28	10	12	17	9	24
Items targeting balance	4			7		
Items targeting belonging	8			7		
Items targeting calling	2		2		1	8
Items targeting enjoyment/enablement	8	1	3	1	7	1
Items targeting significance	5	5	2	2	1	8

Scale's name	CMWS	WAMI	EMWI	COPSOQ	VIQ	CVQ
Items targeting work as an end and not as a means	1	4	5			7

Depending on the dimensions of interest, relevant items can be selected on the basis of table 1. While some of these scales only have a rather narrow focus on only a few dimensions, others such as the CMWS, are comprehensive.

When choosing items of different scales for the same assessment, it must be considered that the scales have various response formats, given in table 2. It is advisable to limit the number of different response formats used, to achieve clearly structured and coherent results.

Table 2: Response format of meaning measurement scales, based on Baumgartner and Kaiser (2021)

Scale's name	Response format
CMWS	dual response format: frequency and importance; five-point Likert-scale
WAMI	five-point Likert-scale
EMWI	seven-point Likert-scale
COPSOQ	five-point Likert-scale
VIQ	five-point Likert-scale
CVQ	four possible options from "1 Not at all true of me" to "4 Absolutely true of me"

From the scales presented, WAMI (Steger, Dik, and Duffy, 2012) is the most frequently used scale (e.g., Akin et al, 2013; Fouché et al, 2017). However, only CMWS (Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012) covers all six dimensions of meaningfulness. Hence, we recommend relying on CMWS in order to notice changes in every possible dimension of meaningfulness that could be affected by a shared vision.

5. Conclusion & Limitations

In this paper, we have described an approach to assess the impact that a shared vision has on the meaningfulness of work in an organization. We argue that meaningfulness is a reasonable measure, because according to the literature, it is closely related to a (shared) vision that depicts the organization's purpose. Our assessment of meaningfulness is based on the essential principles of performance measurement and consists of *scale selection*, *data capture* and *information provision*. Based on this assessment logic, we present respective scales that allow us to measure changes in perceived meaningfulness that occur through a shared vision development process. Ultimately, we suggest using Lips-Wiersma and Wright's CMWS, as it provides the most comprehensive selection of meaningfulness dimensions.

We believe that specifying this impact is crucial to raise awareness to the importance of creating and communicating a shared vision among both researchers and practitioners.

With our approach, we focus primarily on the impact of a shared vision on the individual perception of the meaningfulness of work in the context of an organization. Thus, our unit of analysis are the individual members of an organization. Further study might incorporate more of an organizational perspective and thus also use (organizational) measures such as financial performance or the increase of Intellectual Capital, or address other individual aspects apart from meaningfulness, that could be influenced by a shared vision (changes in behavior, peoples motivation, workplace satisfaction, etc.).

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