

## Vision Casting in Uncertain Times

*“A leader's role is to raise people's aspirations for what they can become and to release their energies so they will try to get there.”*

— David Gergen

These are tough times for law firm leaders. Many firms have had one or more rounds of layoffs. Attorneys are pressured to bill more hours and bring in more work. Staffs are being asked to do more work with fewer resources. Attorneys and staff alike wonder if they will still have a job next week, month or year. Anxiety is high, even in the best of firms. While there is a light at the end of the tunnel, some wonder if it is a freight train.

Managing partners and firm leaders have a lot to think about now, including changing client expectations, fee pressures and increased convergence, not to mention internal issues of compensation, talent management and profitability.

Casting vision is probably one of the last things they are thinking about. Sure, in good times, communicating a compelling vision of the future for an ever growing firm is standard among good leaders, but today it seems risky, even fool-hardy.

But attorneys and staff need vision more now than ever before. People want to know how they are going to get out of this mess. They desire to know that the firm has a plan and is working hard on it. Individuals want to be part of the solution and have confidence that their contribution will be recognized, appreciated and remembered. Everyone wants to be part of creating the future of the firm.

Firm leaders need to articulate a clear and compelling vision of the future. Wise leaders communicate how their firm will be different from others and why they will have a competitive advantage. They outline the specific steps the firm will take to get there and the contributions needed by every individual to realize the vision. The vision needs to be forward-looking, positive and compelling, yet practical and realistic.

Survival is not a compelling vision. Nor is maintaining status quo until the market gets better.

A compelling vision is one that gives people a reason to come to work early on Monday morning and creates hope in the hallways. A compelling vision inspires innovation and creativity. A compelling vision motivates and doesn't discourage. A compelling vision is transparent, open, honest and trustworthy.

Here are several ways to communicate a compelling vision:

1. Develop a theme: Focus on one, two or three key words or ideas that convey the essence of your vision. Create metaphors and find creative ways to use them. Practice your

‘elevator speech’ that you can deliver in just a few minutes, whether you are meeting with a practice group or waiting in line at Starbucks.

2. Tell a story: Stories give life to vision. People will remember and retell a powerful and illustrative story before they recall a dry vision statement. Stories that evoke emotion and imagination create trust, credibility and engagement.
3. Use multiple channels: Communicating vision is a lot like branding – it takes multiple channels of communication to get your point across effectively. Use your elevator speech and strategic stories when you meet with practice groups, staff and firm leaders. Use intranets, blogs, social networks and email. Employ whatever tools you have to keep your message in circulation.
4. Repetition: Vision casting is a lot like fly casting - you have to cast over and over and over again before you get a bite. Constantly communicating your vision and connecting individual and group contributions to the vision is critical for people to 'get it'.
5. Build a movement: Identify opinion leaders, stakeholders and supporters who will influence others to buy into the vision. Seek their support before going mainstream. This may require some horse-trading to get buy-in from potential naysayers.
6. Communicate one-on-one: Engaging people individually gives them an opportunity to provide feedback, give support and create energy around the vision. One-on-one meetings are critical to getting buy-in and engaging people to take action.
7. Practice what you preach: Reinforce your words with your behavior. If people see one thing and hear another, you’ve lost your credibility and your vision becomes a joke.

Vision casting is not the sole responsibility of the managing partner. Even if you are not the author of the vision, it is your job to understand and communicate the vision to your group. Everyone in the firm should be able to answer these questions:

- What is the firm’s vision and values?
- How do I connect the firm’s vision to my role in the firm?
- How do I show my passion for the firm’s vision?
- How do I overcome any obstacles I or my group has in realizing the vision?

In the ancient book of Habakkuk, the prophet wrote, “Write the vision and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that read it. Where there is no vision the people perish.” (*Habakkuk 2:2*). As you enter this season of annual review and planning for next year, consider how you will communicate your compelling vision.