

# Striving relentlessly towards the mean... should public sector organisations be aiming higher?

This six-part series of articles examines approaches to strategy design, performance improvement and employee engagement in public sector organisations.

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*We have been struck by the complexity of the challenges facing our public sector partners, much of which centres around a perceived (in some cases 'actual') lack of control over the future direction of the organisation. More often than not, the inevitable result is unclear messages about the future, vague strategies, inconsistent leadership, confused organisational behaviour, frustrated, dis-engaged employees – even a sense of malaise and defeatism.*

*However we wonder if much of the perceived organisational strife owes as much to self-inflicted wounds as it does to any external influence. Public sector leaders are not powerless to prevent generic vision creation, inconsistent leadership and loose strategic and cultural alignment. Perhaps employees and customers alike should expect a little more.*

*Whilst the multiple external influences and drivers influencing public sector bodies, escalating, funding pressures and public expectation will remain inherent challenges - we have cause for optimism, and believe there are many opportunities for public sector organisations to reassert some control over their futures and in doing so set themselves apart from their sector peer group.*

*This six-part series of articles examines ineffective organisational behaviour we have observed in the public sector regarding strategic focus, cultural and operational alignment and employee and customer engagement. As well as pointing out the occasional elephant in the room, we highlight examples of good practice; and offer some suggested strategies for tackling common organisational challenges in order to build sustainable organisational performance improvement.*

# Vision creation in the public sector: *So flipping what?*

Tony Reynolds, Director of Consulting Southern Region, at invigor8 explores.

## Vision Statements – A brief reminder

There are thirty-plus years worth of definitions of what a vision statement is, their purpose and value. Management theorists suggest that well designed vision statements can be powerful messages of intent and a compelling call-to-arms for employees. That crucially, they describe a believable and attractive alternative future for their employees, partners, customers and communities.

Roger Constandse's definition below seems to capture the general thrust of the research:

'A vision statement is a vivid, idealised description of a desired outcome that inspires, energises and helps create a mental picture of an organisation's target'.

Of course vision statements are statements not only about an organisation's future, but the future of those who work for and rely on that organisation. They form a key part of an organisation's proposition (or brand promise). A vision statement signals to employees the motivation, aspirations and ambition of a Board, a Chief Executive or Leadership Team and can help an employee answer the question – is this a future I want to be part of?

If Constandse's definition offers a plausible description of what a vision statement is for, - it begs the question, why are the vision statements of public sector organisations so often characterised by a distinct lack of idealism, inspiration, or energising qualities?

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## Compliance over inspiration

There are obvious and necessary commonalities of purpose and operational focus dictated by statutory responsibilities for all local authorities, acute hospitals and other public sector bodies.

Compliance with legislation and nationally driven targets, preparing for and responding to external assessment and audit, and responding to national

and local media - are all unavoidable influences on time, focus and leadership behaviour. In addition, residents or patients and their host communities also share common aspirations and expectations and a degree of uniformity in organisational direction and activity across 'like organisations' is therefore both unavoidable and desirable at the same time.

However is it the elements that public sector bodies share that should dictate visioning work across the sector? Or should the articulation of difference drive vision creation?

It seems logical that every NHS organisation, local authority and the community they serve will have its own unique starting point, its own:

- *History, identity and reputation*
- *Geography and climate*
- *Attractions*
- *Population demographics*
- *Business and industry*
- *Infrastructure*
- *Community ambition and degree of satisfaction with the status quo*
- *Threats and opportunities.*

One might expect then that this uniqueness would have a huge bearing on vision creation. One might also expect then that the public sector would be awash with creative, bold and innovative visionaries, and vision.

Below is a sample of 12 vision statements taken from Local Authorities from across the UK. They provide a fairly typical flavour of vision statements selected from more than 100 councils researched. Note that some are taken from Corporate Plans, others from Sustainable Community Strategies.

Table 1: Vision Statements in Local Authorities

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Vision Statement</i>
1	Improve the quality of life for the people of the District, now and for future generations.
2	X will be a vibrant, inclusive, safe, healthy and prosperous town
3	Our vision for X in 2017 is for it to be a place where everyone has an improved quality of life and the confidence to achieve their ambitions
4	X will be a prosperous and lively borough, full of opportunity and welcoming to all. A place that will thrive for generations to come, whose future will be determined by local people.
5	X City Council plans to continue providing excellent services that are accessible and sustainable to ensure our city is a healthy and vibrant place to live, work and visit.
6	Our vision for X is that it remains the place where people choose to live and do business. We want to be seen as excellent in the eyes of local people
7	We will deliver prosperity and security for the people of X by encouraging economic growth while improving the quality of life and environment for those living and working in the county.
8	To improve the lives of those in our community, and to maintain and enhance the environment.
9	To create a place which is safer, healthier, more prosperous and sustainable - a place where people choose to live, work, visit and socialise, and which is addressing the needs of the future
10	A county where strong economic growth is matched with a community that believes in itself and aims high, and where everyone can achieve to their potential and enjoy a high quality of life
11	By 2015 X will have a vibrant mix of communities supported by quality housing, accessible transport links, vibrant open spaces, strong cultural attractions and a prosperous local economy.
12	A council we are all proud of

“It’s vision creation dictated by national policy, by existing service and portfolio structures, characterised by conformity, and a subservience to the status quo.”

Many of the vision statements in Table 1 share obvious similarities, particularly concerning quality of life, improving opportunities and confidence. But what is striking is that whilst many nod towards a better future, they do so in a drearily familiar, insipid and uninspiring fashion. Few create the ‘mental picture of the organisation’s target’ - needed to fulfill Roger Constandse’s requirements.

Improving quality of life is of course a worthwhile pursuit (it also never ends), but the phrase ‘hedging your bets’ also comes to mind.

What many of these statements seem to convey is a commitment to making small incremental improvements to what is already being done. It’s vision creation dictated by national policy, by existing service and portfolio structures, characterised by conformity, and a subservience to the status quo.

**We would argue - its not vision at all.**

Some might protest that our observation is a little iniquitous, that vision statements on their own do not always adequately represent the sum of genuine vision that might exist within an organisation or within supporting strategy. This may well be the case, and its true that the authorities in Table 1 go on in depth to explain what they mean by their vision statements, through their aims and priorities listed in their glossy and often professionally designed Corporate Plans, Sustainable Community Strategies, Local Area

Agreements and other Community Partnerships - outlining positive and laudable initiatives and work programmes. Unfortunately though, often the powerful, inspiring and unique ideas are lost in the detail. Moreover - when we focused our attention on the first few pages of these strategy documents, and removed references to the specific organisation or region - often it was very difficult to determine what region the vision and priorities related to. Points of difference were the exception rather than the rule.

One director we spoke to earlier in the year explained that vision creation in her organisation was ‘the process of articulating political priorities and party manifesto pledges in a snappy way’. Manifesto pledges tend to be a direct response to the immediate needs of citizens, and therefore perhaps the ring of familiarity and short-termism is inevitable.

It begs the question, is the apparent need for local authorities to reflect their political responses to common, obvious citizen demands in their vision statements and strategies – working against genuine, long-term vision creation and implementation? Through our conversations with many public sector leaders it seems that all too often this is likely to be the case. Perhaps in the endless process of listening, consulting and partnering with stakeholders and customers to shape vision, - an emphasis on ‘leading’ has been lost... (In part three of this series of articles we explore this in more detail).

## Standing out from the crowd

“There are enormous opportunities for Local Authorities and NHS organisations to stand out from their own peer group.”

More than a decade ago Tesco was determined to differentiate its customer experience from that of its competitors. Central to their vision, business strategy and competitive advantage was making their customer experience in their stores unique. Their aim was to make the experience of shoppers so distinct to Tesco that if they were to remove all labels and references to Tesco and drop a customer into a store – they would recognise it as Tesco just through the layout and experience.

Whilst the challenges facing public sector bodies are unquestionably complex, the potential points of difference to drive vision creation are far greater than available to a retailer like Tesco.

There are enormous opportunities for Local Authorities and NHS organisations to stand out from their own peer group. Taking on the challenge of fusing together all the unique qualities and characteristics of their own geographic area, exploring the future challenges, opportunities and competitive advantages over their peer group neighbours – developing a vision that unites and inspires.

Being better, first, number one, a market or sector leader, a pioneer, famous for something, loved for something – often characterise vision statements in other sectors. In our research into local authorities we did find several examples of ‘vision statements’ that appear to capture a sense of this ambition. A sample is included overleaf:

Table 2

Organisation	Vision Statement
Chelmsford Council	Our long-term vision is for Chelmsford to become the economic, cultural, leisure and retail heart of Essex and leading regional centre in the East of England.
City of Westminster	Our Vision is to be a world leader in city management.
Isle of White	We want the Isle of Wight to become a world renowned Eco Island, with a thriving economy, a real sense of pride and where residents and visitors enjoy healthy lives, feel safe and are treated with respect.
Hull City Council	Hull City 2020: Hull is a city which is living, learning, working, healthy and proud. One of the most important cities in Northern Europe, we are a gateway for global trade and the heart of a prosperous Humber sub-region'.

We assume that these authorities are still required to comply with legislation, improve the quality of life of their communities, cleanliness, sustainability, educational attainment and so on, yet in their vision statements they have articulated

something different, something vivid, something more akin to what we would describe as vision. They are statements that are aspirational, bold and built on a point of difference.

## Opportunity knocks

“Public sector leaders could do worse than start a radical agenda - with a radical picture of the future.”

In both the Health Sector and Local Government there are considerable opportunities to create a unique, bespoke picture of the future that can act as a unifying force for employees, partners and communities. Whether it's a unique system of regional healthcare, a vision for a regenerated town centre, or becoming a national or global leader in the arts, entertainment, sport, science, sustainability, visitor-experience - the points of potential difference are endless.

‘Standing-out; daring to be different; innovative and bold’ are phrases espoused by many public sector bodies but without genuine vision and a clear strategy for differentiation, they have a tokenistic ring to them.

Whilst ambitious vision statements do absolutely nothing to guarantee success, they are a starting point for building a sense of competitive spirit,

ambition, engagement and a platform for setting the leadership and performance bar higher. Designed with the right considerations in mind, vision statements can help a leadership team break the shackles of conformity and begin to steer a different course.

The present economic climate and squeeze on public sector spending may well compel public sector organisations to be more radical in the way they lead their communities, deliver services and engage their employees. Public sector leaders could do worse than start a radical agenda - with a radical picture of the future.

Our simple message to public sector leaders is - be aggressively authentic in creating an exciting future destiny and direction for your organisation. Don't sell vision creation short.

In part two we examine a further element designed to help glue and govern organisational focus; ‘organisational values’. In particular we will examine the popular trend of adopting ‘values-discovery exercises’ (designing values by consensus or inside-out), exploring pros and cons.

If you would like to share any thoughts or feedback in relation to this article, please contact Tony Reynolds, via email on [tony@invigor8.eu](mailto:tony@invigor8.eu)

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