

To lead means to explore and to explore means stepping into the unknown.

But it's a deep human need to know what's around the corner, particularly when staff and investors are worried about markets and jobs. We all crave certainty *and* adventure.

The vision statement is an expression of your long-term goals; it is the hardest paragraph a CEO has to write. Here's how to make it easier.

Hit 'em where they ain't

Remember what a vision statement *isn't*. Think about who you're *not* speaking to. Start by listing what you're *not* going to do.

A statement of vision isn't a statement of purpose or "mission": it's not about *why* you do your work, but *who you want to be*. It's not a motto, tag line or elevator pitch. Your audience isn't your customers or the public; it doesn't have to be self-explanatory. But it *is* important to staff, investors, directors and partners. It can be:

- A pledge of continuity
- A promise of personal opportunity
- A inspiring challenge
- A reinforcement of the business plan
- An opportunity to look past today's worries

You don't need to predict the future, but you do need to paint a picture of what you *want* it to be.

Start with where you're not going

Start with what you *don't* want to be, what you want to *stop* doing, who you *don't* want to work with, and what can wait. It's then much easier to write down what you *will* do and who you *will* be.

Don't rush it and don't write it on a retreat. Don't tinker or over-do. And never say, "It's just semantics." Hire a professional writer if you've gotten too close to it. It is much easier to write after updating your business plan—which will already point in a promising direction.

Example and worksheet

The inset is a successful vision statement derived from the notes in the table below. This is a statement for a mature and careful company; your own vision might be more daring.

Where we're headed: We always prefer steady growth over the big win. Our priorities will always be high quality products, repeat business and high staff satisfaction, and we'll always be willing to make disciplined experiments with new ideas.

Over the next two or three years, we'll strengthen our core business by expanding sales to existing customers and competing more aggressively for new customers in adjacent markets.

Though we want to get substantially bigger, we don't want to get bigger to get richer: we *need* growth so we can make a bigger difference in the world and to create career opportunities. This means we will do three things: develop new products, enter new regions, and open new channels.

We know we're successful when: margins steadily grow, we receive customer compliments and great candidates seek us out.

Your statement doesn't have to be comprehensive or even unique, but it must be personal, clear and confident.

	We won't...	We will...
Who	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add layers of management • Enter into vague "strategic alliances" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hire from outside, if the position demands it • Do all we can to build morale and teamwork
What	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abandon our core products and services • Let our equipment and fleet get outdated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand current product families • Carefully update our technologies
When	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grow just to make money • Continue near-term acquisition searches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give ourselves 24months on basics • Take more smart risks after 24 months
Where	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market to new territories for 2 to 3 years • Relocate or add facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grow into contiguous markets • Get 10-20% online sales
How	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jump to the newest thing • Take impulsive risks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept the need for a risk capital pool • Experiment with products and processes