



CREATING A FIRM VISION STATEMENT by Sam M. Allred, CPA

Within professional service firms, there is a chasm between the maximum effort each owner and staff member is capable of contributing to the firm and their actual performance that keeps them from being penalized. The one thing, perhaps more than any other, that will bridge this performance chasm is a shared, compelling vision of where the organization is going. The value of an organizational vision statement is huge, but a very small percentage of CPA firms have gone beyond the development of a mission statement and core values.

Whenever an organization lacks vision, there are two possible results. The best result is status quo or dormancy. The probable result is confusion. Think about what you might read if you asked every member in your firm to write down the shared vision in your organization. Where would they see the firm in 10 to 15 years? What roles do they play in the continued success of your firm? Could they write a descriptive future of the firm and what things will be like for all stakeholders, owners, employees and clients?

The purpose of this article is not to convince you to develop a vision statement. I am assuming that you have become convinced as to the need for such a document in your firm. If, however, you are still unsure as to the need for and benefit from developing a vision statement, I would strongly recommend you read Built To Last by James C. Collins and Jerry I Porras. This book identifies the successful habits of visionary companies. Although I would recommend you read the entire book, the following chapters are especially helpful in gaining an understanding of the critical role that vision plays in the success of organizations: Chapter 3 – More Than Profits and Chapter 11 – Building The Vision.

This article will focus on the process of creating a vision statement for your firm. I have had numerous discussions in the past two months with leaders of CPA firms who are convinced as to the power and purpose of a firm vision statement. Their question simply is, “How do I go about creating one?”

What is a Vision Statement?

The main purpose of a vision statement is to create teamwork and synergy within your firm fueled by the certainty of purpose and direction in the organization. The vision statement capsulizes the collective view of the core values, mission and courageous goal shared by all employees in your organization.

Your vision statement is much more than a mission statement. A vision statement really consists of two primary things:

- 1) Guiding Principles (Core Values and Central Purpose or Mission)
- 2) Envisioned Future (Courageous Goal and Descriptive Future)

How to Create a Vision Statement

Let me walk you through a process to create a vision statement for your organization. There is certainly more than one way to create a vision statement. I will suggest a process that works well and let you decide whether this process or a modified version of it will work for your organization.

Let's assume you are the managing partner of a 45-person CPA firm. The firm has five partners and seven managers. (Again, if you have more or less employees than this scenario, then make the necessary adjustments to this proposed process.) Your goal is to create a vision statement that serves to build teamwork and synergy within your firm.

There are a couple of guiding principles we need to discuss before we tackle this endeavor. First, if you are to obtain buy-in and excitement throughout the process, you need everyone to feel a part of the process in some way. It is very difficult for all employees of the firm to feel connected to the firm's vision statement if the partners go away on a retreat, bang out the statement, come back and announce "this is the firm's vision statement!"

Second, it is difficult to perform exercises and make decisions with a large group. You must give careful consideration as to who in your firm should participate in the vision creation process. In the scenario given above, I would recommend that you form a "Headwaters Team" that will have the responsibility for creating the final vision statement. This Headwaters Team should consist of approximately seven individuals who are voted on by everyone in the firm (the voting process itself will connect people to the process and the result). You should have a good mix of positions represented on this team. I would suggest that you consider 2 partners, 2 managers and 3 other employees.

A Vision Retreat

Schedule an offsite retreat for the partners and managers of the firm. You will need about a day and a half for this retreat. Make some assignments to these 12 individuals prior to the retreat. Have them read the book Built To Last and to come prepared to discuss Chapters 3 and 11. Also, ask them to write down on two pages or less a courageous thing they have done in their life.

It would also be helpful to the process to gather some input from everyone in the firm prior to the retreat. You should consider creating a survey to be completed by everyone in the firm in a confidential manner that will provide you with valuable input from all employees. Here are some of the questions you should consider for your firm survey:

- Describe what it's like to work at Strike, Hook & Land, LLP?
- What are the three things you like best about working for Strike, Hook & Land, LLP?
- What are the three things that trouble you most about working for Strike, Hook & Land, LLP?
- If you had a magic wand, what would you change about the firm?
- What would you leave the same?
- What would you like to see the firm look like in the 10 years?

Arrange for the survey to be sent out to each employee of the firm and to be collected in a confidential manner. It is important you provide them with the security to be completely honest in their responses without worrying about making a career-limiting move.

Throughout the retreat, you will be dividing the group into teams to work on each section of the firm's vision statement. As each team completes their assignment, they will be presenting their work to the rest of the group. Therefore, you will need a laptop and data projector for these presentations, and someone assigned to record the work of each group. This information will ultimately be given to the firm's Headwaters Team to finalize the vision statement.

Begin the retreat with a discussion of the value of a vision statement. Have participants share their thoughts regarding what they learned from reading Built To Last. Openly discuss the value of having a vision statement for the firm. Outline the process you will follow during the retreat to create a rough vision statement. Explain that the responsibility to create the finished vision statement in form and feel belongs to the Headwaters Team. Review and discuss the results of the firm survey. This section of the retreat will last from one to two hours.

Central Purpose

Divide the 12 participants into three teams of 4 and work on the first part of the vision statement. The Central Purpose or Mission is the firm's fundamental reason for being. Your central purpose should last for years and years – it should not change because of new technology, consolidations, or changes in staff. Your central purpose should be limited to one or two sentences. Ask each group to take 30 minutes and develop what they feel is the firm's mission. After 30 minutes, bring everyone back together and have each group present their version of the central purpose.

After having listened to the other two groups, it is likely they will have changes they would like to make to their original work. Have all of the groups reconvene for an additional 10 - 15 minutes to make revisions to their original central purpose. Have each group present their revised central purpose before the entire group. Once they have done this record the results and move on. The Headwaters Team will use these materials to complete the work on the central purpose.

Core Values

Divide the participants into three new groups (mix people around for each of these exercises) and take 60 minutes to identify the firm's Core Values. Your firm's core values are its essential and enduring tenets that guide every employee in their actions and decisions. These are the inner beliefs held by everyone. They are the beliefs that do not change. They have intrinsic value and are not designed to be strategic in nature.

One of the biggest mistakes many firms make when developing their description of firm core values is to draft values they feel will be impressive to others. Core values are what you already bring with you to work each day. They are not the things you are trying to become. You should limit the number of core values to between three and five.

After 60 minutes, bring everyone back together. Have each group present their recommendations for the firm's core values. After the group presentations, allow the groups 20 more minutes to make revisions. Have them present their final draft of core values to the entire group. Again, record the results and move on. The Headwaters Team will complete the work on the core values.

Courageous Goal

The next part of the vision statement process is dreaming the dream. What is the future of your firm? This part is comprised of two key elements - Courageous Goal and Descriptive Future. A courageous goal is a statement of what the firm will accomplish or where it will be 10 – 15 years in the future. Setting a courageous goal requires you to think beyond the current capabilities of the firm and current trends in the market place. This type of goal forces you to be visionary and not just tactical or strategic. The goal can be quantitative or qualitative in nature.

I find that it's helpful to do some exercises that energize the group to think more creatively before they begin working on a courageous goal. Here are some things you might consider doing at this point in your retreat.

- Divide the group into teams and tell them that the year is 2015 and the firm has just received the coveted Upstream Academy Global Recognition award for the most outstanding CPA firm on the planet. Give each team 30 – 45 minutes to prepare a press release outlining the reasons the firm qualified for this prestigious award. Then have each team present their press release.
- View a video that documents outstanding achievement. Some examples might be “Michael Jordan to the Max” and “Everest”.
- Have members of the group each share something they have done in their lives that was courageous for them.

Now, break into three new groups and take 60 minutes to identify the firm's courageous goal. This goal should definitely be a stretch goal; not something you will be able to accomplish in two or three years. As with the statement of central purpose or mission, the vision statement should be brief – one or two sentences.

After 60 minutes, bring everyone back together and have each group present their courageous goal. As before, allow the groups to reconvene for 15 to 20 minutes to make revisions to their courageous goal. Have the groups share their revised courageous goal with the entire group. Record the results and move on. The Headwaters Team will complete the work on the courageous goal.

Descriptive Future

The final part of the firm's vision statement is the Descriptive Future. This area of your envisioned future includes a specific description of what it will be like to achieve your courageous goal. The purpose of this section of your vision statement is to create a mental picture that your employees can carry around in their heads to remind them of why it is important to put their best effort into the work at hand. Creating your descriptive future is a creative process. The value in creating your descriptive future is to motivate everyone in the company to give their best effort to the work. For many, the descriptive future draws them the picture that they can't see when they first hear the vision.

Break into three new groups and take 60 minutes to identify the firm's descriptive future. After 60 minutes, bring everyone back together and have each group present their descriptive future. After the group presentations, allow the groups 20 more minutes to make revisions. Have them present their final draft of the descriptive future to the entire group. Again, record the results and move on. The Headwaters Team will complete the work on the descriptive future.

Completing Your Vision Statement

Your Headwaters Team will now have three different drafts of each of the four components of the firm's vision statement. The Headwaters Team has the freedom to use whatever is valuable from the retreat. It is not bound by any wording that comes from the retreat. It is the Team's responsibility to finalize the wording for the vision statement and to work with a graphic artist to design a visual look.

Many firms like to display the vision statement in their offices for all to see. It is probably best that this be limited to the Central Purpose, Core Values and Courageous Goal. The descriptive future will likely be lengthier and should be provided to all firm members for their own knowledge.

The Headwaters Team should also create a plan for presenting the completed vision statement to everyone in the firm and identify ways to keep the spotlight on the vision statement.

If you follow this process, you should have the collective thoughts and buy-in of the entire firm and a vision statement that will make a difference in your organization.