

Visioning Basics



Bloomington, Indiana residents create a vision for an elder-friendly downtown neighborhood.

A vision is only part of the process!

For at least a decade, "visioning" has been a hot topic and, I daresay, most every reader has participated in a visioning exercise sometime during his/her recent career. Airport bookshop shelves have long been filled with the latest and presumably greatest guides to "visionary management". So what more can be said about the practice of visioning?

Perhaps not much, except to point out that a critical distinction between corporate visioning and community visioning tends to get lost. A crucial question lies at the center of community visioning processes:

"Whose vision?"

Corporate planners do indeed speak to the importance of creating a shared vision to spur enthusiasm and enable productive collective action (teamwork). Many visioning tools have been developed for use in such strategic planning processes. And, along with the value of engaging employees and shareholders in this process, progressive companies sometimes include reference to social values as being on a par with sales.

Yet, in the end, corporate visioning is essentially an internal process; the public is not fully empowered to participate and someone at the top gets to decide whose vision will be carried forward.

Community visioning, on the other hand, should be seen as a civic process, with citizen participation at the core. While it would be naïve to suggest that power and influence don't enter into the selection of a vision, the goal of citizen participation is to work towards a vesting of that power not in individuals, but in the process itself and its elements: the power of imagination, the power of discourse, the power of collective action, the power of both specialized and ordinary knowledge and experience.

Seeing community visioning as one component, then, of a broader process of democratic (small d) community development is our starting point. Answering the question "Whose vision?" is job one (to steal another corporate metaphor). Creating the vision is job two. Moving the vision to action is job three.

If we fail to include the widest possible circle of voices in the beginning, we risk, at the best, alienating those for whom the vision is supposed to apply and, at the worst, a sabotage of the vision by those angered by the neglect of their views.

If we fail to move the vision forward to action, we have simply engaged in a meaningless, albeit stimulating exercise in science fiction.

In short, we need to place visioning within the broader context of a comprehensive community development model that moves from:

VOICE to VISION to ACTION

Visioning is not just about the future!

There's another popular section in your standard airport bookshop - the one labeled "futurists". We all enjoy reading about what the future holds and get excited about the many wonders ahead. Yet, what is too often ignored by futurists

is the notion that our future is necessarily tied to our present, and, by extension, our past. Metaphorically, the future is pictured as somehow coming towards us, rather than the other way around. We are exhorted to be prepared and, thusly, disfranchised, since that future is, somehow, not of our own doing.

This is to say that visioning needs to be embedded in real time.

There are, indeed, several reasons why we need to pay attention to visioning as merely part of the unfolding of time and events:

- A vision needs to be realistic. This may sound contradictory, but for citizens to take the process seriously, it needs to connect with real life experience and knowledge. Regretfully, there is much cynicism out there, especially among marginalized citizens and neighborhoods (people in poverty, vulnerable elders and others). These groups have been on the receiving end of other people's unrealized visions for a long time and, legitimately, will enter into new visioning with suspicion and caution.
- A useful vision must acknowledge the past and connect with the present. Even though the "good old days" might not have been so good at the time, it is essential to acknowledge the historical experiences

of the people whom you invite to help create a vision for the future. This serves several purposes:

- It models an essential community value by honoring our elders.
- It informs us about all those previous visions that never came to pass.
- Or, pleasantly, it informs us about how what we have today may indeed be the product of someone's earlier vision.
- It dampens the negative effect of sidebar cynics who can sabotage the effort through "we tried that before" thinking.
- It helps create a learning community in which everyone has access to all knowledge.

Vision is related to that other over-used V word: Values

While it may seem obvious, it is important to note that creating a vision for the future is an exercise in the expression of values. For citizens who have not been involved in such processes, we should not assume too much. Some people might interpret a visioning exercise as some kind of workshop that has people predicting, not selecting the future. Asking someone to see into the future does not guarantee they will see a "desired" future, but rather a bleak one. Moreover, different cultural groups will attach a variety of meanings to this idea of visioning. Think about the Native American vision quest, for example, and what that might connote. It certainly doesn't suggest a collective process, but an individual one, though subject to "expert" interpretation by elders.

Hence, it needs to be made clear to participants that what they are being invited to do is to simply express themselves about “the way it was”, “the way it is”, and the “way things should be.” Fancy buzzwords are not always necessary.

Since we are seeking citizens' opinions about a desired future, we are asking people to place a value on something. Different visions suggest differing values, of course, and so the process helps clarify and reveal a range of individual and community values. As such, this kind of exercise begins to hit close to home and, hence, an environment of tolerance for diverse values is critical to the success of the venture. In many ways we are not just one, big, happy family and it is useful to think through the implications of this for community visioning. Take the issue of nursing homes, for example:

Many people feel that nursing homes are an abomination and that we should imagine a future in which they do not exist.

On the other hand...

A future without nursing homes might be a pretty scary vision for the sandwich generation daughter who is single handedly raising teen age children and caring for a parent with dementia.

Clearly, nurturing a trusting environment that will accommodate an airing of all values, dearly held, will be important to the facilitator.

How people present their opinions in public is another aspect of this values dimension, where cultural factors may also come in to play. The way you present the task of visioning is important:

Are you asking people to express their personal desires; imagine themselves as old?

Or are you asking people to speak for others who may be old? It makes a difference in the product you achieve:

- Some people don't feel entitled to speak for themselves, and may have never been asked.
- Some people feel that it is selfish or brash to express what they need over what they might feel are the needs of others.
- Some people don't feel qualified to speak for others.
- Some people feel qualified to speak for others, in fact only speak for others and, in fact, may not actually be qualified!

If there's a rule of thumb, it is that "it takes all kinds" and a diverse visioning process will tap into all of these perspectives. Indeed, rather than prescribing a particular approach, simply acknowledge publicly that citizens assume different styles, respect these different styles, and interpret the information you receive within the appropriate context from which it emerged. All of these human expressions are authentic in their own right.

Despite the authenticity of the expressions, you can do a service by pointing out this dilemma and asking people to try on all the hats if they can; speak for oneself as an old person (or future one) and speak for others whom you may know or think you know. The issue provides a “learning moment” in which you can discuss the classic individual/community dichotomy and the role that cultural differences play in public settings.

Another way around this dilemma is to provide a range of alternative modes of participation. One big workshop is not necessarily the best approach for it will likely exclude certain citizens from participation.

If time and resources allow, promote multiple modes of expression and plan for a mechanism to bring them all together in a common document. Some of the following visioning tools provide a range of options and techniques for creating a shared vision in your community. Use the participation tools selection criteria at [\(link to correct page in website\)](#) to think through the visioning exercises that can best be adapted to your local needs and environment.