# A Vision-based Leadership Approach to Sustaining Employee Engagement

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# Table of Contents

"A challenging present is often needed for inspirational leaders to create and articulate their vision of a better future."

-John J. Sosik and Dongil Jung

## Executive Summary

Sweeping changes in organizational life are usually preceded by a future vision to challenge the status quo. Small and medium organizations typically sell prospective talent on this shared image of a preferred future vision. However, managers usually lead with strategy in mind, while employees are left wondering, "what happened to the vision you sold me on?" When organizations fail to deliver on the employees' belief in a better future, they leave, and the organization hires someone else, creating a revolving door. Is it intentional? No. Malicious? One would certainly hope not. Despite good intentions, the revolving door churns more than decision-makers and even employees would expect.

Managers often ask employees to go the extra mile to exceed the status quo. This calls for employees to engage at a higher level, adopting new routines and behaviors to increase their productivity and improve performance. CEOs and HR Directors at multinational companies such as BMW, Oracle, and P&G indicated engagement, employee opinion surveys, attrition rates, and well-being as indicators used to measure success in HRD and the general HR function.[1] However, a study of 156 CEOs conducted by the Predictive Index found:

1) 30% of CEOs expressed a need for help with employee engagement,
2) 37% stated leadership development as an area for improvement.[2]

The rise of globally dispersed virtual teams has accelerated in response to COVID-19. This insights paper provides a framework for visionary leaders and entrepreneurs to use when developing teams within small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and other organizations where vision-based leadership plays a guiding role. This paper is designed for executive and visionary leaders who are:

1. Assembling a new team in a startup or an existing organization
2. Facilitating strategic leadership teams made up of stakeholders from various business units to respond to changes in the organization's external environment
3. Exploring the need for a different leadership style based on follower preferences.

## How is Vision-Based Leadership Relevant in the 21st Century?

The various leadership styles present in an organization reflect the diverse experiences of its leaders. Transformational, servant, authentic, and crisis leadership represent four of many styles. In the early 1990s, Burt Nanus wrote the book on visionary leadership, a theory that has waxed and waned in business literature over time. Visionary leadership is still relevant, considering recent shifts in economic conditions due to COVID-19.

Since the 1990s, executives and practitioners have become more interested in the effect of visionary leadership on organizations. Researchers and practitioners have produced evidence-based insights expanding Nanus' concept of visionary leadership.[3] Business thought leaders have conducted new experiments to discover best practices for vision realization. Thus, scholars are enlarging the scope of this leadership approach to include topics such as vision-based leadership[4] and vision integration[5].

> So, how can vision-based organizations sustain employee engagement and inspire employees to go the extra mile during times of change?

Traditionally, visionary leadership theory has focused on the leader, but emerging literature has explored follower adoption and implementation. The visionary leadership approach incorporates three components: vision creation, communication (i.e., articulation), and implementation (also called "realization").[6] The pronounced focus on communicating an ideal future distinguishes visionary leadership from charismatic and transformational leadership approaches.[7] Visionary leadership is understood "to have positive effects on follower outcomes, resulting in high trust in the leader, high commitment to the leader, high levels of performance among followers, and high overall organizational performance."[8]

Recently, the focus of visionary leadership has shifted from the fearless leader who is out front casting a vision to the 21st century leader who curiously experiments with various methods to integrate vision into employee behaviors, using it to guide decision-making.[9]
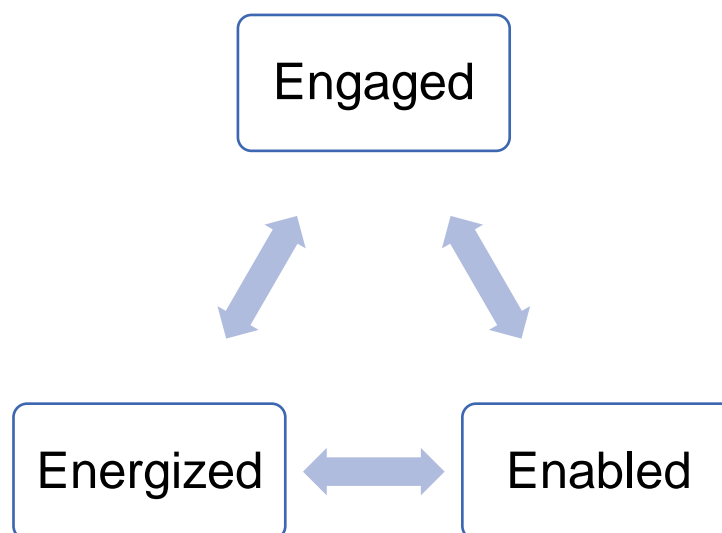
## Sustainable Engagement and Leadership Development

The carrot-stick approach fails to create the type of enduring motivation that drives employees to exceed expectations. Vision resonates internally through what followers hear and allow themselves to imagine. To that end, sustainable engagement centers on creating "internalized engaged states"—a function of intrinsic motivation.[10] Towers Watson coined the term "sustainable employee engagement" as an organizational state created by leaders to ensure their employees are:

(1) engaged,

(2) enabled

(3) energized.[11]

Engaged employees go the extra mile for their employers, primarily based on a professional relationship with their direct supervisor. Enabled employees enjoy a work environment that promotes multiple pathways to productivity. Lastly, high employee energy levels reflect a work experience that leaders intentionally design to foster well-being.

*Figure 1 Three Components of Sustainable Employee Engagement*

Before discussing best practices for visionary leaders to sustain employee engagement, it is vital to outline the leadership framework used in this paper. Sosik and Jung's Full Range Leadership Development (FRLD) provides a useful model for this purpose. Grounded in transformational leadership theory, the FRLD model evaluates leadership effectiveness based on five theories:

- laissez-faire (LF),
- passive management by exception (MBE-P),
- active management-by-exception (MBE-A),
- contingent reward (CR)
- transformational leadership (TL).

The latter approach incorporates *the five Is*—idealized influence *behaviors*, idealized influence *attributes*, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.[12] This paper represents a convergence point for leaders to sustain employee engagement using a full range of vision-related leadership behaviors.

## Engaged: Going the Extra Mile

> Involving employees and managers in vision creation and strategy-making generates the buy-in needed for implementation.

Employees who exceed expectations to pursue a vision for change do so for specific reasons. First, employees believe that the organization's stated goals and objectives ladder up to the ideal future the organization wants to realize. This belief stems from leaders communicating the values, philosophies, and sense of purpose to convey and promote trust through ethical decision-making and authentic leadership.[13] The visionary leader articulates an optimistic and compelling vision of the future and what needs to be accomplished while imparting confidence for achieving goals.[14]

The leader also establishes an emotional connection with employees, eliciting pride for being associated with both the leader and the employer. Visionary managers work with followers to develop strategies and plans to achieve a shared future state.[15] Generating small wins helps skeptical followers to

increase their willingness to lend extra support towards more elaborate plans. This momentum builds emotional commitment for the vision. Implementation behaviors include role modeling, intellectual stimulation, individualized support, recognizing accomplishments, and "managing information through task cues."[16] Involving employees in vision creation and strategy-making engages them from the start, generating buy-in needed for implementation.

## Enabled: The Environment Promotes Multiple Pathways to Productivity

An organizational vision should illuminate the desired path, not just for executive leaders but also for each stakeholder contributing to its future.[17] Productivity results from an employee's ability to overcome obstacles to success, obtain financial and human resources, and increase self-efficacy to meet work challenges.[18] Teamwork and collaboration play a significant role in enabling employees for success.

Visionary leaders understand that no single person has all the answers, not even themselves. As a result, they take a team approach to explore possibilities and pursue new opportunities.[19] Not every unique opportunity originates outside of the organization. In response to change, vision-based leaders facilitate exercises to synthesize creative solutions to increase growth potential. For example, vision realization calls for leaders to augment their leadership styles and for employees to adopt new skills and behaviors. The vision's nature provides clues concerning the most useful skills and actions to target future growth and development.

> Vision-based leaders cast the future vision to build attunement with followers while aligning organizational structures, policies, and procedures with emerging realities.

Transformational leaders play a vital role in building what emotional intelligence expert Daniel Goleman calls "vision attunement," which he contrasts with follower alignment.[20] While alignment derives from strategy, attunement focuses on ensuring the vision resonates with followers on a visceral level. Leaders who

communicate a vision that strikes a chord with followers can more easily inspire them to align with the strategy.[21]

In a 2016 interview concerning a mutual interest in the vision development process, leadership expert Jim Kouzes described this process, saying, "leaders pick up on the vision that is latent in the hearts of their people." The concepts of attunement and alignment are not mutually exclusive. Leaders can build attunement with followers while aligning and adjusting organizational structures, policies, and procedures with emerging realities. Pursuing attunement with followers and alignment with corporate infrastructure communicates respect for followers' ability to direct their work activities. Most importantly, the leader must possess the authority to implement vision-based plans and empower followers to take action.[22] The leader's job is to facilitate this process by connecting their job role with future vision.

Leaders can guide teams through a vision evaluation process using existing management consulting tools. The McKinsey 7s Model[23] helps leaders determine which organizational components to augment in support of vision realization.

In these exercises, teams can evaluate vision alignment and gaps between the vision and commonly held values among stakeholder groups. Using existing tools allows teams to assess the degree of alignment between the vision and other components such as skills, leadership style, and company culture. This approach naturally leads to strategic action planning. Leadership teams evaluate how organizational factors will likely enhance, detract from, or produce little to no effect on the vision development process. The difference in employees' time-orientation[24] will yield a range of insights for present and future consideration.

## Energized: The Work Experience Promotes Well-Being

Inspiring work experiences impart energy to employees. When a leader discovers what types of work tasks an employee enjoys performing and assigns some of these tasks to employees, it increases the worker's tolerance for more routinized work (i.e., the infamous *performs other duties as assigned* clause that officially or unofficially works its way into every job description). On the other hand, having to endure situations involving underperforming team members or unethical business practices zaps employees' energy. Additionally, vision-based leaders are prepared to "go to bat" for their followers, as standing up for what is right builds respect through their actions.

> The leader who uses vision-based coaching reenergizes followers to pursue the shared vision by <u>temporarily</u> shifting focus to the follower's personal vision.

Visionary leaders understand presenteeism (i.e., coming to work while sick) and absenteeism (e.g., missing work for no good reason) adversely affect other team members. Encouraging physical well-being and mental health days can help employees continue to devote their discretionary efforts toward achieving work goals. Additional ways to promote employee well-being include rewarding successes, telling inspirational stories, and recognizing accomplishments.

### Vision-Based Coaching

Vision-based coaching is a function of individualized consideration. Taking this approach, leaders examine leadership from the follower's viewpoint and "thus increase the engagement level of followers by providing the necessary coaching and mentoring for their personal development."[25] Organizational psychologist Angela Passarelli proposed that coaching with an emphasis on a follower's future vision "cultivates long-term development more effectively than an emphasis on his or her immediate goals."[26]

This coaching approach also facilitates expanding the follower's identity, increasing the energy and stamina needed to support change.[27] The leader who employs vision-based coaching with followers temporarily shifts attention from the organizational

vision to that leader's personal vision, reenergizing them to pursue the shared vision. This approach works best when followers are interested in exploring their ideal self.

## Coaching for Engagement and Retention

Following the 2008 financial crisis, management consultants Beverly Kaye and Beverly Crowell advised leaders to venture beyond engagement surveys to find out what matters most to employees through a more sustained, one-on-one discovery process.[28] Coaching for engagement involves "understanding the key drivers of engagement, trends, research, and strategies to create a sustained change in workplace satisfaction."[29] When coaching for engagement, leaders emphasize the employee's career and sources of motivation and satisfaction.[30] Whereas performance conversations focus on the past, leaders who engage followers in engagement conversations demonstrate a present and future focus.

## The Cascading Effect of Manager Engagement

According to the cascading effect of manager engagement, highly engaged managers inspire follower engagement.[31] Moreover, the cascade of manager engagement proves critical for virtual teams. For example, consider communication and collaboration—two significant barriers to remote team engagement.[32] Managers who reach out to personally connect with team members prevent feelings of isolation, loneliness, and unappreciation from setting in. By helping virtual team members feel significant, managers create a virtuous cycle of inspiration that feeds back into the employee's passion for the company's vision and goals, thus positively impacting productivity.[33]

Here are a few practical tips to increase virtual engagement:

1. Reach out personally to team members for brief one-to-one conversations
2. Provide multiple ways for virtual team members to contact the leader and other team members to gain clarification through follow-up
3. Consider differences in cultural norms such as likelihood to interrupt, feedback styles, and hesitance due to language barriers[34]
4. Be mindful of time differences and the time-related accommodations globally dispersed workers make to attend virtual functions (e.g., meetings scheduled after 5 pm in their time zone)

5. Rotate meeting times or select the least inconvenient time for outlying time zones
6. Create norms that help virtual team members feel comfortable speaking up, thus increasing their participation chances.[35]

Adopting a more facilitative approach to meetings helps also. First, prompt team members with a situation and a question to get their feedback. Next, allow a minute or two of "think time." Then, give each team member two minutes to respond. Virtual team members find facilitative methods more equitable.

> Keeping Millennial workers looped in on upcoming developments, and soliciting their feedback, has an energizing effect.

Even though vision-based leaders have a picture of the future, no team member wants to work for a leader who has all the answers. Leaders who hold space for team members by listening, withholding judgment, and making emotional connections, convey a sense of empathy to team members.[36] Kindness and vulnerability are contagious, primarily when modeled by the leader. Those skills help to create collaborative environments where employees don't mind going the extra mile. When team members feel their leader cares about what they have to say, they will go above and beyond the call of duty.

A little gratitude goes a long way, and a cheerful heart does good like medicine.[37] When a team member performs well, it means the world to receive recognition from their manager. A compliment is free, and an inexpensive small gift also speaks volumes to express appreciation.

Regarding humor, it is okay to have fun in meetings within reason. Alison Beard, an editor at Harvard Business Review, recommended authentically using humor, saying "if you can't be 'ha-ha' funny, at least be "aha!" funny."[38] Millennial employees tend to express their needs and opinions more freely in the workplace than previous generational cohorts. They also have different expectations for work-life balance and inclusion in visioning and strategy-making. Keeping Millennial workers looped in on upcoming developments, and soliciting their feedback, has an energizing effect. Giving employees

a voice and thoughtfully considering their feedback creates a sense of belonging and meaningfulness, which bolsters engagement.

## Sustainable Engagement Reduces the Vision Realization Gap

While leaders can inspire followers by casting a perfect picture of the future, visionary leadership extends beyond creating and communicating a vision statement. Vision-based leaders use transformational strategies to develop the context and conditions to sustain employee engagement. Vision-based leadership helps organizations deliver on the vision cast to new hires during initial conversations with company decision-makers and hiring managers. This leadership style not only concerns itself with the company's future vision, but leaders also get a glimpse of the developmental needs of organizational systems, processes, and human capital.

Selling employees on a future ideal state is risky business, particularly when those workers perceive a significant or indefinite delay in its realization. However, leaders can help followers to accept forward-thinking ideas using the practices explained above. When the organization shows promise and leaders deliver on their promises, workers will stick around and reengage, giving 110 percent—even during the tough times.

## About Teaiiano

Since 2004, Teaiiano has worked with individuals, leaders, and organizations to move through uncharted territory and achieve their preferred vision for the future. We specialize in managing the complexities of a shared approach to vision creation and strategy-making.

## Our Organizational Solutions

With the right tools and guidance, CEOs, COOs, HR Directors, and Executive Directors break through barriers and overcome obstacles to position their organization for future growth.
We feel a deep sense of purpose to help our clients:
- Engage new possibilities
- Deescalate internal issues
- Mitigate crisis situations

Teaiiano offers a range of solutions to help executive and senior leaders advance their organization's progress toward their preferred future.

## Vision-based Consulting

Effective organizations practice visioning and planning as a collective unit. Through strategic thinking and foresight, team members can help leaders mitigate the risks of implementing the vision – if adequately engaged in the process. We help senior managers to engage team members and stakeholders at every level in transforming the vision into reality. Teaiiano will help your team to see FURTHER, see CLEARER, see STRATEGICALLY, and see TOGETHER. Learn more about our Organizational Solutions.

## Leadership Coaching

Teaiiano collaborates with executives, managers, team leaders, and business owners to bring about lasting behavioral change. This partnership helps leaders gain self-awareness, clarify goals, achieve development objectives, and maximize performance in both work and personal life.  We help leaders and managers to:
- Develop a more effective leadership style
- Maximize communication skills
- Focus on top priorities
- Increase employee well-being and work-life balance

Leadership coaching can take place in both individual and group settings. Learn more about our coaching solutions.

## Employee Engagement Solutions

Drawing from a coaching and facilitation background, Teaiiano uses an organizational development (OD) approach to transforming organizations. We help business leaders to:

- Optimize the work environment to improve organizational well-being and adapt to changing internal and external demands.
- Increase sustainability of system-wide change with our proven strategies, structures, and processes.
- Create a higher quality of life for employees and managers

We apply OD solutions to address business needs, such as employee engagement. Partner with us to create a transformational learning experience to advance your strategic goals. Learn more.

### Coaching Integration

Feedback and engagement go hand in hand, and leaders don't have to wait for performance reviews to give it. The right feedback will engage employees while improving performance. Workers want feedback that is authentic, frequent, and actionable. Our coaching integration solutions teach leaders how to integrate feedback into the company culture using coaching skills. We examine how coaching exists within your company and provide tools to make it more effective.

Have you ever wondered if coaching could work for your organization? Let's start the process of discovery by asking... "how is coaching integrated into your culture already?".
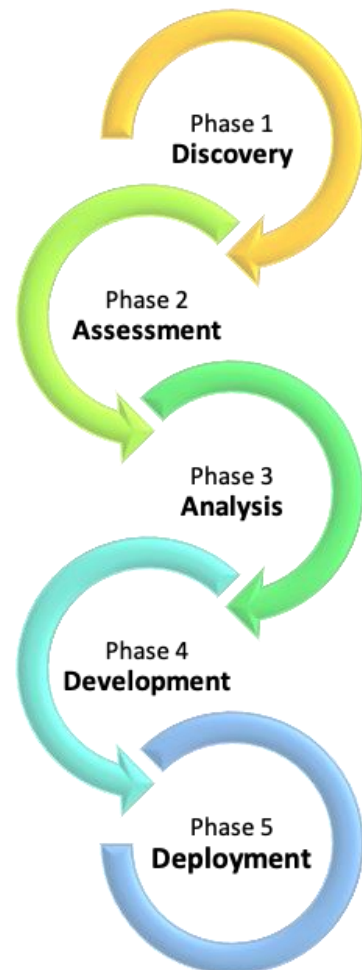

**For more information on our solutions,**

**visit us at www.teaiiano.com.**

## Writer's Bio

Thomas E. Anderson, II is CEO and Facilitator of Teaiiano Leadership Solutions. He has over 20 years' experience leading high-performance teams in faith-based organizations, 12 years' experience in leadership coaching and workshop facilitation, and 10 years' experience as a staff member in secondary education. He is a recurring presenter at Regent University's Annual Research Roundtables and writer for the Journal of Practical Consulting (JPC). Above all, Thomas enjoys being a devoted husband to his wife of 13 years and a dedicated father to two lovely daughters.

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