

Vision as Compass: Aligning Today with Tomorrow



Vision is not wall art. It's a working picture of a future worth building—clear enough to align decisions today, compelling enough to attract and retain people, and resilient enough to guide you when conditions change. Drawing on Joel Barker's work on vision and strategic exploration, this article explains:

- **What a powerful vision is (and isn't).**
- **How to assess your current vision** using a ten-dimension “visual acuity” model.
- **How to craft or refresh** a vision people actually use.
- **How to operationalize and maintain** vision so it stays vivid and useful.

Why Vision Matters (More Than Ever)

In volatile environments, leaders can't script the future—but they can **name** a future worth the effort. A practical vision:

- **Aligns choices** across functions by clarifying what “good” looks like.
- **Energizes execution** by giving purpose to hard trade-offs.
- **Accelerates learning** by focusing attention on signals that matter.
- **Builds resilience** by anchoring change to a shared destination rather than to this quarter's tactic.

Joel Barker popularized the idea that **vision precedes strategy**: once people can see a compelling future, they'll invent the means to reach it. Vision acts as a magnet for innovation and a filter for distraction.

In Joel's classic video, [The Power of Vision](#), he outlined four key components for a vision:

- Developed by Leaders
- Shared with the Team
- Comprehensive and Detailed
- Positive and Inspiring

What A Powerful Vision Looks Like (Ten Components)

Organizational consultant David Noer offered the following ten components to describe your vision's "visual acuity." A powerful vision is:

1. **Visual** – You can picture the future state; you know it when you see it.
2. **Shared** – People at every level hold the *same* picture because they helped create it.
3. **Galvanizing** – It aligns the organization and pulls in one direction.
4. **Compelling** – It's desirable and affirming; it calls out people's best.
5. **Vivid** – Clear and in focus, not fuzzy abstractions.
6. **Owned** – "Creation creates ownership"; it's co-created, not handed down.
7. **Dissonant** – It makes the gap from today explicit, creating direction.
8. **Multi-body-part** – It speaks to the **head** (logic), **heart** (emotion), and **feet** (action).
9. **Multi-perspective** – It accommodates different vantage points without losing coherence.
10. **Multi-level** – It nests sub-visions (team, function, region) under one coherent whole.

The Visual Acuity scale can be used as a factor in developing a vision or to evaluate an organization's current vision. It is a key part of the [Vision Album](#) process, a structured process for creating a vision.

Crafting (or Refreshing) Vision People Use

Use this practical flow. Each step deliberately reinforces the ten components.

A. Discover & Diverge

- Conduct stakeholder interviews and small co-creation workshops (ownership, shared).
- Surface the *dissonance*: what's inspiring about our future, and what must change to get there?

B. Draft the picture

- Write **short, concrete** phrases that you can visualize (visual, vivid).
- Test that it speaks to head, heart, and feet: What do we **know, feel, and do**?

C. Socialize & Iterate

- Share alternative drafts with contrasting imagery tones (multi-perspective).
- Hold “story-from-the-future” sessions where teams narrate a day-in-the-life *after* the vision is achieved (compelling, galvanizing).

D. Make it multi-level

- Ask each business unit/team to author a **nested sub-vision** that ladders up.

E. Choose the final

- Use language that's **memorable, testable, and drawable** (could a frontline teammate sketch it?).
- Pair words with a **simple visual** (a one-frame poster or icon set).

F. Translate to action

- Convert the chosen vision into **3–5 directional bets** and a short “not this” list to stop misaligned work (galvanizing).

The [Vision Album](#) is a structured, highly facilitated process that enables teams to collaboratively create a shared vision. It works off the powerful visual metaphor of a camera and photographs as a powerful, experiential process.

Making Vision Operational

A vision that doesn't change calendars and budgets is only a slogan. Bake it into:

- **Strategy & portfolio:** Rank initiatives by “vision fit” (high/medium/low) and reallocate 10–20% of spend from low-fit to high-fit work.
- **Goals & metrics:** Define 3–4 *leading* indicators that signal movement toward the picture (e.g., customer experience markers, capability milestones).
- **Cadences:** Start monthly “Vision in Action” reviews—one story of progress, one hard trade-off made, one barrier removed.
- **Talent systems:** Weave the vision into onboarding, recognition, promotion criteria, and learning paths (owned, compelling).
- **Narrative assets:** Create a one-page **Vision Card** (headline, image, proof points, “from-to” shifts) and a 5-slide deck for leaders to cascade (vivid, shared).

Keeping Vision Alive (Maintenance Plan)

- **Quarterly refresh:** Re-run a **mini** Visual Acuity pulse on 2–3 weak dimensions; publish the trendline (transparency builds trust).
- **Rituals:** Begin key meetings with a 60-second “vision check”: *How does this decision move the picture forward?*
- **Artifacts:** Keep the image visible—dashboards, walls, internal site, screensavers. Rotate team-made sketches to sustain ownership.
- **Learning loop:** Use the Strategic Exploration Tools (Implications Wheel, T.I.P.S. Tracking) to test your vision against emerging signals; if the world shifts, **amend the picture** rather than clinging to slogans.

Vision versus Mission

A still-too-common issue is confusing a mission for a vision. Here's a clear view of the differences.

Aspect	Vision	Mission
Time Horizon	Future-focused, long-term (5–10+ years)	Present-focused, what the organization does today
Key Question	<i>“Where are we going?”</i>	<i>“Why do we exist?” or “What do we do?”</i>
Purpose	Provides direction, aspiration, and inspiration	Defines core purpose, role, and daily operations
Nature	Inspirational and aspirational – a picture of a desired future state	Practical and descriptive – explains current activities and contribution
Scope	Broad, outcome-oriented, guiding future choices	Specific, action-oriented, guiding daily work and decision-making
Example	<i>“A world where every home uses clean, renewable energy.”</i>	<i>“We design, build, and deliver affordable solar panels to homeowners.”</i>

Common Failure Modes—and Fixes

- **Fuzzy poetry:** If people can't *draw* it, it's not vision. *Fix:* add concrete “when it's real, we will see...” statements.
- **Top-down decree:** Resistance is often design debt from excluding builders. *Fix:* reopen co-creation; “creation creates ownership.”
- **Slogan without trade-offs:** If everything fits, nothing guides. *Fix:* publish “won't do” examples.
- **One-size-fits-all:** Over-standardizing kills relevance. *Fix:* require sub-visions that ladder up and adapt locally.
- **No cadence:** Launch then vanish. *Fix:* add the monthly “Vision in Action” ritual and quarterly mini-assessments.

Conclusion

Vision is the most practical asset a leadership team can invest in. It aligns scarce attention, accelerates learning, and sustains energy in the face of uncertainty. Joel Barker's enduring lesson is simple: **when people can see a better future, they'll create the pathways to reach it.** Use the ten components to assess your current situation, co-create a clearer picture, and then integrate it into how your organization plans, makes decisions, and behaves—every week.



Scan the QR Code to Access More
Information on Joel Barker's
Strategic Exploration Tools.



About the Author

Jim Schreier worked with Joel Barker for over twenty years, served as his Director of Training, and has co-authored the **Finding the Future Faster Guidebook** with Joel. Based on an experiential workshop with Joel, Jim developed the **Vision Album** program, which became one of the Strategic Exploration Tools.