

44-Blurry Vision

Steven Shepard

Steve@ShepardComm.com

24 August 2013



I was in a meeting with a group of executives the other day as they began the arduous task of redefining their collective vision for the company and what would ultimately become their new strategy. I found myself fascinated by the process, not so much because of the progress they made or the process they used, but because of the fact that they found themselves hopelessly mired in the tar pit of the English language.

These executives, smart people all, found themselves in a tautological spin cycle as they wrestled with mission statements, and vision elements, and strategic purpose, and their core values. And what I came to realize was that several of these words are used interchangeably (mission and vision, especially) and are also often conflated with purpose statements. So let me clear the linguistic air, but before I do that, let me share an admonition with you: When commonly used words like the ones I just listed have multiple or ambiguous definitions, don't use them in a story unless you clearly define them. It cheapens the language and confuses the listener. But let's be fair: These are important words, so let's take the time to define them.

Mission comes from the Latin word *mittere*, which means to send out. Missions typically have a beginning and end date, which is why we have the phrase, "Mission accomplished." The mission is a set of activities that help an organization advance to the next stage of whatever endeavor they're involved in, whether it's a sales or marketing plan, the development of a strategic partnership or an R&D project. When it's over it's over.

Vision comes from a Sanskrit word *vedah*, which means to see the future. That's what a vision is – a view of the future, a reality that has yet to take shape. Vision statements, if properly written, reflect a timeframe that is 20 years or so in the future so that it can't be conflated with the present. They describe for the reader or the listener what could be, not what it is. The other thing about a vision is that you never, ever achieve it. It's always slightly out of your grasp, pulling you along, providing a reason to strive for that desirable end state. If you ever DO achieve your vision, it wasn't a vision at all – it was a mission. Go back to square one and start over.

The word *Strategy* comes from the ancient Greek word *strategos*, which means "The actions taken by a general on the field of battle." Generals don't typically pick up a weapon and ride into the fray; they stand at the crest of the hill and watch from afar, giving directions that will transform the hands-on tactical and operational battles taking place on the plains below to a strategic outcome next week, next month or next year.

Finally we come to *value*. Values come from the Latin word *valere*, which means “that which makes you strong.” Your values make you strong and give you the ability to withstand the onslaught of competition, market slowdowns and fickle customers. So don’t fall into the trap of weak speak: Use strong, clearly understood terms. Be deliberate in your written and spoken language. If you’re not sure, look it up. That group of executives, for example, got hung up on the word ‘rigor’ as in, ‘we need more rigor in the business.’ But rigor doesn’t necessarily mean “toughness” or “rigidity.” It actually means “precision,” which, once I told them that, took the conversation in a very different direction.

Thanks for reading.