Five Elements of Vision

1) Beyond-The-Eaves Vision
Columbus had never seen India and certainly didn’t have one of those magnificent photos of Earth taken by our astronauts. His vision lacked direct visuals, being based on his observations and those of others. He listened to the tales of the ancient mariners, he watched ships’ masts slip - not fall - off the horizon as he sailed, and he was rational about this. He demonstrated what I call Beyond-the-Eaves Vision. A Beyond-the-Eaves business visionary weighs the meaning of the wider horizons he sees.

This business person sees what others are doing in their businesses. This skill is requisite to discovering techniques and trends that may be applied to one’s own business. Then one needs to become adept at copying others’ ideas and visions.

Columbus’s views extended only to the horizon because he lacked the means for extended vision. However, his vision wasn’t inhibited by walls and protective lawyers. His vision was necessarily developed despite a lack of role models, a helpful barrier to others’ entry as competitors. Columbus’s observations lacked precision. Yet, in Columbus’s mind, the vision of a globally-shaped Earth was so clear that he willingly risked lives, his own along with those of his terrified crew, and he convinced a queen to back him. His venture had a plank that puts TV’s “Shark Tank” to shame.

Such commitment comes only when visions assume the clarity and certainty of reality. Today’s business leaders have access to facts, photos and
familiarity. Columbus's vision derived from tales, optics and imagination. Both were and are obtained by looking at occurrences beyond one's lot line, which in real estate terms helps define property borders.

2) Forest & Trees Vision

World War II is and hopefully will remain the largest war in history. Its battles were not limited to fighting fields. There were constant clashes among the Allies’ political and military leaders: between those who pushed for the big picture and others who focused on details. There were great leaders in each perspective camp, not so many in both. Most had to choose: the forest or the trees, the big picture or the smaller detailed picture.

Gen. Dwight (Ike) Eisenhower seemed possessed of both. He could debate details with Gen. Patten and politics with Roosevelt and Churchill. It was the uncanny ability to see both the forest and the trees simultaneously that enabled him to manage the greatest invasion in history and bring victory over the enemy.

The successful business visionary must be able to distinguish the global aspects of the company and its industry, the forest, from the company's people, financial situation, capabilities and local challenges, the trees that constitute the forest. Business visionaries do so by alternating between the two instantly and automatically.

Such visionaries have the ability to focus virtually simultaneously on the smallest company trees and the whole world forest including the competition, the economies (global and local) and relevant time frames.

3) Trend Pattern Vision

Price, quality and service are the three-legged stool of business. They begin in sync. Advancing one of these is often the basis for competitive advantage. Observing the pace of trends in all or any of the three is an example of the Trending Pattern Vision that serves as the base for many business successes.

When inefficiencies caused a few airlines to raise fares, reduce services and eliminate the fun factor in air travel, others with Beyond-the-Eaves
Vision saw it as a license to do the same. One airline leader’s vision clashed with the entire industry.

Herb Kelleher was co-founder of Southwest Airlines. He saw those trends and envisioned opportunity. From out of nowhere Southwest soared to the third largest US carrier. This was the result of Herb’s looking beyond the wing span and seeing trends in competitors’ actions and customers’ desires. He allowed flight attendants and pilots to use the public address system to entertain passengers. This and efficiency-enhancing measures made flying a pleasurable experience and not the boring bus ride his rivals were providing.

Spotting a trend is a great skill but nowhere near as valuable as being able to follow its path and the speed at which it is moving. Business visionaries who can spot such trend patterns and convince others to follow their lead have more time to reposition their companies to take advantage of opportunities the trends offer, to avoid pitfalls trends cause, and to prevent wasting resources chasing lost causes.

4) Rapid Action Vision

For most business leaders, visions develop over time. But one dare not take too long. Visionaries win the gold. Silver winners? Forgotten or remembered for failure. Most business visionaries are lucky to have one vision that carries their company to success; some have a series of lesser but equally important visions that, taken together, rank in importance with the other visions.

Such rapid repetitive visions present themselves most frequently in areas of intense time pressure: combat, medical crises, natural and terrorist disasters, criminal and fire emergencies, and competitive sports. In those, a form of response differentiates winners and losers.

Some refer to a rapid recognition from experiences as a sixth sense. Similar traits are present in certain business visionaries. Rapidity is relative. In war, rapid may be in seconds, while in business, rapid may mean months or even years, since the business visionary usually experiences such change in decades. Few have such a series, each with grand visions.
One who has is Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon. Today, it’s difficult to analyze the pieces of Amazon. It is truly an amalgam of Jeff Bezos’s Rapid Action Visions. Starting with books, he recognized the inefficiencies of an antiquated industry, run essentially by English majors. Then, having built a customer base, he expanded into other products, then further, built an extraordinary system for marketing and logistics, a platform for others to sell products, and for others to store things in Amazon’s cloud: more recently, buying airplanes to reduce dependence on UPS, FedEx and the USPS, while continuing development and acceptance of bantam delivery drones to fill his latest vision.

Each of his visions requires successful implementation utilizing the previous visions as the infrastructure and launch pad for the newer ones. Some resulted from thought processes that also visualized a completed prior vision even before proven or existent. Yet the prior vision was so real in his mind that its projection provided ample infrastructure for the next.

5) Retro Vision

A new vision can call for the rebirth of an old vision for re-use. The visionary recognizes that the values and standards of the past constitute infrastructure that can be applied in the present to lay new roads for the future.

This vision occurs infrequently, less often than it should, possibly because: (i) we are admonished from childhood not to look back, not to dwell on past results, and only to focus on future challenges and opportunities; and (ii) looking back may necessitate looking too far back to be meaningful. (However, Sir Winston Churchill said, “The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.”)

Time lapse is a challenge to all visions, so looking far back can be difficult. But Retro Vision is a growing technique among family businesses. S. C. Johnson is but one of millions of family businesses. Originally known as Johnson Wax, the enterprise has diversified and modernized. Successful now in several industries and best known for products such as Raid, Pledge, Off, Glade, Drano, Windex and Ziploc, S. C. Johnson has grown in volume,
locations and number of employees into a highly successful and competitive 21st-century enterprise.

The future is theirs. Yet over the past couple of decades, they have purposefully reached back to their roots, finding the origin of their values that provided the basis for extraordinary success.

They even started tagging all their TV and print ads with, “a family business.” Peering back decades, even generations, their extraordinary Retro Vision provided the infrastructure and guard rails for moving forward.

THE VISION THING

Visionaries Are Made Not Born

The title of my first book, Entrepreneurs Are Made Not Born, was selected by my extremely capable editor, Caroline Carney, who spotted the phrase in my text and elevated it to a title. A similar question—genetic or environmental—reappears regarding business visionaries. That's not obvious. Not all business visionaries are entrepreneurs, although one might claim that all entrepreneurs are business visionaries.

Business visionaries certainly have both genetic and environmental influences. I don’t pretend to have the magic recipe for those ingredients. Since I doubt that anyone does, I suggest: It’s too late to choose your parents, so focus on what you can affect.

The Nearsighted Critic

In Invent Reinvent Thrive, I used a saying I created over 40 years ago: “If you're not up on it, then you have to be down on it,” to explain that many naysayers are such because they don’t understand another’s idea. Applying that to business visionaries, I would use the optics analogy: The visionary is far-sighted, seeing things further away (in distance or time) that aren’t visible to others who, in effect, are nearsighted.