



# Be Coherent, Not Visionary

Michael Lissack and Johan Roos

Many executives feel the need to articulate an ideal end-state for their organizations—often in the guise of a corporate vision. Striking the balance between novelty and believability of such an ideal end-state is often tricky, and empirical evidence shows that people are neither satisfied with the vision, nor the visioning process. This article argues that the very idea of having a corporate vision is of limited use in today's complex business landscapes. When you perceive your world as unstable and unpredictable what matters is *being coherent* rather than *being visionary*. Being coherent means acting in a manner that reinforces who you are, as an organization, given the current environment. It is such coherence that “makes sense” to us and to the others around us. The authors point out why executives need to replace visioning efforts with a focus on how to become and remain coherent throughout the organization. They also offer a few guiding principles on how to do this in practice. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

Strategy sessions seem to focus on vision—the company vision, the team vision, and the founder's vision. But, this article will argue that *the concept of vision has been transcended by the concept of coherence*. Strategy should not be based on vision alone, companies should not be organized around achieving the vision and executives should not spend time articulating the vision. Vision alone is just not enough. Consider the excerpts below taken from a strategy planning session for a software company.

So the question is, how big is the value potential created by this technology, and where will the value migrate from, because value doesn't appear out of nowhere, it migrates from somewhere where it is today to you. ... Well it is a dilemma, but it is a dilemma about a tactic, which is where do we start rather than what is our ultimate vision .... The words that keep coming to mind are where is the coherence of the vision ... You need to enrichen and enliven the vision so that it begins to speak to you and tells you what you will carry with you and what is actually baggage.

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Later in the same meeting:

If you forget about vision for a second, if you talk about the quality of the conversation, this ongoing conversation about who we are and what we do, and the emerging issues that come out of it, they in turn are fed back and inspire you. It is not so much what your vision is but how that conversation is going to go.

Our experience has been that companies can make significantly greater progress by focusing less on vision and more on coherence. As the second quote above notes "how the conversation is going to go" is more meaningfully reflected in the steps and actions that follow next steps and next actions than any abstract concept of vision will ever be. The purpose of this article is lay out the logic of why coherence should replace vision in corporate thinking and what the benefits (and pitfalls) may be for managers and companies that do so.

Why do we argue that the concept of vision is unduly limiting? In many instances, vision is only based on what has already been incorporated into your sense making. You can certainly only know about yesterday while you are trying to envision tomorrow or the future. By naming the desired outcome "vision" you reify it and thus preclude changes in it. This is of course perfectly acceptable if your world is predictable, if you can actually see the changes that *will* occur, but what if it isn't? The very dependence on predictability makes vision both limited and potentially misleading. Having locked in an outcome (i.e. the predictable future), it is tempting to work backwards from it and not focus on the potential interactions that could happen along the way. The very process of working backwards, of defining a game plan for achieving set goals, will restrict your "possibility space" and may interfere with your ability to adapt to changes and seize new opportunities. In this way, having an articulated vision works to silence your company's scouts—the staff members who are always probing for new ideas, new markets, and new possibilities. The strategic vision makes no room for emergence, thus whatever emerges may go unexplored or unexploited.

The failure of Boo.com demonstrates the risks of focusing on vision. Boo's founders wanted to have a global presence and so insisted on launching in more than 17 countries and a dozen languages *all at once*. They wanted to present an intense "real life" shopping experience, yet their reliance on large file sizes and the latest software meant that that their average user could see but a fraction of the experience and only *very slowly*, as the 3-D software required the latest equipment and broadband. While implementation problems held back Boo's launch for nearly six months, the focus on vision meant that it was advertising an offering that could not be found—*simply in order to increase mindshare*. The vision was powerful and investors loved it—some \$135 million was raised. The media also loved the vision. But the buyers hated the clothes. The \$135 million became \$352,000.

A vaunted brand known for vision became the watchword for internet failure.

So if vision and visioning are out, what is to replace them? We suggest an alternative: evoke coherence. Johan reached this conclusion after running executive education seminars at IMD for managers, doing follow-up case studies and consulting assignments. Michael reached this conclusion after sponsoring six conferences on the management of complexity involving nearly 600 managers, consultants, and organizational scholars and more than 1,000 hours of transcribed discussions. Our findings are not unique. Haeckel<sup>1</sup> asserts a similar point of view, so too do Hitt, Keats and DeMarie.<sup>2</sup> But where the first of these authors suggests that technology and information systems will provide the critical variable for successful management and the second set proposes a shopping list of concepts, our research suggests something far more basic: a shift in thinking and a related shift in actions. The ideas that underlie Haeckel and Hitt et al.<sup>3</sup> need to be elevated to the foreground, not relegated to the foundation of an argument for better information systems.

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*Vision may define a pathway to success or it may describe the goals a firm has set*

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### Revisiting the concept of vision

The popular view of strategic management has it that “vision” is all-important. Vision, as a management phenomenon, touches upon issues of leadership, motivation, empowerment, cognitive complexity, and self-transforming organizations. Popular books suggest that vision should involve goal-setting, team orientation and a futuristic orientation. It may define a pathway to success for the future of the firm or it may describe the goals a firm has set. As several recent studies<sup>4</sup> have shown, vision is perceived as a “need” by most senior executives. Lipton<sup>5</sup> suggests that visions serve five purposes: enhancing performance measures, promoting change, providing the basis for a strategic plan, motivating individuals and keeping decision making in context.

The popular media has elevated vision to the status of “sacred concept” and visionary managers to the status of “gods”. A vision statement is described by such noted journals as *Fast Company*, *Wired*, *Business 2.0*, *The Industry Standard*, *Upside*, and *E-Company* as future-focused, and defining what you want to become in the next three to ten years. Consider the “lessons” from a Fast Company “Realtime” conference.<sup>6</sup> Organizations that pursue a vision have vision-based missions and mission-based visions. A mission statement is present-focused and defines what you do to accomplish your vision. The mission keeps an organization focused on its key customers, products, and services, and helps when evaluating new business opportunities to make sure they fit in with the scope of the company’s mission. Missions are cast in vision: first see a future that is virtually inevitable, and then adopt a mission to participate in that future. “I skate to where the puck is going to be,” as Wayne Gretsky used to say. Peter Drucker claimed that effective visions are a future that has already happened. Strategy is the medium-term game plan for

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*Vision underlies a  
unique pattern for an  
organization's future*

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putting into place that effective future. Mission, vision, and strategy are the holy trinity of *Fast Company's* movement where the “gods” are “the unit of one” and “change”.

Serious academic researchers have seen vision as important to leadership, strategy implementation, and change.<sup>7</sup> Substantial bodies of both popularized<sup>8</sup> and more academic work<sup>9</sup> support the notion that top strategic leaders can—or should be able to—clearly state their visions for their organizations. Vision has been suggested as a form of leadership<sup>10</sup> in which a “visionary leader” alters an organizational culture to bring others to understand, accept, and carry forward his or her plans for the organization. Vision is seen as one of the critical tasks top organizational leaders perform<sup>11</sup> and as a demonstration of leadership competencies.<sup>12</sup> Vision underlies a unique pattern for an organization's future.<sup>13</sup> Yet, visions fail.<sup>14</sup> Russ Ackoff has noted that fewer than 2 per cent of strategic plans and their incorporated visions succeed.

The failures may be rooted in a lack of advice about how to go about making strategy and within it, a vision. Over the past decades the field of strategic management has developed more and more sophisticated concepts, models and techniques to help strategic decision-makers make decisions. Grounded in economic theory the “industrial organization” view<sup>15</sup> focuses on what is going on within particular industries and how to gain a favorable competitive position. Still rooted primarily in economic theory the more recent “resource-based view” of the firm<sup>16</sup> instead focuses on what resources give the company a competitive edge. Whereas the former helps strategy-makers develop a static view of the industry, the latter helps them take a path-dependent perspective of the desired resources to be leveraged and protected. Although these “strategy-content” theories provide illuminating descriptions of optimal competitive positioning and resource-base, they say very little, if anything, of how strategy is and should be made.

The parallel development of concepts, models and techniques within strategy-process theories, offers strategymakers richer descriptions about how strategy is formulated and developed over time. Grounded in linear logic the “planning”, or strategy “formulation” view<sup>17</sup> focuses on how strategymakers deliberately delineate formal (strategic) plans before somebody else (the line) implement them. As a reaction to the rational and mechanistic assumptions behind this view another stream of research has focused on the successive adjustment of the deliberate plan that stems from human behavior.<sup>18</sup> Whereas the former helps strategymakers develop rational plans, the latter helps them realize that, to paraphrase General Eisenhower, “a plan is nothing, but planning is everything.” Although the “strategy-process” theories provide descriptions of vital processes, they say very little of how strategy is and should be made in the first place.

In the absence of serious academic guidance about how to “make” a strategy, the practising manager is left with popular

advice, consulting firms and the literature on visions. Together these sources seem to rely on five unspoken assumptions:

(a) *The world is stable enough that changes that may occur are foreseeable* (we will label this as “continuity”).

(b) *Prediction is possible.*

(c) *Boundaries are clearly defined.* The fuzziness, which characterizes the network firm of today, goes unrecognized. Employees know who they are, suppliers know who they are, customers know their place, and the bosses’ jurisdiction is self-evident.

(d) *Identity is assumed,* and has no need for articulation.

(e) *Outcomes are more important* than processes.

Notice the stress on outcomes in these two brief excerpts from recent columns in the *Harvard Business Review*:<sup>19</sup>

A great corporate strategy begins with a vision of how a company’s resources will differentiate it from competitors across multiple businesses. But it must also articulate **how to achieve that vision.**

The new HR can also make sure that broad vision statements (such as, We will be the global leader in our markets) get transformed into **specific behaviors** by helping employees figure out what work they can stop, start, and keep doing to **make the vision real.**

Lipton<sup>20</sup> notes that visions and visioning fail for several reasons: the executives’ walk does not match the vision’s talk; the vision is not the holy grail; the vision presents an ideal future irreconciled with the present; the vision is either too abstract or too concrete and is imposed from the top. These tendencies continue to the present day.

## Complexity intervenes

When faulty assumptions underlie visions and visioning is it any wonder that most strategic plans fail? As Haeckel<sup>21</sup> notes and our own research concurs, the real world of managers has far different assumptions than the visioning literature. Continuity is but a fragile, temporary and illusionary notion. Prediction, at best, is possible in the very short term: the dartboard works better in the long run. Boundaries are always shifting: composition of work teams, temporary organizations, the company, the industry and the competitive environment are rarely predictable. The trade-off between outcome and processes do not favor one over the other. Situation and context take on determinative roles. When outcomes are not dominant over processes, measurement loses meaning and may have negative feedback consequences.

Consider the case of the Lego Group<sup>22</sup> the maker of those multi-colored bricks that 300 million children play with. For

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future*

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more than 30 years Lego enjoyed a stable growth rate of some 15 per cent. “We defined our own world” said some Lego executives. Nothing seemed to stop the company expanding its product line of theme sets based on “studded” plastic bricks. By the late 1990s this sense of continuity brought Lego into difficulties. The PC and internet revolution had changed children’s universe and how children they played: Gameboys, tamagotchis, and even talking furry dinosaurs were reducing the demand for traditional construction toys, the segment which Lego had dominated for so long. After suffering its first loss in history by the end of 1998, the firm hit back with its Robotics Invention System—Lego Mindstorms. Labeled with its own identification number, this intelligent brick can be programmed via a PC, and gives the user access to an internet community of inventors. *In the complex world of business today, managers perceive that continuity is but a fragile, temporary and illusionary notion, the assumption of predictability does not hold anymore.*

The physicist Niels Bohr said that prediction is difficult, especially about the future. We agree. For an increasing number of managers in an increasing number of industries prediction seems to be only possible in the very short term—weeks or days. Like the ongoing fluctuations in the global weather system, or in the stock market, it is impossible to tell what will happen next. Big changes such as replacing the CEO or bombing a country, can result in outcomes such as huge layoffs or unconditional surrender. In an interwoven economy, where individuals, groups, companies, and organizations of different kinds are connected in many ways, a big change may cause just a tiny difference. A small change, on the other hand, may cause huge avalanches of change rippling through our industries and continents. CEOs, generals, and strategic planners face this unpredictability every day. The composition of work teams, temporary organizations, companies or industries is rarely predictable simply because the boundaries are shifting all the time. *In life, boundaries are not fixed, for most situations they are always shifting.*

Most observers think of Lego as a toy company, and it still holds some 80 per cent of the market share in the construction toy segment. Yet, in 1998, Lego added “Just Imagine ...” under its well-known logo to emphasize that it is more than a toy company. The very notion of imagination lies at the core of its identity as a corporation and the new brand statement was very well received by its employees, vendors, customers and partners. Today Lego hopes to shape even more the meaning of imagination, learning and play for children worldwide. The identity of most organizations is rarely as clear-cut as in the Lego case. People on all levels and functions are continuously part of bringing forth an ever-changing identity of their organizations. *Identity will always be somewhat unclear, and people will always want to talk about it.*

## The challenges of co-evolution

As many contemporary writers observe, we live in a world in which complexity is rising and institutional orders are dissipating. More than 30 years ago, Thompson<sup>23</sup> wrote: “Uncertainty appears as the fundamental problem for complex organizations, and coping with uncertainty, as the essence of the administrative process.” The intervening three decades have marked little progress. Perhaps, what is occurring is that we are encountering more of what Rittel<sup>24</sup> described as “wicked problems”—“a class of social system problems which are ill formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing.” In such a world, organizational science studies ways of fending off the forces of chaos. Bruce Henderson, the late founder of BCG, was found of quoting Jay Forrester:<sup>25</sup> “While most people understand first-order effects, few deal well with second- and third-order effects. Unfortunately, virtually everything interesting in business lies in fourth-order effects and beyond.”

This study of the third- and fourth-order effects has taken on new prominence in the past few years under the guise of complexity studies, adaptive enterprises, and most prominently co-evolution.<sup>26</sup> James Moore, who popularized the concept in his book, *The Death of Competition*, writes that “companies need to co-evolve with others in the environment, a process that involves co-operation as well as conflict. It takes generating shared visions, forming alliances, negotiating deals, and managing complex relationships.”<sup>27</sup> More technically, co-evolution can be defined as the evolution of species, not associated with their environment, but to how they relate to other species. Co-evolution is the co-ordinated and interdependent evolution of two or more systems within a larger ecological system. There is feedback among the systems in terms of competition or co-operation and different utilization of the same limited resources. Moore said: “Biological co-evolution is a process in which interdependent species evolve in an endless reciprocal cycle: changes in species A set the stage for the natural selection of changes in species B, and vice versa. Over time, as co-evolution proceeds, the whole system becomes more hardy.”<sup>28</sup> In the realm of organization studies, co-evolution has been the focus of some of the leading scholars in the field.<sup>29</sup>

Where vision emphasizes predictability and goal-orientated forecasts of the future, co-evolution emphasizes adaptive-ness, situated-ness with time, space, and opportunity, and an awareness that change within the others with whom one relates will trigger changes in self which cannot be forecast. The “movement” of which *Fast Company* is the most prominent example places its stress on co-evolution, adaptive-ness, and change.<sup>30</sup> What few of the evangelists of co-evolution mention is the subject of another academic discipline—how the need for vigilant adaptation and for a willingness always to change is stressful. As psychologists would emphasize, the perceived need to be able to

undergo continuous adaptive change is threatening to identity and to self-esteem.<sup>31</sup> Vision's emphasis on predictability is countered by the co-evolutionist's emphasis on change.<sup>32</sup> Into this breach, steps coherence.

## Coherence

Coherence, the concept of “holding together” and of self-recognition of the boundary of self, acts to tie the levels of organizations together. Kabanoff et al.<sup>33</sup> noted: “All organizations need to solve a fundamental problem—how to maintain internal cohesion while producing economic outputs. ... To meet the requirements for cohesion and performance, organizations adopt different patterns of structures, processes, and values.” From the traditional perspective, in order to survive organizations must find ways to interpret events so as to make their environments more predictable. From the complexity perspective, organizations must find ways to interpret events so as to be at one with the environment, an environment, which they choose. Sense making is the manner by which each entity goes about describing, understanding, cognizing, and enacting its world. When managers “enact” the environment—as the very forces of co-evolution require—they as Weick<sup>34</sup> put it: “construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many ‘objective’ features of their surroundings. ... they unrandomize variables, insert vestiges of orderliness, and literally create their own constraints.”

Coherence in the “enactment process” serves as the glue, which allows both the manager and the organization to reassert identity in the face of the continuous change demanded by co-evolutionary market forces. We build our identity through our daily interactions. Collective action is regulated through the constraints of the environment and the structure and the “culture” of the actors. Similarly, culture and identity are built by action and interaction with others and the environment. While each of us is a single self (and while our organizations like to be thought of as a single entity of many selves), we must fit into many different roles and bear many different responsibilities. Who among us has not felt torn between the demands of a sick child at home, and a business deal that will fall apart if not attended to yesterday? The tension from conflicts among these roles works to dissipate a sense of coherence, while resolving such conflicts enhances coherence and its related qualities. Multiple levels and roles are in some sense a separation between being a part of one thing and a whole of something else—e.g. a subordinate and yet a product team leader. Each of our roles will continually evolve with each new occasion of use, because new situations, negotiations, and activities inevitably recast it in a new form. One of the greatest changes in the modern organization is the increased awareness everyone in an organization has about interactions and complications among these multiple roles. Change in the organization or in the marketplace can no longer be undertaken as though *ceteris paribus* were true. Haeckel calls this creating an

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“adaptive enterprise”.<sup>35</sup> Pasternack and Viscio refer to it as the value-laden core of the otherwise “centerless corporation”.<sup>36</sup> They write:

coherence refers to the linkages that hold a company together. Indeed, these linkages have never been more important in a global marketplace. They are the connectors among the many pieces of the firm, such as the global network of offices and systems that allows the firm to globalize yet work as one; management processes that enable the firm to function smoothly, and a whole range of other factors that bind the value-adding horsepower of the corporation and create value greater than the sum of the parts.<sup>37</sup>

Given this need for ever-adapting linkages, vision alone cannot overcome the pressures of co-evolution and increased complexity. Management’s focus on vision perhaps needs to be replaced instead by a stress on the hows and whys of managers’ evoking coherence.<sup>38</sup> (See Exhibit 1, on the next page.)

## **Coherent actions**

Our research has led us to focus on the importance of coherence to organizations in general and to management in particular. Coherence is about acting in a manner consistent with who you are given your present spot in the business landscape. Identity and action need to be consistent and not in conflict.<sup>39</sup> Where vision allows a focus on the future, coherence demands a recognition of the present. Where vision looks at where you want to be, coherence demands that you deal with where you are. Boo’s vision called for a broadband world of cool kids with large budgets. Boo’s reality consisted of 56k modems, fussy buyers, and tight budgets. Boo was consistent with its vision but out of sync with its present landscape. Virtual “there” is fine for vision, but the present “here” is a prerequisite for coherence.

Coherent actions are those actions that make sense to others in our organizations. Incoherent actions do not. What makes actions coherent is that the sets of people who take part in them react with “that makes sense” and do not react with surprise or angst. It is not helpful merely to characterize actions as coherent or not. What managers need to know is how to promote and encourage coherent actions throughout the organization.<sup>40</sup> Coherence cannot be summoned on the spot. It cannot be created overnight. But when an organization, a company, or a team has coherence, amazing things can happen. The manager cannot be the one to make it happen but can play a major role in helping it come into being.

In many companies, ranging from drug manufacturers to internet content providers to banks, we have observed a relationship among the actions taken, the viewpoints adopted, and assertions of identity as individuals, groups, and organizations. If a group, be it the secretarial pool or the top management team,

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### **Exhibit 1. Coherence in the Humanities and Sciences**

While the importance of coherence has not yet become conventional wisdom in managerial contexts, its critical role is well recognized in other fields. In psychology, for example, professional practice is based upon the recognition that a unified perspective is needed to make sense fully of the world as each of us perceives it. Fragmentation is considered as a direct threat to the “self”, to our sense of who we are. Psychologists describe that unified perspective as “coherence”, and those who possess it are “coherent”. A sufficient lack of psychological coherence renders one eligible for institutionalized care. From the biological perspective, entities are distinguished from one another by “boundaries”, e.g. a cell wall or a human’s skin. That which is within the boundary is said to “cohere”. If an outside observer, or a self-reflective observer in the case of humans, can ascribe purpose to the location of the boundary, the entity is described as coherent. Thus, for example, cancers, which serve no purpose for their host entity, are incoherent with their host. On the contrary, certain parasites that have a symbiotic relation to their host are considered to be part and parcel of the coherent entity. Mitochondria are the classic example of this as both a coherent entity in their own right and a vital part of the coherent entities we call cells.

Physics lends its own credence to the concept by positing coherence as the opposite force to that of entropy. If the basic tendency of all systems is to dissipate in the absence of new energy inputs, it requires energy to hold the system together. When the system has an attractive force—gravity for the solar system, psychological coherence for humans—there is less energy required to hold it together than when such forces are absent. You or I can force repellant magnets to remain in our closed fist, but it requires our energy to do so not theirs.

Biology and physics are combined in the study of ecosystems. Here it is held that coherent organizations (i.e. meaning groups of plants or animals which occupy a given space) are nature’s most effective means of capturing the added energy of the sun and not allowing it to be dissipated away, as the second law of thermodynamics would otherwise suggest. Psychology rejoins the arena when we consider the field of organizational ecology, which holds that human endeavors and groupings can be studied as a series of ecosystems. Coherence is the glue that holds the organized entities (be it an ant colony or a city) together in their ecosystems and renders them more ecologically fit for survival to the next generation.

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shares some basic views, the interactions among those group members allows for the others to make sense of any particular individual’s actions. This sense making will occur only if the group members share a set of views (on why they come to work each day, what their work is about, on competition, collaboration etc.) and if they see themselves as a group. Without the group identity and the shared views, the sense making is usually absent.

And sense making is the key to further action. We seldom are willing to act in a manner which threatens identity, and it is the sense making which determines if acts (our own or others') are identity enhancing or not (see Figure 1). Actions are seen either to align with sense of self or not, and thus to cohere or not. In the absence of coherence, further aligning actions are unlikely.

Once one affords import to coherence, then the very task of managing becomes that of guiding purposive action. From the manager's perspective, coherence is an alignment of context, viewpoint, purpose and action that in turn enables further purposive action.<sup>42</sup>

Coherence cannot be produced (other than temporarily through coercion); it must be evoked, coaxed into existence from a convergence of interactions and sense making. By setting boundaries the forces of coherence can be channeled. Intention and purpose are embodied in the channeling. Intention is expressed by purposive action. Exogenous events will occur, demands be made, and communication happen. How the interactions between the exogenities and purposive actions are made sense of as they emerge will indicate whether coherence can result. By evoking and challenging identity claims in the reaction to interactions and exogenous events the forward motion of the players involved will either reinforce or devolve mutual sense of self. With reinforcement comes coherence, devolution speaks of itself.

Coherent people thrive mentally, emotionally, and physically. Coherent organizations thrive in attainment of their purposes. Coherence is not a rigid state, but rather is a process that reflects the ongoing alignment of identity, purpose and values. When a system is coherent, virtually no energy is wasted so as to achieve

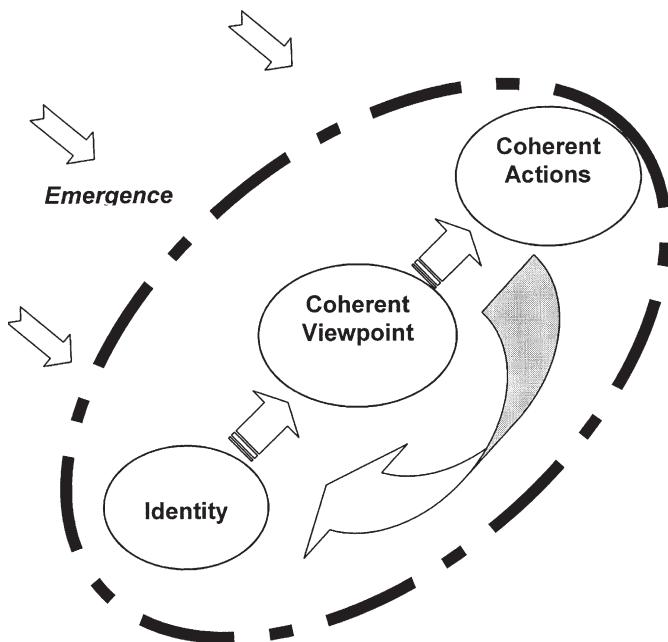


Figure 1. The importance of coherence<sup>41</sup>

internal synchronization.<sup>43</sup> Power is maximized through coherence—the power to adapt, flex, innovate resulting in a major leap in efficiency and effectiveness. Organizations, being comprised of people, operate the same way. As coherence increases within individuals and teams, a much higher level of organizational coherence and alignment is possible—coherence between the organization’s goals, its viewpoint and its actions. The presence of coherence is more likely to contribute to the accomplishment of shared purpose.<sup>44</sup>

The focus in coherence is on who am I, what do I see as adjacent possibilities in the current environment (for we only can move to the next step one at a time), are those possibilities consistent with my sense of identity and boundary (are they coherence preserving)? And for “I”, one can substitute the team, the group, the unit, and the company. Action across all those scales is what the company is all about. And guiding coherent action is the key task of management.

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*Coherence is not a panacea. Neither is or was vision*

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### Limitations and cautions

This article has suggested that the overly broad claims made for vision in both the academic and popular business press have led to an unhealthy emphasis on the wrong ideas for many companies and for many managers. In vision’s place we suggest that a more correct emphasis should be on coherence. Yet, we would be less than coherent if we failed to suggest that there are, of course, limitations to this approach. too. Kurt Gödel proved that no “system” could be both complete and fully consistent.<sup>45</sup> The risks to a manager striving for coherence lie in the subtleties of Gödel’s observation. When a member of your network—be it an employee, superior, vendor, customer, or competitor—has vastly different goals and orientations than you, the very action of trying to find a coherence which is *inclusive* of that member is likely to contribute to incoherence at first and ultimately to the decoherence (read: unraveling) of the company and the network itself.

Coherence is not a panacea. Neither is or was vision. The major danger to the coherence approach comes if it is adopted in a superficial way. Giving lip service to coherence is very different from striving to achieve it. Attempting to be overly inclusive is counterproductive. Attempting to “force” coherence (through coercion) would mean turning the words into lies and would shatter the concept. The coherence approach needs to be viewed as a recipe—to be adapted to local conditions and to available ingredients.<sup>46</sup> If one attempts to apply coherence in a “one size fits all” manner, Gödel will strike again and failure is a likely result. In our book, *The Next Common Sense*, we suggest that “context matters”.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the greatest risk to a manager or to a company seeking to apply the coherence approach lies in ignoring that observation.

## Simple guiding principles for being more coherent

Abandoning some of the comfortable assumptions of strategic management, a focus on evoking coherence provides a different perspective of what is important and what strategic managers should do. We offer five simple guiding principles to the executives who want to focus on being coherent:

- 1 *Strive to become more of what you really are.* Ensure that viewpoints and actions are aligned with your identity. Having said that, emergent behavior will force you to revisit who you are often, and continually reassert coherence.
- 2 *Try to channel emergence, not control it.* Whether you like it or not, new and often unexpected things are bound to happen in all situations in which people, companies or neurons interact. Your “tools” include boundary setting (but remember these will change), conversations, and setting the initial conditions for new interaction. Coherence may emerge.
- 3 *Try to find your preferred adjacent possible, i.e., the next stage or level of possibilities for you.*
- 4 *Act in a manner that will improve or enhance those adjacent possibles.* While acknowledging the power of emergent behavior, relate to your organization’s purposive actions, and encourage those around you to do the same.
- 5 *Discuss identity, boundary and processes often and with many people in your surroundings.* If you don’t, your juniors will ... and probably to your detriment. Other people refer to this as the “informal” or the “shadow” organization. By bringing identity to the forefront and away from the shadows you reinforce coherence.

Contract these simple guiding principles with traditional advice concerning effective articulation of visions. Managers must:<sup>48</sup>

- 1 *Define a vision;*
- 2 *Define a competitive strategy consistent with that vision;*
- 3 *Define organizational work processes that, when executed, will implement the strategy; and*
- 4 *Define individual job requirements so that employees can carry out the processes effectively.*

Sure, *if* your business environment is stable and predictable. If it is not:

**we recommend that you try to be more coherent rather than try to be more visionary.**

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