



Vision, innovation, and leadership in research libraries



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A B S T R A C T

This study examined the relationship of research library visions, as embodied in a publicly posted vision statement, and the innovativeness of the library. The literature on organizational vision is abundant and generally reveals a positive relationship between vision, visionary leadership, and a variety of organizational factors. Many researchers state that a vision, communicated throughout the organization, is a critical element of organizational success and those entities without a vision are “stumbling in the dark”. In this study, library professionals rated each research library vision statement based on established attributes and it was found that the resulting vision statement score was positively and significantly related to the innovativeness of the library.

1. Introduction

Organizations are the major mechanisms for achieving societal goals (Hage & Aiken, 1970). For the research library,¹ these goals are expressed in the vision and mission of the organization. Scholars and practitioners are studying the vision and mission of organizations and, more specifically, how these concepts are communicated in formal statements (Kopaneva & Sias, 2015). A vision statement describes a future preferred state and it is an indispensable element of organizational life that energizes members and drives the organization forward. Creating the right vision is one of the toughest and most challenging tasks for leadership.

Vision, innovation, and leadership are intertwined in multiple and complex ways. A close reading of Martin's (2016) work on academic library leadership reveals how leadership styles, vision, and innovation are intimately related. Important leadership attributes include the creation and sharing of a vision for the library, being innovative, and having the self-confidence to forge ahead in a changing environment. In earlier studies of research library innovation (Jantz, 2015, 2016), significant factors found to be related to innovativeness included the integration of the leadership team and the singular leader's attitude toward organizational change. The premise in this study is that a powerful vision statement, communicated throughout the organization, can energize members to higher levels of commitment while also contributing to greater job satisfaction and creativity, resulting in new ideas and a more innovative culture. Consequently, one might expect

that the vision and innovativeness of the library will be significantly related – the focus of the study reported here.

2. Problem statement

A vision describes a future preferred state of an organization and the corresponding statement, communicated throughout, is a critical factor in the future success of the institution. Kilpatrick and Silverman (2005) stress the importance of a vision statement for nonprofits, given that these organizations lack the feedback provided by profit and loss statements.

The research on visionary leadership is extensive with many definitions of vision. Zaccaro and Banks (2001) cite seven definitions, however all of these have a set of common components. Briefly stated, a vision is a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization (Nanus, 1992). Kilpatrick and Silverman (2005) define a vision as “a compelling, easy-to-understand description of how the nonprofit would like the world to change in the next three-to-five years, what role the organization will play in that change, and how the nonprofit will measure the success of its role” (p. 25). Most definitions stress the motivational aspects of vision as an aspirational description of what an organization would like to achieve or accomplish in the stated timeframe. In crafting a credible vision, the leader must be aware of the limits of the organization and the boundaries imposed by the external environment. For some organizations, a three-year timeframe may be

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¹ In this study, the term “research library” refers to those institutions that are members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). ARL is a nonprofit organization of 123 research libraries at comprehensive, research institutions in the U.S. and Canada that share similar research missions, aspirations, and achievements.

too short and there are external economic and political realities that must be taken into account. [Bennis and Nanus \(1985\)](#) identify the essential dimensions of a vision statement – “...a vision articulates a view of a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization, a condition that is better in some important ways than what now exists” (p. 89).

Many research libraries do not acknowledge the importance of a vision and most library employees do not understand the content expressed in these statements and how the vision statement might affect their own work. Given a dynamic external world, statements about the future and purpose of the library are essential components of a strategic plan and should evolve to keep pace with change. Unfortunately, many statements about vision published on library web pages just don't work. In addition, some libraries do not consider a vision statement important, focusing primarily on day-to-day management challenges. The premise of this study is innovativeness will be an important attribute in a library seeking to provide the services required by the 21st century university and a powerful vision will help leaders create this more innovative institution.

3. Literature review

Vision is a key concept in the study of leadership and organizational change and can be succinctly defined as an “idealized goal to be achieved” ([Ruvio, Rosenblatt, & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2010](#), p. 145). Leadership is about vision, and a compelling vision, communicated throughout the library and the university, can significantly increase the probability of organizational success. Visionary leadership encourages innovation, inspiring what may at first appear to be unachievable. Unfortunately, in the more autocratic organization, a leader can mandate policy and make decisions without a vision—a style that is tantamount to stumbling in the dark. [Nanus \(1992\)](#) proposes an appropriate metaphor for these organizations “a lifeboat adrift in turbulent seas with no oars, no compass, no maps—and no hope” (p. xviii).

3.1. Vision—organizational factors and performance

What are the characteristics of a powerful and transforming vision statement and how do statements about the future provoke and sustain behavior? [Van der Helm \(2008\)](#) proposes a framework for studying vision and describes seven different types of visions including humanistic, religious, organizational, and personal. He claims that all of these visions work because they have three common attributes: a claim about the future, a reference to an ideal future, and the desire for deliberate change.

Vision can relate to organizational structures where a more flat-tened structure leads to increased innovation but also difficulty in maintaining a coordinated effort throughout the organization. A more hierarchical, top-down management structure will be more efficient but will also restrict the innovative capabilities of organizational members. These issues have led [Collins and Porras \(1991\)](#) to develop a theoretical framework for understanding organizational vision consisting of two major components: a guiding philosophy and a tangible image. The guiding philosophy is a set of motivating assumptions and principles while the tangible image includes the organizational mission and a vivid, engaging description of what one would expect when the vision is accomplished.

In perhaps the earliest large-scale empirical study of organizational vision, chief executives in one national and three regional

samples participated in a study of the content and structure of their organizational visions ([Larwood, Falbe, Kriger, & Miesing, 1995](#)). Corporate chief executives were asked to write a brief, one-sentence statement of their visions for their firms. In order to evaluate the content of their statements, these executives were also asked to analyze the statements by applying 26 items from a list provided by the authors. The authors report that vision statements represent a multifaceted structure with formulation, implementation, and innovative realism being the most important factors. No differences in vision were found with respect to region or firm size. One important methodological conclusion from this study: It appears viable to empirically test many of the concepts that have been developed concerning vision statements.

In a comprehensive longitudinal study to examine the effects of vision on performance, [Baum, Locke, and Kirkpatrick \(1998\)](#) used structural equation modeling and found that vision content and attributes can have an impact on the growth of a company. However, the context, size, and environment of an organization can affect the efficacy of vision statements. [Gulati, Mikhail, Morgan, and Sittig \(2016\)](#) used content analysis and evaluated the relationship between the quality of vision statements and organizational performance in U.S. hospitals. Their study revealed a statistically significant and positive relationship between vision statements and at least one of four performance measures. [Jing, Avery, and Bergsteiner \(2014\)](#) have found a positive relationship between vision communication and financial performance and staff productivity in small professional service organizations.

3.2. Vision and leadership

A vision must be communicated to be effective. [Carton, Murphy, and Clark \(2014\)](#) have studied how leaders can use rhetoric to create a shared sense of purpose among followers and thereby improve organizational performance. These researchers used multiple methods to demonstrate how combining vision imagery with a small number of value concepts can boost performance.

[Westley and Mintzberg \(1989\)](#) examine the experiences of a number of visionary leaders to identify different types of vision creators. They report that most researchers appear to agree that visioning can be broken down into three stages in which 1) the envisioning of a desired future state 2) when effectively articulated and communicated to followers 3) serves to empower those followers. These researchers state that “visionary leadership encourages innovation.”

[Nanus \(1992\)](#), pp. 28–32 has explored the pivotal role of vision in leadership and identifies seven properties that provide guidance for leaders to create a vision statement. The vision statement should – be appropriate for the organization, exhibit standards of excellence, clarify purpose and direction, inspire, be well articulated, reflect the uniqueness of the organization, and represent an ambitious undertaking. In a related study of vision statements, researchers have uncovered a core set of characteristics that comprise a powerful vision. These characteristics – abstractness, brevity, challenge, clarity, future orientation, stability, and desirability or ability to inspire – have significant impact on both client and employee satisfaction ([Baum et al., 1998](#); [Kantabutra & Avery, 2010](#)).

The singular leader can create a vision, however most visions are developed in a group environment. In their review, [Foster and Akdere \(2007\)](#) note that employees hold three types of future

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