

Sustainability Vision Theory

Subjects: Management

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Sustainability vision theory means a vision should convey enduring values and a lasting higher-order purpose, so as to guide employees and all other stakeholders to what is really meaningful to them in their path toward realizing the vision. Strong, productive culture always starts with a vision statement. When a vision statement is genuine and simply displayed prominently, it can assist in orienting stakeholders toward achieving the vision. In doing so, corporate sustainability strategies should be formulated according to the vision. Certainly, the strategic focus is on maximizing values to a wide range of stakeholders. A vision statement as a leadership tool reflects a clear indication whether organizational leaders care about strategic sustainability. Indeed, ensuring corporate sustainability requires an integration of the two dimensions of society and environment into the vision, culture and operations, which suggests a large-scale transformation is needed, as these two dimensions are not often taken into account in organizational visions.

Keywords: sustainability vision ; corporate sustainability ; retail ; sustainable leadership ; organizational culture

1. Introduction

A strong, productive culture always starts with a vision statement ^[1]. When a vision statement is genuine and simply displayed prominently, it can assist in orienting stakeholders ^[1] toward achieving the vision. Conveying enduring values and a lasting higher-order purpose ^[2], a “vision” is indeed a corporate pitch to guide employees and all other stakeholders to what is really meaningful to them ^[3] in their path toward realizing the vision. In doing so, corporate sustainability strategies should be formulated according to the vision ^[4]. Certainly, the strategic focus is on maximizing values to a wide range of stakeholders. A vision statement as a leadership tool reflects a clear indication whether organizational leaders care about strategic sustainability. Indeed, ensuring corporate sustainability requires an integration of the two dimensions of society and environment into the vision, culture and operations, which suggests a large-scale transformation is needed, ^[5] as these two dimensions are not often taken into account in organizational visions ^[6].

Two types of visions exist: positive and negative visions. Positive ones are inspiring, full of desirable, and often sustainable, values ^{[7][8]}. They adopt a transparent approach in reaching a more desirable future ^[9]. Clearly, they are more effective than negative ones, which have no passionate appeal ^[9]. Therefore, positive visions are capable of spurring change. In the sustainability context, positive visions are the ones conducive to corporate sustainability. They promote continuous development, as is required to survive in this rapidly changing world. On the other hand, negative visions are ones that direct energy to prevention, rather than innovation, signals that organizational members pull together solely when threatened, and are very short-term ^[8]. They are detrimental to corporate sustainability and limit corporate prosperity. Unfortunately, positive visions are less frequently found in the corporate world than negative ones.

For decades, an organizational vision has been emphasized as critical to leadership, strategy and sustainability ^[10]. However, vision is still not commonly defined, and is often confused with an organization’s philosophy, mission, strategy and goals ^[10]. To avoid greater confusion, we define vision in the present study as a leader’s individual cognitive concept used to guide his/her behaviors, options and actions ^[11]. In theory, Sustainability Visions have two components ^[10]: attributes and content.

1.1. Vision Attributes

Seven attributes for effective Sustainability Visions exist ^[10]: brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, and desirability or ability to inspire. They are theorized to facilitate the vision sharing process in an organization as discussed one by one below.

Vision brevity means a vision statement that contains approximately 11–22 words ^[10]. With the other six attributes, sustainability visions with such a length increase the chance of improved corporate sustainability, since a leader can articulate a brief sustainability vision frequently and continuously, and organizational members can then grasp it more

easily. Consequently, organizational members can be more effectively guided by the sustainability vision in terms of their daily decisions, improving their own satisfaction and that of stakeholders.

Clarity means a vision statement that directs at an overarching goal it wants to achieve ^[10]. With the other six attributes, such clear sustainability visions increase the chance of improved corporate sustainability, since organizational members realize precisely what their organization wants to achieve. Thus, clear sustainability visions direct the full energies of organizational members toward satisfying stakeholders.

Vision abstractness means a vision statement that is not a one-time, specific goal that can be achieved, then abandoned ^[10]. With the other six attributes, such abstract sustainability visions increase the chance of improved corporate sustainability, since abstractness allows members of the organization to feel a greater sense of a longer-lasting organization, and promotes self-governing and individually innovative interpretations among them in working toward satisfying stakeholders.

A vision challenge means a vision statement that challenges organizational members to continue contributing their best efforts toward delivering desirable sustainability outcomes ^[10]. With the other six attributes, such challenging sustainability visions increase the chance of improved corporate sustainability, since the more there is a discrepancy between its present reality and the sustainability vision, the more motivated organizational members are to work toward satisfying stakeholders.

A vision's future orientation means a vision statement that indicates the long-term organizational perspective ^[10]. With the other six attributes, such sustainability visions increase the chance of improved corporate sustainability, since the long-term, future organizational perspective permits a balance between long-term and short-term strategy formulations, and prudent management at all organizational levels attracts organizational commitment toward satisfying stakeholders, and draws members of the organization to work toward satisfying the stakeholders.

Vision stability means a vision statement that is less likely to be affected by environmental change ^[10]. With the other six attributes, such sustainability visions increase the chance of improved corporate sustainability, since a stable sustainability vision does not confuse organizational members particularly when they are implementing sustainability strategies, suggests leadership integrity, and promotes the incorporation of sustainability into daily operations among organizational members.

Vision desirability or a vision's ability to inspire means a vision statement that declares a goal which inspires organizational members ^[10]. With the other six attributes, such sustainability visions increase the chance of improved corporate sustainability, since members of the organization are drawn to working toward satisfying stakeholders by a desirable or inspiring sustainability vision.

1.2. Vision Content

Vision attributes alone are not going to make an impact. A vision needs to have meaningful and effective content to demonstrate and clarify the focal values which combine to create a desired manifestation of its direction, alongside reasonable recommendations for achieving the highly challenging goals associated with the vision ^{[12][13][14]}. As a matter of fact, vision content essentially defines organizational identity ^{[12][13][14]}.

Specifically, vision content refers to an image of the collective future, the information embedded in the vision ^[15]. In the sustainable organization setting, the information or the image is frequently about such virtues as perseverance, ethics and integrity, social responsibility, and social innovation ^[10]. Gleaning the needs and desires of stakeholders, surpassing their differences, and appealing to a wide range of stakeholders to share mutual concerns toward the future or their organization, a sustainability vision widens the support base for implementing the vision ^[16] by allowing members of the organization to reflect on the needs and aspirations of a range of stakeholders, enhancing their own satisfaction and that of stakeholders ^[10].

Therefore, sustainability vision content is theorized to contain an imagery about improving the satisfaction of stakeholders, because they are vital to sustainable organizational success ^[10], and empirically, the imageries of improving venture growth, and customer and staff satisfaction were found to improve venture growth, and customer and staff satisfaction ^{[17][18]}. In essence, visions that seem desirable to organizational members are ones that associate possibilities and growth with sustainability values such as social responsibility ^[10]. Therefore, the more imagery about improving stakeholder satisfaction contained in a vision, the higher the satisfaction of organizational members, the higher the improvement in corporate sustainability.

Based on the literature, vision content in this study are imageries about improving sales, store leadership, and staff and customer satisfaction, as (a) sales represent the interests of staff, store managers and owners, (b) store leadership and staff satisfaction represent the interest of staff, store managers and owners, and (c) customer satisfaction represents the interest of customers, staff, store managers and owners. All of these are corporate stakeholders, which is consistent with the Sustainability Vision theory [10]. More importantly, staff have an interest in all these imageries. Thus, we use staff satisfaction as the proxy for corporate sustainability, which will be discussed in the following Staff Satisfaction section.

In summary, the sustainability vision content of sales, store leadership, and staff and customer satisfaction imageries that represent stakeholder interests, and the seven sustainability vision attributes of brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, and desirability or ability to inspire facilitate a sustainability vision's communication, articulation and sharing processes. With the resulting shared sustainability vision, organizational members become committed emotionally to the sustainability vision by wanting to improve stakeholder satisfaction, thereby increasing their own satisfaction and sustainability performance.

2. Vision Realization Variables

Simply having a vision will not lead to sustainable success, as vision alone contributes to only 10 percent of organizational success [19]. Vision realization factors are needed. Each vision realization factor is discussed below.

As part of forming a strong organizational culture, vision communication has long been regarded as key to the successful implementation of a vision [7][20]. Organizational leaders and managers communicate their organizational visions in a variety of ways, such as through written statements and personal communication [21][22]. In particular, as an organization is growing, vision communication, articulation and sharing processes among organizational members is necessary so that all members share the same vision [23]. Such a shared vision allows members to become self-adapting in response to the changing environment [23], allowing the organization to find a way to survive and thrive in the increasingly dynamic world.

Vision Communication is operationally defined as the extent to which a sustainability vision is communicated by a store manager via spoken, written and/or technology-mediated channels.

After communicating the vision, organizational members start to share and intrinsically want to turn the vision into reality. The existing organizational systems may not be supportive to them. Therefore, the systems need to be aligned with the sustainability vision. These organizational systems range from organizational structures and processes, organizational culture, recruiting systems, incentives and job design [24][25]. Effective sustainability visions also align people in an organization, freeing energies that might have been consumed by irrelevant matters among them toward the attainment of the vision [26]. As a matter of fact, the entire organizational alignment process can be defined as leadership [27]. Empirically, in retail stores, store managers who do not align organizational systems with their store vision frustrate their staff members because the unsupported organizational systems will become obstacles whenever they are intended to realize the vision [25].

Organizational Alignment is in the present study operationally defined as the extent to which a store manager developed new staff performance evaluation criteria according to the vision, and reassigned his/her staff as needed to support his/her vision.

While an alignment of organizational systems to suit a vision concerns structural changes, empowerment entails delegating and giving out power to organizational members no matter where they are in the organizational levels [28]. Organizational members are allowed a reasonable degree of independence to decide and commit to do something supportive to the vision [29]. Specifically, sustainable enterprises promote self-governing teams where employees are fully empowered in their operations [21]. In doing so, a shared vision is used as part of a soft organizational control [7] for the self-governing teams. With such empowerment, organizational members feel involved with the vision and are allowed some room to individually, innovatively interpret the sustainability vision as they feel relevant to their work [30]. It is not surprising that sustainable corporations are found to have innovation as a core value and are highly innovative [7][21]. Sharing the sustainability vision, empowered organizational members can use the sustainability vision to promptly inform their judgements and actions [10]. Such timely judgements and actions are highly suitable for the non-linear, complex and non-static nature of the present corporate environment.

Empowerment of Staff is operationally defined as the extent to which a staff member felt involved with his/her store manager's vision, and a store manager delegated work to staff, provided support services and resources to staff, and encouraged staff to make more decisions regarding daily store operations.

Sustainable enterprises focus on intrinsic motivation among organizational members. They usually have a highly motivated group of employees [31][21]. Vision-guided leaders espouse their vision to arouse organizational members to work toward their vision, especially in difficult times [32]. Essentially, a vision can be a leadership tool to motivate organizational members, develop long-term commitments among them, and enable the organization to adapt over time [33]. Motivation also increases when organizational members see their leader is passionate about his/her vision [16], meet their leader's high expectations, and, through such a process, enhance their perceived self-efficacy, which is an important foundation of motivation [34]. Motivation also comes from decisions they are allowed to make, and from job designs and sound judgements on rewards and compensation [35][36]. In addition, as challenges are a form of motivation, a challenging vision allows organizational members to increase their own esteem while trying to attain the vision [37]. In such a process, organizational members are motivated and satisfied [38].

Motivation of Staff is operationally defined in the present study as the extent to which a staff member was committed to his/her store manager's vision, and a store manager acted as a role model for staff, was passionate about his/her vision, built staff's self-confidence, challenged staff, and rewarded staff who exhibited consistent behaviors with his/her vision.

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