

The visioning process and its impact in a service setting

Building and rebuilding a “winning team”

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Most newly-hired managers want to initiate changes which will demonstrate their capabilities and move their organization past the initial staff anxiety over what the new person will be like and what the new manager will expect of them.

Often, the first step is to attempt a departmental renewal. But more often than not, they face the dilemma of how to go about it — what important areas need change, how much change, where, when and how to start the change.

Our newly-hired (British) recreation manager initially chose training as the starting point for change. As we brainstormed possible options to take, he and the assistant recreation manager (also British) described the existing scenario in the Gulf Hotel Health Club — demotivated employees (made up of Filipino, Indian and Sri Lankan expatriates), intrigues, lack of commitment, lack of instructional knowledge, lack of self-discipline and an untidy gym area.

After a few more meetings with the managers, the recreation manager started talking about what he wanted to happen at the Health Club. At that point, I knew that visioning would be the way to start the process.

So we began discussing visioning and what effects it would have in transforming the organization and the people. I supported this staff learning process with selected literature on visioning and samples of vision statements developed by the hotel's laundry department. The next step for this staff team was to actually begin their visioning process.

The birth of a vision

The recreation manager started the process by consulting with his employees while the management team began developing draft mission and vision statements. The assistant recreation manager developed the idea of describing the Health Club employees as the Winning Team — a group of individuals who will make a difference. As a visual representation of their desired future, the team created a logo which epitomized their initial attempt to graphically capture their vision's concepts.

When the team was ready with their draft vision statements, a meeting to discuss the vision was scheduled with all health club employees plus the two top managers concerned (rooms division manager and the personnel and training manager).

From the very start, the idea of the Winning Team and the logo seemed to energize the individual members to move toward a better future. As we discussed what the logo meant to them, ideas just flowed freely. The discussion became livelier after they were asked to individually visualize what the Winning Team would look like, feel like and act like. Group members then shared their experiences in the visualization exercise and I wrote the keypoints of their insights on the flip chart. We then had a list of vision concepts which were ranked according to the group's preference. This resulted in further discussion and revision of the draft vision statements.

Accelerators, decelerators and action steps

It was then time to get into the nitty gritty of the vision. I was amazed at the power of the logo to symbolically introduce the force-field analysis. Graphically showing the upward and downward movement of the “balloon,” I described the helping forces as the upward air currents or accelerators, and the restraining forces as the downward air currents or the decelerators.

After brainstorming and evaluating the helping and restraining forces, they listed specific action steps to increase the effect of the “accelerators” and reduce the effect of the “decelerators.” As I observed how enthusiastically they generated creative and logical ideas, I knew that the Winning Team had the potential to go places.

The personal vision

To get each team member to align his/her personal vision with the departmental vision, we organized another meeting. They went through another visualization exercise to see themselves as part of the Winning Team, see what contribution they could bring to make the team win, and feel how important they were to the team. After processing the visualization exercise, I found that the vision logo had created a great impact on the team members as they kept referring to the logo in the course of our discussion.

I concluded the session by giving them a “vision” assignment which we termed as their personal contract. They wrote their personal goals to strengthen teamwork, show their commitment to self-discipline, improve their professionalism and develop self-confidence. We made it clear to them that these contracts would be a part of a six month assessment of the vision progress.

Vision impacts

One of the concerns brought out by the managers and some team members was the lack of commitment and sense of responsibility of the senior instructors. In the earlier vision meetings, employees identified the need for clarifying their duties and responsibilities as opposed to those of the instructors. We then discovered that they had no job description! (It was a significant oversight of ours and former recreation managers.)

Health Club & Recreation Department – Vision

We in the health club and recreation department want to become and be known throughout Bahrain and neighboring countries as the “Winning Team.”

We, the “Winning Team:”

Are recognized as leaders in teamwork, taking pride in the success and achievement of the department;

Respected for discipline, professionalism, self-confidence and hard work, are constantly aiming at perfection in service;

Offer a warm, friendly atmosphere, radiate enthusiasm making each member feel welcome;

Provide an environment known for its cleanliness and good facilities; it is an environment where people care to understand each other, support each other and establish rapport.

The Winning Team’s Mission

Our purpose is to make the Gulf Hotel’s Health Club the place to be seen.

The Health Club is ideally located close to the City, Muharraq, and residential areas, providing good recreation facilities with active programs. The programs are managed and supervised by professional staff and offer competitive rates, good service, with a comfortable and friendly atmosphere.

Without further ado, the management staff organized a meeting to discuss and prepare appropriate job descriptions. As the managers discussed the concerns about the instructor role with the senior instructors, they (the managers) realized the reasons why they (the instructors) had acted “that way.” The senior instructors also aired their deep seated frustrations and difficulties brought about by the lack of direction and information in performing their tasks. The managers stressed the importance of the instructors in making the vision work; they then discussed what could be done about the issues brought out. That was their first dose of the needed recognition. After the meeting, we knew that we had got them on board.

The commitment project — The vision was a month old when the health club employees completed the team effectiveness questionnaire. After the results were shared with them, they felt a sense of accomplishment when they realized their progress in terms of team effectiveness brought about by the visioning as compared to where they were in the past.

The questionnaire results revealed that the two critical factors which needed improvement were commitment and trust. This paved the way to developing a commitment project, the results of which would be presented to management.

The team initially talked about what they wanted to happen in the presentation and they came up with the following:

- Show immediate results of the vision
- Get good feedback and support from management
- Impress the management with their enthusiasm
- Have a happy ending

The assistant recreation manager then prepared and laid out a rough plan for the presentation which was later discussed, improved and approved by the team.

The next step was actual preparation of the presentation. The first dry run was video recorded. Fun and laughter filled the room as they grappled their way to perfecting their presentation. They were not satisfied with having only one dry run; they asked for a second and a third. It was the most exciting event for the Winning Team. The funny photos taken during the dry run captured the memory of that wonderful “vision” episode.

The first shot at winning... The vision presentation was to be done during the department head’s meeting. The nervous but excited team waited for the entrance cue from their manager. Management was bowled over with enthusiasm as the team gave their unexpected cheer leader (complete with pom-poms) opening. They ran around the room cheering “We’re the Winning Team and we’re the best....”

The first presenter (a senior instructor) discussed the painful past, described as the *Twilight Zone!* She then related this with the development of the mission and vision statements. She also covered the immediate results of the vision such as the motivation of the team members, cleaner facilities, updated job description, compilation of materials regarding health club fitness testing/instruction, and positive feedback from members.

The second presenter (an assistant recreation manager) vividly presented the department’s goals which were dubbed the *Target Zone*. Basically, the goals were directed towards introducing the concept of a “health zone,” the space age image, space age activities, advertising strategies, and the opening of the newly refurbished ladies health club.

The team also developed a very unique way of concluding the presentation. Five members of the team “strained” as they lifted a “heavy” weight made of styrofoam. Then a petite Filipino team member carried the weight with one hand and said, “The burden gets lighter when we work together as a team.”

The vision presentation was a real success. Management’s feedback? “Excellent,” “A–1”, “The best presentation I have ever seen!”

A brief downturn... Following the presentation, the team organized an informal party to celebrate their high spirits for their first taste of success. But after a short while, some team members felt depressed and physically drained; two even were sick.

We immediately organized a meeting aimed at talking about these feelings and relating the vision presentation experience with back-at-work realities. They developed ways of sustaining high spirits through projects such as the newsletter, new activities for the customers, feedback from customers, et cetera.

“What the customers say” project — The plan which seemed to be most promising and unique was the project on “What the customers say.” As a deviation from the usual pencil and paper comment forms solicited from customers, we devised a unique instrument inspired by the vision logo.

The team members constructed little “hot air” balloons made out of an ordinary child’s balloon and a small basket. Customers were asked to place a gold ribbon in the basket if they were satisfied with the service, cleanliness and the like. If they were dissatisfied, they were instructed to put a deflated balloon inside the basket along with their comments. The team decided to have a meeting every Thursday to discuss the results of this feedback system and solve any problems that surfaced.

The change brought about by the vision caused conflicting feelings. At times, the team members feel apprehensive with the hard work that awaits them. But to the team, there is no such thing as turning back or as they put it “We don’t wish to let the balloon slow down.” Things may get in their way as they make their journey toward their vision. No matter what the outcome is, they have their team spirit to bank on.

They know they have this passionate drive to win and “strive for perfection.” I also have my apprehensions as I start thinking of “what’s next?” and “what if...?” But I have great faith in the Winning Team. I know they are sure winners.

Storm winds on the horizon — Braving the winds of change, the Gulf Hotel’s Winning Team continued their journey toward living their vision. However, they realized that acceleration toward success could not be that fast and easy. They stumbled upon certain road blocks to their destination, which to their surprise, actually stemmed from themselves.

Overcoming intra-group conflicts

The concerned managers and some members of the team were gripped with anxiety as they realized the impact of the team’s regression vis a vis their envisioned process of growth. The apparent relapses only pointed out that the development of a team could not follow predictable evolutionary stages. In this regard as I thought of developing an appropriate intervention, I was aware that a highly structured one may not effectively meet the needs of the team. Hence, I could only bank on the team’s experiences and potential as a guide to the design.

After a series of problem sensing meetings with the recreation managers and some team members, we found out that the backsliding issues centered upon petty infighting, evading certain duties and professional jealousy. It was also apparent that two subgroups had formed within the team. Identifying subgroup members was the starting point of the process.

Through the help of an associate, we were able to develop a design aimed at:

- Bringing out the positive and negative qualities group members perceive in themselves and in the other group
- Identifying the most commonly perceived positive and negative qualities of each group as seen by the members themselves and the other group
- Developing action plans to increase the effects of the positive qualities and reduce the effects of the negative qualities

Team re-building — After discussing the intervention design with the recreation managers, we set the date for my meetings with the two sub-groups which were to be held in the Health Club Lounge.

In our first meeting, I explained the objectives of the design, the process and its expected results. I qualified the terms positive and negative by referring to specific traits and behavior which build or break a team. When members were divided into two groups, they dubbed themselves as the “Mafia” and the “Yakuza.”

Brainstorming team builders and breakers... Both groups went through the process of brainstorming positive and negative qualities that they saw in themselves and in the other group. Then they evaluated their inputs based on how valid, clear and specific they were. When I explained that our next meeting would be focused on planning for each group’s presentation to the other group, I thought everybody was sold on the process. I did not sense the growing apprehensiveness from some members.

Meeting with sub-groups... Later, one of them approached me privately and expressed his negative thoughts and feelings about the process. He doubted the readiness of some members in the group to accept the feedback. He said that the other members would not take things with an open mind and the process would be detrimental to the team rather than beneficial. Together we sorted out ways of making both groups ready to accept the feedback.

With his help, I finally developed a plan to meet one group at a time for the following objectives:

- To further evaluate their feedback
- To discuss effective ways of giving and receiving feedback
- To set ground rules for the presentation
- To plan and develop their “script” for the presentation

The Yakuza’s go Hollywood — When I met the Yakuza group, I had some unexpected surprises. I saw a spark in the eyes of a member as he heard the phrase “script for the presentation.” I knew something special was coming! His brilliant idea — a video film production revolving around the feedback of the group!

The entire Yakuza group enthusiastically supported his idea. That was the start of the group’s independent meetings to develop the “script”, casting, props and video recording sessions. The “producer/director” busied himself learning the mechanics of the video camera and studying the best lighting/sound effects.

The Yakuza “shoot” — The “Yakuza” group selected one quiet Friday evening for their shoot. I was thinking it would take so much time for them to create the props, but I was amazed at their creativity and ingenuity. The “director” asked for some transparencies and borrowed my overhead projector. I eventually found out that this was their way of easily enlarging their props by projecting their visual aids on the screen.

The film production was done in the Health Club itself and the “script” turned out to be a spoof. The shooting took a long time because of the uncontrollable laughter of the members as they acted out their roles. What time did they complete the shooting? 3:40 am! The next morning, beaming with pride and a sense of achievement, the director handed me the video tape of their production.

The serious spoof — As I previewed the film, I marvelled at the group’s enthusiasm and creativity in developing their own “masterpiece.” The learning process they had gone through was also quite evident. Some highlights of the film follow.

“YMCA” which was the title of the film, meant “Yakuza–Mafia Cooperative Action Plan” (The background music selected was, of course, the pop song “YMCA.”)

A “Yakuza” group member introduced the spoof with the following opening: “Hi, everybody! Before we present these scenes, we would like our fellow employees to relax and sit back. The focus of this production is on a cooperative action plan. So each one is expected to have no hard feelings with the feedback and concentrate more on what could have been done better to improve the situation.”

The scenes basically were similar to the silent movies and pantomimes, vividly portraying their feedback with the help of well chosen background music. For instance, to show one of the group’s positive qualities which was their exemplary physique projecting the Health Club’s image, a team member danced to “Boys (Summer-time Love)” by Sabrina. The group showed their helpfulness by making a member help another pick up soiled towels (the background music; “Help” by Tina Turner).

Before they presented the other group’s team breaking behaviors, a female member (“lip-syncing” a male member’s voice) gave the following introduction: “Well, fellow employees, you have just seen the qualities and behavior that build up a team. Now we will show you the crucial points that break up a team. But before we do that, we would like to present first the possible reasons why we think this had happened. We should take these reasons into consideration before judging the behavior as negative.”

And then scenes were shown such as an employee receiving “bad news” from the home country. (The wife was having an affair with another man. And because of this, the employee had his late night out in the disco, to forget; therefore, affecting his next day’s performance. (Please recall that many of the club’s employees are expatriates whose families remain in their home country.) The film closed with the list of cast, acknowledgments and the Winning Team’s vision logo.

Presentation day — Both groups looked forward to their presentations; the Mafia, curious about the film production; the Yakuza, proud to show their masterpiece to the other group and the recreation managers. I gave a “brief and sweet” introduction discussing the objectives and the outcome of the presentation. (I overlooked reviewing the ground rules that each group had set — this I realized towards the middle of the presentation).

The Mafia presented their piece and asked the other group if they had any questions. As there were none, we went ahead with the film production. Fun and laughter filled the room! I realized the power of humor to neutralize the impact of the negative feedback. The ground rules earlier set were not after all necessary since humor took care of everything.

After the film presentation, I identified the most common perceptions based on what they (the group members) saw in themselves and what the other group saw in them. The following had surfaced:

Team building qualities and behaviors

Mafia	Yakuza
helpful	talented
creative	

Team breaking qualities and behaviors

Mafia	Yakuza
rude	aloof,
neglecting customers	reserved, lazy

Team rebuilding — I was aware of the sudden silence in the room and the pensive look on some faces after I had presented this analysis. That was the ripe time to zero in on their thoughts and feelings about the entire process. Some of the comments made at that point were: “We were able to see ourselves as others saw us;” “The problems are dealt with directly;” “The film is very entertaining but effective.”

Both groups were then ready to go through another series of meetings aimed at mapping out their action plans to reduce the effects of the team-breaking qualities and increase the effects of the team building qualities.

To recognize the effort of the Yakuza group, we gave them individual copies of the film and certificates for their commitment and creativity. They felt very proud and thrilled with the later idea of showing the film to the hotel employees during meal breaks at the cafeteria.

The vision empowers... the team grows

The intervention, which depended heavily on team spirit and creativity, resulted in health club employees successfully renewing their enthusiasm and a sense of commitment to their vision. We were confident that with our next progress meeting we could only expect positive results because of the tremendous changes already evident.

The groups' next projects illustrate the progress. The Yakuza's were into another film production; this one aimed at increasing the effects of one of their positive qualities — their creative talents. The film, “Listen to the Experts,” involved presentations from each member on a chosen topic such as massage, stretching, weight lifting, et cetera.

A healthy competition had also developed between groups. The Mafia had decided to make their own film production about the successful results of their action plans in cooperation with the Yakuza “film director.” Meanwhile, team members were already initiating certain steps to implement what they had committed themselves to.

With all the definite steps they had taken to maintain their rapport and team spirit, I knew that the Winning Team would be capable of influencing each other to provide the support that each one needed. With other roadblocks that may come their way, I know that another successful intervention could emerge out of the Winning Team's store of incredible energy and distinctive spirit. ®



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