



## **IVORY TOWER OF VISION AND MISSION**

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If you can dream it, you can do it. That is a nice meaningless demagogic generalization. Of course dreams can have the magic to guide you to new unexplored horizons and even illuminate paths that could otherwise stay in the dark forever. But just imagine all those fascinating things out there that you can dream but never realize. The color is okay, and the shape is fine too, but the vision of the mouse to become an elephant reminds us immediately of a much quoted say. "Vision without implementation is hallucination." It is even worse. Vision without grounding in potentialities is mere illusion.

In less than a decade, the vision-mission statement conquered half of the world and made the other half restless. Unfortunately, instead of genuine soul-searching, far too often the vision-mission exercise amounted to a cult of branding and of being trendy and fashionable. It was more concerned about what others would say than what one's own body felt. It surely provoked reflections that added to the common ground between stakeholders, but at the same time it was too much cherished as a marketing tool for companies, an accreditation requirement for universities, a propagandistic device for NGOs, a prerequisite for quality and efficiency claims, a business card for professionalism, and today its absence is thought to be more damaging than not having Internet.

Experts keep insisting on its huge importance, as overheard in one of the many internet videos. 'There are two most strategic decisions any business, any organization or company can ever make, and those two decisions are what is our mission and what is our vision.' We

seem to have a strategic problem, if after so many decades of insistence there is still much confusion what the difference between the two actually is.

So, what is it all about? Haven't you also got that eerie feeling, driving back home after an intensive one day expert-led vision-mission workshop, still wondering what the exact difference between the two is and what comes first? Then you think about that day long pressure to be creative. Wouldn't it be creative out of the box thinking in a training session, if someone would state that the Coca-Cola mission is to monitor the blackness of the coke to prevent the company from going broke?

If vision is about what you dream by envisioning and mission is about what you actually set out to do, then the question what comes first becomes even more interesting. Most companies start with their mission statement, and for that purpose they typically change their real mission statement from "We exist to make money" or "We exist to stay in business" into, say, "Our mission is to get the right shoes on the right feet" for a shoe producer. Or let's take a soft drink company: 'Our mission is to refresh the world... to inspire moments of optimism and happiness'. Maybe that sounds a bit inflated, but that is the official mission statement of The Coca Cola Company.<sup>1</sup>

Mission and vision statements of the majority of the companies in the world are typically overblown. In fact, it is achieved by carefully replacing their core mission to make profit with a "creative" (read created) mission and vision statement in a catchy persuasive phrase that serves well as a marketing tool and a branding device. That obviously shifts the vision-mission statement exercise from soul searching into soul chasing, from inner company reflection into consumer engagement. Vision and mission, then, become part of an advertising and marketing strategy. Strictly speaking there should be no objection to that, since corporations aren't philanthropic institutions in a capitalist system, where the core business of business is doing business. But, for that purpose, they should better leave the vision-mission realm alone and hire a marketing company instead.

One may want to start with vision as mission control, which brings us closer to Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream', with the consequent mission to organize mass mobilizations to make it possible that someday a black man could become President of the United States, even if he knew that it was a remote illusion.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/ourcompany/mission\\_vision\\_values.html](http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/ourcompany/mission_vision_values.html)

If the delirium of the mouse to become an elephant is not our best advisor, then the key question rises where the vision statement should come from. Can you just plagiarize or “peer-review” the most eloquent vision statements of sister institutions or organizations? Should you brainstorm them into being by the modern oracle of Delphi? Can the vision statement sprout from delving in the dictionary of historical quotations? Can it be composed by a linguistic exercise to reach excellence in verbosity or from pursuing eloquence in speech to the extreme of misuse of poetry? What if you go for democracy and participation, and the elephant-dreaming mice win?

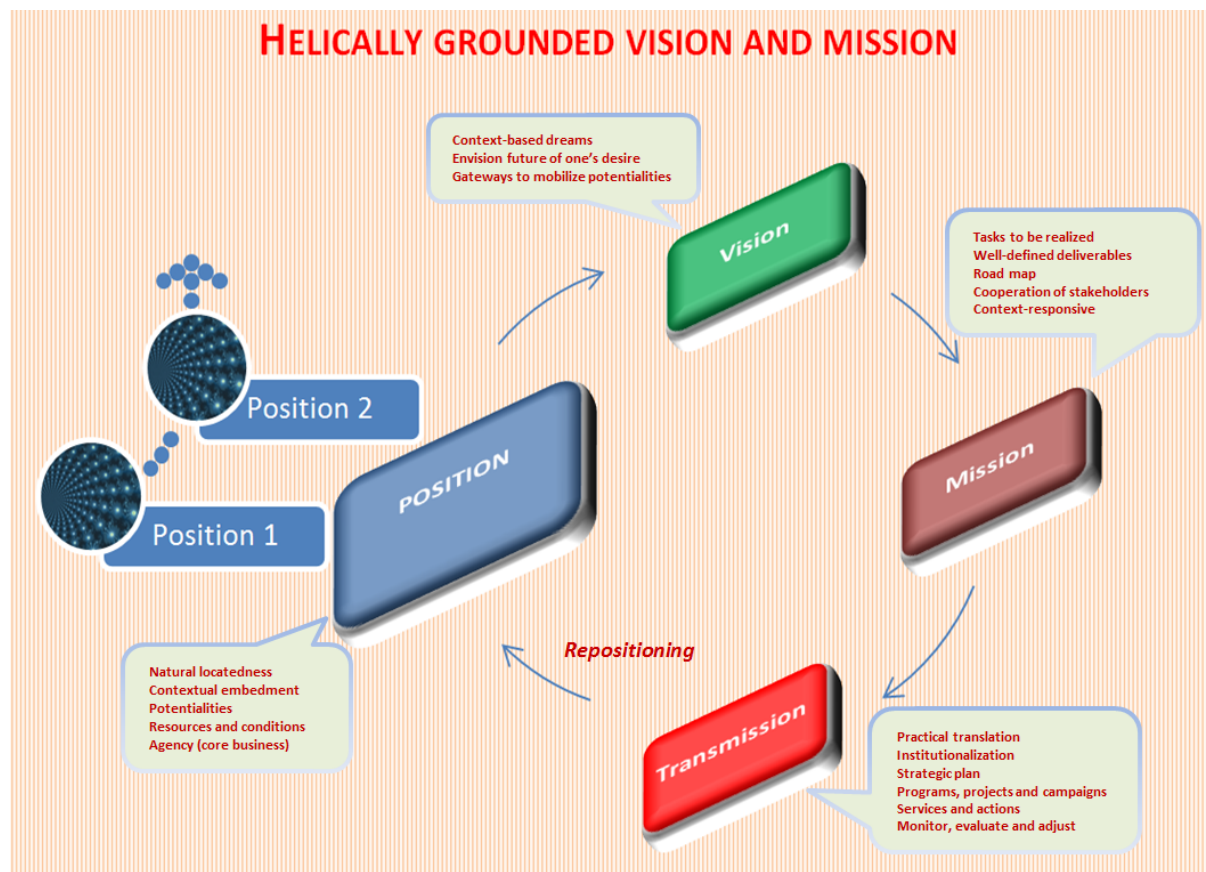
The vision-mission approach that has been practiced unchallenged for an extended period of time at a global scale has become a sacred cult, which unfortunately did not produce the required results. The reason is that one cannot even start with a vision, if it is not grounded in one’s context and conditions. “Taking into account” the own characteristics to retrospectively test an already formulated vision or mission statement cannot remedy the problem.

“Position” should come before “vision”, to make sure it is grounded in reality and real world conditions. Context-free vision is what is called fata morgana in the desert. Before a meaningful vision or mission statement can be formulated one should map where one’s general agency and core business stand as connected to reality, by determining the natural location and contextual embedment in a given place, space and range of action, and at the same time by identifying inherent potentialities and available resources.

The first and foremost step is therefore “positioning”, as an explicit and systematic exercise to define Self, context, conditions and resources that are available or can be rallied to mobilize the inherent potentialities related to addressing the core business. You should therefore always start with “Position”, before you can ever make a meaningful vision statement, by positioning your agency in the contextual reality and capacities, to prevent vision from keeping meandering with eloquent verbosity in the sphere of hallucination, illusion and delirium.

“Helically grounded vision and mission” can be proposed as a new format or “model” to remedy what has become a pointless time consuming effort. Its focus on potentialities is closely connected with a fresh understanding of development that unmasked the developmentalism hoax of the last sixty years. Development is the mobilization of inherent

potentialities and assets in interactive response to challenges posed by nature, habitat, and history to realize a project under one’s own command.<sup>2</sup> In that spirit, the process of “helically grounded vision and mission” can be illustrated with the graph below.



The starting point is “Position”, as an exercise (i) to determine the natural locatedness and contextual embedment in a given place, space and historical reality, as the starting point to define your agency (your core business), in order to map where you stand as connected to reality, and (ii) to identify potentialities and available resources that can be mobilized for goal achievement. The core areas of attention for “Position” are:

<sup>2</sup> The new “development envelopment dynamic” is amply discussed in a forthcoming book. For an earlier description see Glenn Sankatsing, *The Caribbean between Development and Envelopment*, 2003 and *Development and Society in the Americas*, 2007, both posted at [www.crscenter.com](http://www.crscenter.com)

potentialities, context, conditions, resources, historical embedment, geography, and infrastructural facilities.

The next step, “Vision”, which is grounded in “Position”, maps how potentialities will be mobilized to realize the future of one’s desire. It is the dream grounded in real world conditions by envisioning possible futures that can find or create gateways for their realization.

“Mission”, grounded in “Vision”, specifies the tasks to be realized with well-defined deliverables along a road map or several alternative paths that are laid out. It maps how potentialities will be mobilized in a cooperative engagement of stakeholders for a context-responsive route with the assets at hand.

“Transmission”, which typically represents transfer of engine power into wheel movement, is the practical translation or institutionalization of the mission statement in the form of programs, projects, campaigns, services and actions that are executed according to a strategic plan that is constantly monitored, evaluated and adjusted. The helical movement comes full round with a repositioning that brings the original position on a different plane by opening up new untapped and enhanced potentialities. Context itself may shift in the process, while additional contextual factors can be mobilized for their repositioning as assets in a next cycle of an upward spiraling movement. The resulting forward driven dynamic movement is, actually, what we defined as development. It is all about grounding: vision grounded in position, mission grounded in vision, transmission grounded in mission and position re-grounded after transmission, to continue as a helical movement that spirals up after each cycle.

There is nothing wrong to seek external support to jumpstart an institution or project, but the accumulated experience and wisdom after each helical cycle should constitute a new impetus for enhancing possibilities to progressively take command over processes that were initially outsourced. The maxim should be: only accept aid that makes itself redundant. The alternative is to get stuck in dependency and mendicancy, which will eventually outsource your destiny. That is what makes a “helically grounded vision and mission” really important as an engine of development.

Universities in the Caribbean typically initiated as dependencies of metropolitan universities, like the London School of Economics starting activities in Jamaica in the 1950s

as a dependency of its home-based institution, what later became the University of the West Indies. A strategy of gratefully using initial international assistance can be beneficial when it is embedded in a general policy to pursue one's own capacity building. A child starts walking with parental support, but well before she can really fare for herself she refuses help when making her own first steps. All faculties of the University of Aruba benefitted from academic support of foreign universities from The Netherlands, United States and Puerto Rico. There is nothing wrong with such a beneficial relation, but there is one essential requirement to monitor carefully. The test, on a yearly base, after a helical round, is whether command over your own destiny has been enhanced. You can outsource some academic tasks but never your context, your vision or your mission. Applying the maxim regarding assistance, the rule should be: only accept aid that progressively makes itself redundant; otherwise, it is not aid you are looking for but dependence, and what you are actually outsourcing is destiny, which will trigger a negative helical movement that spirals down, eventually all the way to ground zero.

The University of Aruba, as an institute of higher education and scientific research still involved in pioneering work as a relatively new university, should well take into account its contextual circumstances and potentialities as a small university in process of growth, on which its mission and vision statement should be grounded to be able to render services to a small island that drives on tourism. That should serve as the yardstick to gauge the magnitude of activities regarding training, research and service in the form of faculties, programs and research projects that it is able to support within predefined minimum standards of quality with its resources and efforts. Its core focus should be to adequately respond to the need for highly qualified human power and research findings in Aruba in the realm of development. Mission and vision should be informed by the strife of the University of Aruba to enhance command over its own destiny through a process of becoming more self-supporting, while taking advantage from mutually beneficial relations with the external world in conducting its core business. As the University of Aruba is entering a new cycle of discussion on its strategic plan, trying to envisage a new future with a review of 25 years of existence, it has a great opportunity to pioneer this new idea of "Helically grounded vision and mission".

There is nothing wrong with traditional vision-mission statements and no company or organization should just throw them away. But they need to be revisited with the proposed helical process. Without previous contextual embedment of the mission-vision process and its grounding in potentialities and its resource base, it amounts to a cosmetic exercise to embellish the body while disregarding the soul. It can temporarily serve other goals, such as profit or fame, but it may well constitute a waste of human power and energies for the intended purpose.

It is time for the organization gurus, before continuing their travels to train the globe the management alphabet, to first focus on the syntax by grounding their tale beyond the cosmetics of vision and mission. To find inspiration for a good vision statement they may want to make a stop in Aruba to take some food at The Old Cunucu House. Right away, on the cover of the menu card, they will find the clue. 'Our goal is perfection, which is impossible to attain, but beautiful to pursue.'

Once vision is contextually grounded, the next fascinating step is to open the gate to imagination to do the creative work. Just having a laptop at hand will not suffice, because as the writer-poet Wilson Harris warns, people can be quite competent in reading and writing but 'their imagination may be illiterate'.<sup>3</sup>

This, then, is what we have to do now: focus in the first place on our inherent potentialities and contextual embedment. Never mind the handful hallucinating grey mice trapped in the comfort of their vision-mission ivory tower, unaware that who is most terrified by ivory towers is the elephant.

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<sup>3</sup> Bundy, Andrew (ed.), Selected Essays of Wilson Harris. London, Routledge, 1999, p. 77