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MAKING VISION STICK

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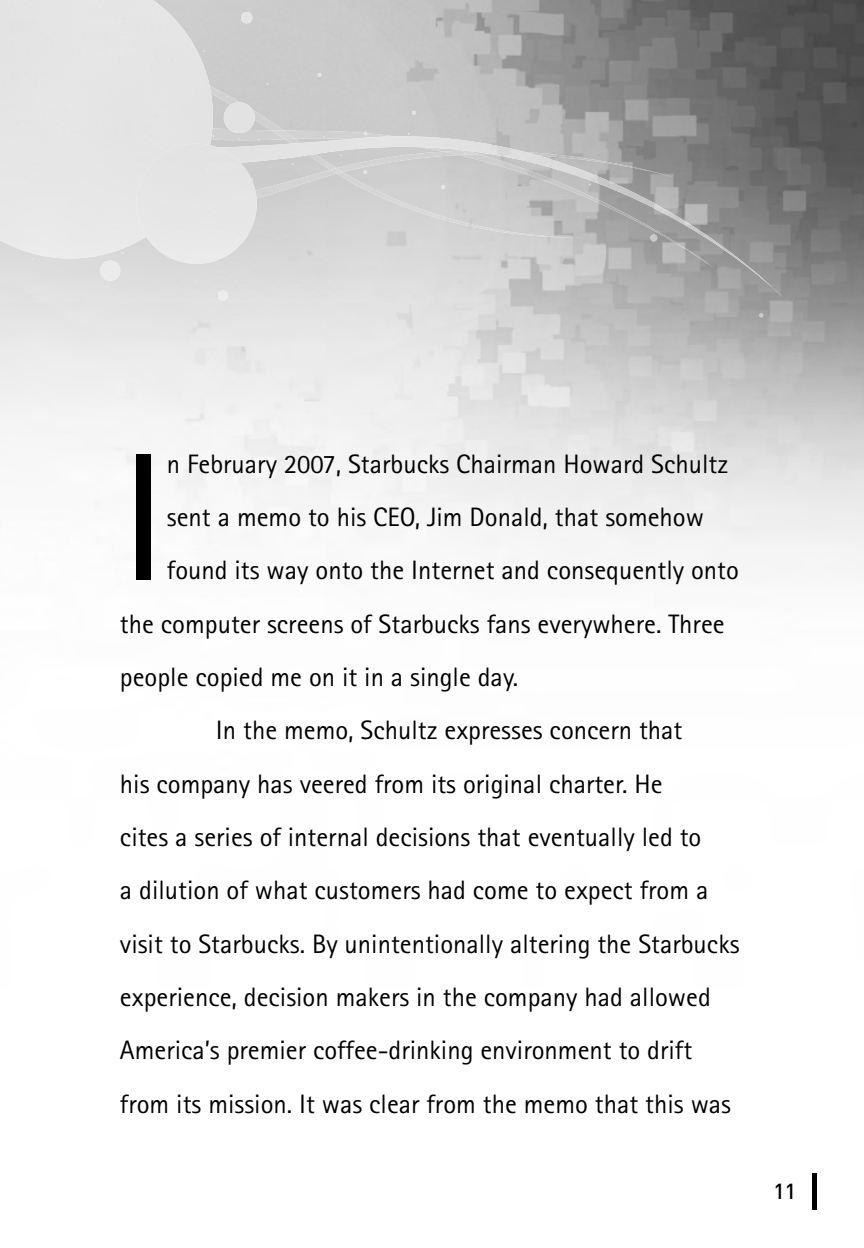
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Making Vision Stick



In February 2007, Starbucks Chairman Howard Schultz sent a memo to his CEO, Jim Donald, that somehow found its way onto the Internet and consequently onto the computer screens of Starbucks fans everywhere. Three people copied me on it in a single day.

In the memo, Schultz expresses concern that his company has veered from its original charter. He cites a series of internal decisions that eventually led to a dilution of what customers had come to expect from a visit to Starbucks. By unintentionally altering the Starbucks experience, decision makers in the company had allowed America's premier coffee-drinking environment to drift from its mission. It was clear from the memo that this was

not simply a corporate concern. For Schultz it was personal. He urges his CEO to create a course that will lead Starbucks back to its original vision. This candid memo underscores the point of this little book and serves as a reminder that vision doesn't stick without constant care and attention.

One of the greatest challenges of leadership is making vision stick. Vision doesn't have much adhesive. Regardless of how clear I think I've made the vision and in spite of my commitment to repeat it often, someone will inevitably ask a question or offer a suggestion that makes me wonder, "Where have you been? Have you not been paying attention?"

When speaking to leaders on the subject of vision, I like to joke that the three primary obstacles to making vision stick are success, failure, and everything in between. There is no season in which a leader can push autopilot and expect the organization to remain vision-driven. It is possible for an organization to increase market share and profit margins while drifting from its original vision. I know

from personal experience that it is possible for a church to grow numerically while drifting further and further away from the founding vision that energized the original team of leaders. The gravitational pull is always to the left or right of center. Success lures us into taking our hands off the wheel. Failure causes us to overcorrect. Both success *and* failure can lead to disaster.

The passage of time is hard on vision. Over time organizations become more complex. Complexity is distracting for leaders. Where there were once two balls to juggle, suddenly there are three, then four, and then forty. All of them are important. Where once there was one good opportunity to pursue, suddenly there are three. And each new opportunity leads to yet another and another. Complexity can kill the original vision.

General Motors is a good example. For over fifty years, GM dominated the American car industry with a market share that hovered at 50 percent. The architect of the vision that rejuvenated GM was Alfred Sloan. His idea

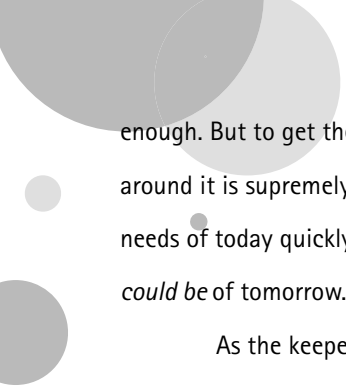
back in 1924 was simple: Create five separate brands and price ranges for five distinct types of car buyers. Chevrolet was branded and priced for the first-time car buyer. Pontiac was branded and priced as an upgrade from a Chevrolet. From there a car buyer could upgrade to an Oldsmobile, then a Buick, and, finally, a Cadillac.

This approach took several years to catch on, but when it did, GM became king of the American car industry. Along with the growth of GM came unavoidable complexity. In the midst of the complexity, the simplicity and focus of the original vision were lost. The price points among brands

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this minute.

began to overlap. Before long, GM brands were competing with each other for the same customers. As brand clarity diminished, so did market share. Now a Chevrolet is anything from a \$10,000 Aveo to a \$60,000 Corvette. A Cadillac can be anything from a sports car to an SUV. As brand distinction diminished, so did market share. GM, the world's number one maker of cars and trucks, lost twenty points of U.S. market share in the last twenty-five years.

It's tough to make vision stick. Time has a way of eroding the adhesive. The forces that slowly eroded the adhesive of Alfred Sloan's vision for GM are working against you and your organization as well. Vision is about what *could be* and *should be*, but life is about *right this minute*. As important as we believe it is for people in our organizations to embrace our pictures of the future, their lives are consumed with the present. Life is about deadlines and decisions and problem solving, not to mention the kids and the house and the bills and the yard. To get people to sit still long enough to understand your vision is hard



enough. But to get them to actually organize their lives around it is supremely difficult. The urgent and legitimate needs of today quickly erase our commitment to the *what could be* of tomorrow.

As the keeper of the vision, there's a lot working against you. Actually, it's worse than that. Just about everything is working against you. Success. Failure. Time. Life. But if, in spite of all that, there's something in you that refuses to give up and settle for the status quo, you may very well be the person God will use to bring about change. It's possible that God shares your anguish and your passion to make your vision stick.

In the following pages I'm going to download what I've learned over the last twenty years about making vision stick. This certainly isn't everything there is to know about this important subject. It's just all I know.

This is not a book about discovering or developing vision. My assumption is that you've done the difficult work of crafting a statement or paragraph that describes the

preferred future for your organization. If not, you may want to dog-ear this page, gather your team, and spend the time necessary to develop a vision statement. If you've already done that, then let's figure out how to make your vision stick.

Taking Responsibility

When it comes to making your vision stick, here is the most important thing to remember: *You are responsible*. It is the leader's responsibility to ensure that people understand and embrace the vision of the organization. We are all tempted at times to blame the people around us for their inability to understand and act on the vision we have cast. But when a leader blames the follower for not following, the leader has ceased to lead. If the followers don't get it, we probably haven't delivered the vision in a way that makes it *get-able*. We are responsible for keeping the vision of our organization at the forefront. It is up to each one of us to make sure there is alignment between the activity and the vision of our enterprise.

While in graduate school, I had a professor who was fond of saying, "If the student hasn't learned, the teacher hasn't taught." The same could be said of leadership and casting vision. We are the keepers and purveyors of the vision. If the people around us don't know where we are going, it's because we haven't made it clear. Instead of casting stones, we need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves: How can I make the vision clearer? Simpler? More accessible? What can I do to make it stick? How do I drive this vision down into every level of the organization?

Once you have settled the issue of responsibility, here are five things you can do to significantly increase the adhesiveness of your vision.

1. State the vision simply.
2. Cast the vision convincingly.
3. Repeat the vision regularly.
4. Celebrate the vision systematically.
5. Embrace the vision personally.