

## Does “The Vision Thing” Work?

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### **Specific behaviors by leaders can contribute to the success of a firm’s shared vision.**

When law firms prepare or revise their strategies, we ask them to write a vision statement: “What do you aspire to be?” We find that discomfort is evident, and disagreement follows. Somehow, the statement gets written, and then adopted by the partners. But does anyone communicate it and push it beyond the day it was created? Leaders hesitate and wonder, “Does the vision thing work?”

A California entrepreneur named Harold Butler thought vision might work for his small shop when he opened Danny’s Donuts in 1953. He repeated this vision over and over again: “We will serve the best cup of coffee, make the best donuts, give the best service, keep things spotless and offer the best value. We will stay open 24 hours a day.” Pretty simple. At the time, “Always open” was a distinguishing feature of the brand. Butler was relentless about communicating his vision to employees and customers. Whatever happened to Danny’s Donuts? More on that later.

The job of communicating vision is often uncomfortable for law firm leaders. When I run leadership-development engagements in firms, I use an assessment called the “Leadership Practices Inventory,” developed by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner from their book *The Leadership Challenge*. In this self-assessment of their behaviors, leaders most often give the lowest score to the group of behaviors called “Inspire a Shared Vision.” In brief, they just don’t think they do it or know what to do.

Many think it is a matter of repeating the firm’s vision statement. That is valuable and should be done at regular opportunities, such as monthly practice group meetings. Kouzes and Posner are more helpful. Because they study effective leader behavior, not personality, they suggest some things all leaders can do to “Inspire a Shared Vision.” With some editorial additions, they are:

- Talk about future trends influencing our work (and profession)

- Describe a compelling image of the future (e.g., New market share we will have)
- Appeal to others to share dream of the future (e.g., How you will contribute to our growth)
- Show others how their interests can be realized (e.g., Where your unique skills help us build business)
- Paint a “big picture” of group aspirations
- Speak with conviction about meaning of work (e.g., Speaking to juniors who are uncertain about how their work is used)

Broken down into these specific behaviors, the broad exhortation to “inspire” starts to make sense to the pragmatic, fast-moving leader. Now there are specific things I can do, or at least try. Consequently, we find many leaders willing to try to improve the communication of their “vision thing” and they are surprised to hear it echo back to them after several months.

The Leadership Practices Inventory has been tested with hundreds of thousands of leaders. We know that the “vision thing” works. Before empirical studies, Harold Butler knew it 60 years ago. His Danny’s Donuts restaurant, now called Denny’s, has over 1600 locations in multiple countries. And it’s still always open.