If You Have a Vision – or if you are developing one

In this article, we will be exploring the following four questions, which also serve as the four key sections of the text:

1. Why do individuals and organisations seek and create visions?
2. Why are visions inextricably linked with the health of individuals and organisations?
3. Why do we feel uneasy about visions and visionaries in general?
4. Why do the impact and sustainability of corporate visions depend on having the 'right' culture, ethics and strategy?

Introduction

A vision is an answer. It provides an answer to the very question which most of us never stop asking from the tender age of four or five onwards: 'Why?'

Some visionary individuals and organisations provide very explicit and direct answers to why-questions: others are less explicit, as we will see in various examples. For reasons which we will also go on to explore, the world's most powerful visions tend not only to be very explicit answers but also ones which directly address some of the most fundamental why-questions of all, e.g.

- Why are we here?
- What is my purpose in life?

At CERN, the European Centre for Nuclear Research, for example, we find a vision statement which directly addresses our need as human-beings to understand more about the universe, its origins and our place in it. The CERN vision reads as follows:

> *Seeking and finding answers to questions about the universe; advancing the frontiers of technology; bringing nations together through science; training the scientists of tomorrow.*

At the IFRC, the International Federation of the Red Cross, we find a vision statement which directly addresses the purpose of humanity and the need for a humanitarian form of co-existence:

> *To inspire, encourage, facilitate and promote at all times all forms of humanitarian activities by National Societies, with a view to preventing and alleviating human suffering, and thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world.*

The current vision statement of the IFRC has gradually evolved from the personal vision of the founder of the Red Cross, Henri Dunant, a Swiss man who, after experiencing the horrors of the battlefield, dedicated the greater part of his life to the promotion of humanitarian intervention. He gained worldwide recognition for his achievements and, in 1901, he received the Nobel Peace Prize. He was congratulated on this award with the following words: "Without you … the supreme humanitarian achievement of the nineteenth century, would probably have never been undertaken."

In his final years, Henri Dunant suffered from depression and was reported to have been in despair about the lack of fulfilment of his personal vision, a matter to which we will return below when we examine the links between visions and the health of individuals and organisations. Henri Dunant died on October 10th 1910 and his last words are quoted to have been:

> *Where has humanity gone?*

In accordance with his request to be buried like a dog, Henri Dunant was interred without ceremony. The award money, which he had never spent on himself, he bequeathed to charity.

As with many luminaries, the significance of this great visionary's foresight would become even clearer posthumously as battlefields such as those of the First and Second World Wars claimed the lives and well-being of previously unimaginable numbers of civilian and military victims.

Henri Dunant was an agnostic and, when we look behind his life's work and at that final rhetorical question 'Where has humanity gone?', we recognise that his personal vision, i.e. to create an international humanitarian organisation devoted to the alleviation of human suffering, was an answer to several implicit fundamental why-questions – ones which could be formulated as follows:

-   Why does being human make belief in an omnipotent God an inadequate answer?
-   Why can a God of compassion and salvation to whom we delegate responsibility not exist?
-   Why are we the way we are?
-   Why are we human?

Like the Red Cross, CERN was also the brainchild of truly visionary individuals, a group of scientists including Raoul Dautry, Pierre Auger, Lew Kowarski, Edoardo Amaldi, Niels Bohr and Louis de Broglie who foresaw significant value-creation and meaning for mankind in addressing fundamental human why-questions by conducting high-level research into atomic physics in a context of transnational cooperation.

In the following pages, we will be examining a set of similarly fundamental why-questions and visionary answers, four of which are given in the section titles listed above.

The reader is asked to note that, as we address these particular questions, we will not be distinguishing between the words 'vision' and 'mission' which, in corporate and other environments, are often used interchangeably. For the purposes of this paper, we will be using the term 'vision' only.

Further, we will be assuming that the status of being a 'vision', whether mediocre or truly visionary, lies in the eyes of the beholder. In other words, we propose that only the beholder can award an idea the status of being a 'vision' and then proceed, with or without others, to evaluate it as being a truly visionary one, or not: in order for an idea to qualify as being truly visionary, a critical mass of third-party beholders within a certain beholder-group must regard it as such. The size of the critical mass is then, of course, relative to the size of the beholder-group for which the vision may have a relevant impact. Thus, we can distinguish between visions of narrow and broad relevance as well as ones of local and global relevance.

As a final introductory comment, we propose that many powerful visions manifest themselves at the summit of belief-systems which provide hope, and even salvation. In recent centuries, both the creation of visions and receptiveness to visions seem to have been core elements of social life in many cultures; perhaps they are core elements of the human condition, as we will discuss below.

1.   Why do individuals and organisations seek and create visions?

In the introduction, we defined visions as 'answers' and looked at two examples. In this section, we are going to add in the factor of emotionality. We propose that the world's most powerful visions tend to provide not only explicit answers to the most fundamental questions in life, but also, in so doing and in order to be truly visionary, powerful visions possess qualities which can catalyse a strong and lasting emotional resonance, which we will term a 'collective affirmative passion'.

In order to understand the full significance and potential of visions to individuals and organisations and how collective affirmative passion is catalysed, it may be helpful firstly to examine the

link between fundamental why-questions and one of the core elements of the human condition, i.e. an insatiable quest for meaning, as expressed in:

- Why are we here?
- Why am I here?

Questions like these have kept philosophers, psychotherapists, priests from all denominations, teachers and social workers 'in business' from one generation to another and they will probably continue to do so for many generations to come. Currently, there is a huge and ever-expanding volume of literature, products, services and institutions which address the needs of people looking for meaning in their lives and which often 'succeed' in capturing their emotions. One can look at this phenomenon from at least two perspectives. On the one hand, there are organisations and individuals who have a talent for recognising and fulfilling 'market' needs for a variety of motives, some self-serving and others more altruistic. On the other, perhaps not surprisingly, visions tend to be born precisely when people have been addressing their own fundamental why-questions and are in the process of answering them, either individually or collectively. The resulting visions are answers which can quite naturally appeal to an audience of people who have been asking similar questions and are in need of an answer; many are looking for an affirmative meaning in their activities and their life in general.

At certain times in people's lives, their search for meaning is subdued, i.e. comfortably at rest in a sort of 'on hold' status; sometimes it is consciously suppressed or unconsciously repressed; at other times, it poses itself acutely and often in the foreground of their conscious minds. Under particular circumstances, the why-question can become so acute and unanswerable that a person can see no option but to take his/her own life, or that of others. It is at such points in life where the why-question is no longer asked with an underlying premise of affirmation, but with one of negation.

Whether subdued, suppressed, repressed or acutely present, the search for meaning seems to draw people through their lives, each looking for a fully satisfactory, life-affirming answer until they naturally part company with the physical world or capitulate in some way. This search seems to be so deeply wired into the cognitive and emotional workings of the sentient human organism, due at least partly to the complex, multi-layered, bi-hemispheric constitution of the cerebral cortex, that science and artificial intelligence currently seem likely to remain unable to provide the ultimate, irrefutable answer, let alone eradicate the question: If so, the thirst of human nature for seeking convincing, affirmative why-answers in the form of visions, will also remain indefinitely – something to which we will return below.

Of course, not all why-questions are existential ones. The why-question can be posed in relation to all types of concrete and abstract phenomena and for a wide variety of motives and reasons including curiosity and the furtherance of knowledge and/or confidence. Natural scientists, social scientists, philosophers, artists, inventors, explorers all actively and emotionally go about their various pursuits asking 'Why this?', 'Why that?', 'Why the other?' In private life, too, people constantly ask themselves and others the same questions in all sorts of contexts and very often accompanied by a high degree of emotionality manifesting an affirmative, a neutral or a negative disposition.

In corporate life, the why-question seems to be no less significant. Not only do many company owners need to know and understand why the company does what it does, in what manner and by whom, but also many employees need a satisfactory answer to what is perhaps the most central question of all in their own working lives, in the long-term at least:

- Why do I do this work?
- Why do I do it here?
- Why do I stay?
- Why don't I leave?

The long-term performance and loyalty of employees can, under circumstances which we will discuss in the further sections of this paper, be directly linked to the answers which they find

and how affirmatively convinced they are, both in their conscious thoughts and in their unconscious feelings, about those answers. The role of unconscious feelings in this matter can often be overlooked, not least because of the inherent difficulties in accessing the unconscious. However, despite these difficulties, we propose that one of the central ingredients in the creation of powerful corporate visions lies in the ability to catalyse strong unconscious feelings and emotional resonance in the form of collective affirmative passion among the employees. Corporate visions which unleash sustainable passion through offering adequately convincing, affirmative answers to the employees' most fundamental questions can impact positively not only on their performance and loyalty, but also on their mental-emotional health, as we will discuss in the third section. This effect is particularly and increasingly so in secular societies where, for very many people, employment, work, recognition and personal achievement constitute an ultimate, existential purpose. Since there are few employers who do not seek to recruit and retain people with the ultimate work ethic, the provision of an affirmative corporate vision then arguably becomes an ethically-grounded obligation – something which is often underestimated, neglected or avoided by senior management, sometimes for very personal reasons.

Depending on the size and history of an organisation, there can be a strong overlap between the personal vision of one or more senior managers and the corporate vision. Not surprisingly, the levels of aspiration, tangibility, attainability, consciousness and explicitness of personal visions, as well as the degree of their orientation towards the Self or the Other, are all expressions of the personality structures, mental-emotional dispositions, cultures and ethics of their creators. This fact has the consequence that one cannot always assume that there is an adequate degree of alignment and agreement among the senior managers; at the same time, it raises the question as to how corporate visions can be crafted in order to create genuine collective buy-in and affirmative passion among an organisation's employees. The content and form of visions reveal a lot not only about their creators, but also about their followers, as we vividly see in political, corporate and private life.

Vision statements are often attempts to catalyse thoughts of conviction and feelings of loyalty among a variety of stakeholders, including the employees. The greater the number of employees who are able to embrace a corporate vision, the greater the sense of collective belonging and the greater the common 'raison d'être' tends to be. This is particularly the case when the employees feel that the content of the vision is aligned with themselves and with the 'soul' of the organisation, i.e. with its veritable culture and ethics, and also with its strategy. If people get the feeling that a given vision is being implemented with the right strategy, then that vision can often become luminary, rather like a lighthouse radiating solidity and safety in a sea of unpredictability and potential danger. If, on the other hand, adequate alignment between the vision, strategy, culture and ethics is felt to be missing, then the employees and others will tend to regard the corporate vision with as much skepsis as they do the management and the rest of its initiatives and directives; a corporate vision then becomes just one more source of incredulity, jibe and collective apathy.

Whilst numerous managers seem quite unabashed about providing their organisations with a vision, others are more reticent. Often due to bad personal experience, some managers are wary of the visions of others and extremely wary of visionaries; some managers feel quite simply that making visions is out of their depth, i.e. something that they are unable to do; others just feel intuitively awkward about creating visions – and, as we will see, there are several strong arguments as to why they should feel awkward or uneasy.

To the subset of managers who seem less reticent about providing a personal vision we can certainly count the co-founder of Google, Larry Page when, with reference to Alphabet Inc. at the Fortune Gold Forum in San Francisco in 2015, he said:

I want to push the envelope for what's possible for an innovative company with large resources.

Here we have an example of an autoreferential (self-referential) and deterministic vision, delivered on a background of world-recognised, pioneering achievement. The content of the vision is spiced with an ingredient of passion through the metaphorical use of the phrase 'push the envelope': this is derived from a mathematical term and is often used in engineering and in aeronautics to mean testing and extending the limits. It was famously used by Tom Wolfe in his book 'The Right Stuff' in relation to the space programme, which adds another symbolic ingredient to Larry Page's vision.

In starting his vision statement with the two contextually powerful words 'I want', Larry Page allows us to interpret that he finds personal meaning and affirmative faith in self-determination. In its entirety, the wording of the statement strikes a balance between science and belief, the digitalisable and the non-digitalisable, between mathematics and the poetic, the tangible and the mystic. In the fourth section, we will return to the significance of paradigmatic balance when creating visions.

Another autoreferential, deterministic vision is to be found at the Schindler Group AG, a Swiss company which portrays itself to be one of the world's leading providers of elevators, escalators and moving walks.

At Schindler our vision is to achieve market leadership through providing exceptional value to our customers. In addition to providing competitive products, we must deliver industry leading services and world class customer care.

This statement is a direct answer to the question 'What do we do?' The use of the word 'must' in the second sentence very clearly begs the question 'Why must we deliver …?' and possibly leaves the answer subtly open to individual interpretation.

Upon closer reflection, the use of the imperative 'we must' could be a way of circumventing the notion of belief and, in so doing, of attaining inherent mono-paradigmatic congruence. Such an approach to vision-making has the potential to foster individual and collective affirmative confidence, rather like certain religions have done, in pre-supposing a higher or transcendental imperative.

A rather different approach to the formulation of a corporate vision is taken by the Swiss multinational healthcare company, H. Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd. The company describes its vision in 2016 as a 'purpose':

Doing now what patients need next.

In the corresponding company-video, we see people from different cultural backgrounds variously explaining why they do what they do.

The corporate 'purpose' of Hoffmann-La Roche, which in its formulation attempts to strike a balance between auto- and altero-referentialism, is portrayed through the video in a way which suggests that each of the individual, self-deterministic visions is subordinate to, or encompassed by, the corporate one. The extent to which the individual visions are indeed subordinate or, in fact, psychologically superordinate to the corporate one is not clear in the video and left to personal interpretation. This aspect of vision-making will also be discussed in the last section.

To conclude, the reader is invited to contemplate what a world would look like which had no visions at all. Where would today's world be if there had been no visions and no visionaries: would it be worse off, or perhaps better off? Is it even feasible under current circumstances and premises that people could live sustainably without an explicit or implicit, affirmative orientation towards the future – and would it be more feasible for a nation-state or an organisation than for an individual, or less feasible?

2. Why are visions inextricably linked with the health of individuals and organisations?

As we will discuss in Section 4, for many people, having a vision, or being able to contribute to someone else's, is something central to their personal well-being; it gives them something to live and work for, something to have faith in, an energy-catalysing projection into the future. Visions can engender belief in a positive future and, at a deep-psychological level, they can avert feelings of insecurity and fears of stasis or degeneration. In many cultures, including secular societies, visions can serve to distract the individual's thoughts from the inevitability of human finitude.

The link between visions and psychological well-being manifests itself in the fact that people who are suffering from certain types of severe depression can, in contrast to their 'happier', more euthymic counterparts, find it difficult to create visions autonomously or to identify themselves with those of others. The plethora of published medical research has shown that there are numerous possible sources, triggers and intensifiers of mental-emotional vitality and depression; new scientific insights into happiness and depression are progressively being gained through research into the role of gut microbiota and the enteric nervous system. A common factor among many of the event-triggered, i.e. non-genetic, forms of depression with which patients, psychiatrists and psychotherapists are confronted is the phenomenon of deep-level disappointment, as in lost and/or abused positive faith in others: in the context of this paper, we might use the term 'dis-envisionment' for this type of event-triggered depression. In Western medicine, the term 'psychotic depression' is used for a particular subcategory of depressive disorder which expresses itself in persistent negative feelings in combination with certain forms of loss of contact with reality, including delusional beliefs. In psychotic and certain other forms of depression, we see an almost pure opposite of the positive mental-emotional energy and affirmative passion which visions can – and are often intended to – generate.

As we will see below, the act of implicitly or explicitly offering visions to people and thereby gaining their belief or 'faith' can not only be psychologically vital and gratifying, i.e. generate positive energy and passion, but can also run the risk of being psychologically damaging, i.e. lead to dis-envisionment, deep-disappointment and depression. This is particularly the case where people develop a strong identification with a vision and it becomes part of their identity. If one or more of the key visions in a person's life turn out to have been an illusion or a delusion, he/she might begin to question the meaning of life and, under extreme conditions, consider putting an end to it.

One of the keys to avoiding the negative risks of offering visions to others, e.g. in a corporate environment, lies in anticipating the perceptions of relevant third-parties concerning the motives and ethics of the vision-creator. Such anticipation starts, of course, with an adequate reflection of the creator's true motives and ethics. These matters, which we have also discussed elsewhere in greater depth[1,2], will be key topics in the following two sections.

An example of corporate visioning which shows both sides of the consequences of offering an explicit, passion-generating answer to the fundamental why-questions of employees, partners and shareholders is to be found at the Swiss telecommunications provider, Swisscom AG. In its 2010 and 2011 annual report and other presentations, the company made the following 'promise' to all its stakeholders:

> *We bring people together. We simplify and enrich our customers' lives. We inspire others with our expertise, reliability and zest for life.*

This promise was modified in 2012 as follows:

> *As a trustworthy companion to the digital world, we help our customers feel secure and at ease, find what they are looking for quickly and simply, experience and achieve extraordinary things.*

Following the suicide of the company's CEO, an internationally renowned visionary, on 23rd July 2013, the annual report of 2013 declares:

Offering the best in service and quality to our customers.

Understandably, this statement is very bland. Appearing so shortly after the vision-shattering event, it does not, and arguably should not, aspire to offering an inspiring vision to any of the stakeholders.

In 2014 and 2016, the vision statement becomes more inspiring again and reads respectively:

The best in today's networked world – everywhere and any time.

The best in the networked world – everywhere and all the time.

Whilst the change in the last two vision statements can be regarded as minor, both of these differ very strongly to those of 2010-2012 when the company was being led by its former visionary CEO. For several years following the latter's self-chosen death, Swisscom's vision statements make no allusions to earlier visionary elements such as 'zest for life', 'trustworthy companion' or 'feel secure' – and, in order to attain an adequate level of credibility, there certainly cannot be any such allusions for as long as corporate stakeholders remain aware that their visionary capitulated. Whatever the true reasons for his personal decision, for many, their CEO's suicide may well have been perceived an act of annihilation: the visionary himself would have negated belief in the corporate vision, he would have negated his own answer to the existential why-question not only for the organisation and its stakeholders, but also, being a family father, for his children.

3. Why do we feel uneasy about visions and visionaries in general?

Whilst there is a lot of literature which casts a negative shadow over visionaries and highly charismatic people, there is also a lot of evidence to show that many millions of people around the world find solace, inspiration, purpose and faith in what it is that charismatic leaders say and do. Narcissism, which can co-occur with strong charisma, has been reported in numerous studies to be prevalent at the top management level of a high percentage of organisations in the western world and is therefore a managerial selection criterion by dint of fact, even if not by conscious design. E.O. Wilson has published numerous well-renowned books including 'Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge' where he writes that, despite all the advances of science, the human species is still God-struck and craves for affirmation and authority. This could be at least one explanation as to how the ultimate answers provided by charismatic visionaries and religious figures continue to fulfil a basic human need.

On November 9th, 2015, Pope Francis expressed his personal vision for the Catholic Church to a gathering in front of the cathedral of Florence in Italy:

The Lord is active and at work in the field.

He also stated his personal vision:

I want a happy Church with the face of a mother, who understands, accompanies, caresses.

These statements suggest that for Pope Francis his personal vision is subordinate to, i.e. embedded within, the former contextual statement. Pope Francis then added:

Dream for this Church, too, believe in this, innovate with freedom.

The wording of this imperative to the audience, i.e. to act on his words, suggests that he is speaking from a position of higher authority and, in the context of the Catholic religion, it may well be understood that there will be reward for doing so, affirmed by the Pope. This he states explicitly on the following day, in the Holy Mass address entitled 'Homily of His Holiness'

Our joy is recognizing the presence of God in him, God's Emissary, the Son who came to make himself the instrument of salvation

for humanity. This profession of faith that Simon Peter proclaims also holds true for us. It represents not only the foundation of our salvation but also the path through which it is fulfilled and the goal to which it is directed.

At the root of the mystery of salvation, in fact, lies the will of a merciful God who does not want to surrender to the misunderstandings, failures and misery of man, but gives himself to the point of becoming a man himself in order to meet each person in his or her actual condition.

As already mentioned, visions can be a direct or an indirect answer to the most fundamental, most existential forms of the why-question. In this address, rather like the vision of the IFRC cited earlier, Pope Francis offers a humanitarian purpose couched, in this case, within the promise of ultimate mercy and salvation.

As we see here, visions offer meaning and, if adequately credible, obtain faith.

The phrase 'adequately credible' is used here to indicate the non-absolute dimension of faith – and of ethics, in general. Interestingly, on the same day, in his earlier address to the 'World of Labour', Pope Francis appealed to his audience to have adequate faith and thereby face adversity, when he said:

… there is no faith without risk.

In other words, the intensity of a person's faith lies in the depth of his/her courage to interact with adversity, and by proving the latter, one is able to prove the former: affirmation requires (acts of) affirmation.

As with other visions, the Pope's appeal to people's faith shows that the offered vision, the offered promise of mercy and salvation, holds no absolute guarantee. The answer to the fundamental why-question contains another why-question: no answer is ever ultimate. We are left wondering: a phenomenon which, as mentioned earlier, corresponds to, or leaves room for, the mystic element of the human condition. This is one of the fascinating things about the why-question:

deep inside ourselves, we seldom feel fully convinced about the answers which are given to us. Sometimes, we reject visions outright or show no particular conviction either for or against them, but, even in cases where we do demonstrate full acceptance of them, there remains an inkling of doubt. Unsurprisingly, this phenomenon applies not only to the answers and visions which we get from others, but also, if we are fully truthful, to those which we generate ourselves.

At this point in the discussion, we propose that the inkling of doubt which each and every really powerful vision naturally and ineluctably contains is the catalyst of individual and collective affirmative passion. The mystic, wonder-full element of doubt remains a teasing receptor of affirmative human energy until such time as it – i.e. the doubt or the energy – expires.

It follows that the presence of an inherent doubt factor in declared belief in a vision constitutes a game which we play with ourselves and with others. Couples just getting married, churchgoers standing next to each other in the nave, employees and their managers at an annual gathering are all playing a game: in demonstrating that they absolutely believe in the attainment of the promise/vision, deep-down they are each holding on to their personal doubts. A further part of the game is that, in holding on to their own doubts, they know intuitively that the other is holding on to his/her doubts as well.

Holding on to doubts can, of course, take on various forms such as blatant, vehement denial and subtle, innocuous suppression, but these are all part of the same game, just like the outbreaks of anger, depression or despair which take place when the vision is fundamentally questioned by a third party or when it fails to materialise. It is a game which one plays with others and, of course, with oneself. By definition, one can only believe where there is doubt; one can only become disillusioned if an illusion, or a delusion, was present in the first place.

A further element of this game, one which undoubtedly contributes to our general wariness, concerns the phenomenon of 'pretended

positivity'. Behind the façade of certain very affirmatively communicated visions lies a fundamental, negative conviction which is an expression of deeply-seated doubt. Whilst it is obvious that such visions lack authenticity, numerous people have misled themselves into putting their faith – and in many cases their money – into them. We will address the issue of motives and ethics in the final section of this paper.

At this point in the discussion, we can conclude that belief in visions is one the most serious games which the human condition requires us to play. Writing at the beginning of the 14th Century, Dante refers to this game throughout his most famous work, the 'Divine Comedy' and very pointedly at the end of Canto 26 of 'Inferno':

> *Tre volte il fé girar con tutte l'acque, a la*
> *quarta levar la poppa in suso, e la prora in*
> *giu, com' altrui piacque, infin che 'l mar fu*
> *sovra noi richiuso.*

In this passage concerning the shipwreck of Ulysses, the sea closes in on the boat as its prow plunges deep below the waves **as it pleased Another/The Other** or **as if it pleased Another/The Other.** The three-word phrase in the Italian original has a multiplicity of possible interpretations which include the hope of salvation through a compassionate God, masterfully opened with ambiguity in the word *com'* (short for *come*) to mean either 'like/as' or 'as if', i.e. as if it is – or would be – God's will. Again, we see that the salvatory vision and why-answer contain yet another why-question. As Dante shows us so vividly with this picture, the ultimate unanswerability of the why-question constitutes the tense life-line which, if it yields or if we let go, renders life to be completely futile to the sentient human-being. It is perhaps not surprising that some of the world's greatest comedians and intellectuals who have devoted their lives and professions to exploring the tension in that life-line eventually commit suicide.

In corporate contexts, providing stakeholders with a vision which they can hold on to is a very serious health-game. We are right to let ourselves be amused by it from time to time, hopefully without turning cynical. We are well-advised to respect our own uneasiness about it, hopefully without losing our sanity. But, as we will discuss below, there is a very strong argument that senior management has an obligation to undertake the offering of an adequately credible vision with genuine affirmative sobriety.

4. Why do the impact and sustainability of corporate visions depend on having the 'right' culture, ethics and strategy?

In many societies, organisations are confronted today with two developments which impact strongly on the existential why-question and consequently on the creation, the pursuit and the degree of significance of corporate visions. One of these is the widely increasing spread of agnosticism, atheism and secularism and the other is the recognition of global and intra-societal religious, cultural and ethical pluralism as a fact.

If we assume that the premodern, modern and postmodern ages all address, albeit differently, the human's almost insatiable quest for existential meaning and that this quest paves the way for vision-type answers, then we can appreciate how a multitude of belief-systems, including Scientific Rationalism, have rooted themselves in various societies all over the world, each belief system offering its own affirmative vision and certitude about our 'raison d'être'.

If we further assume that organisations have employees, clients and partners who have been socialised within differing cultures, ethical systems and belief systems, including agnosticism, atheism and secularism, if we are also cognisant of the fact that many millions of people have lost their faith in visions which for a certain period of time were crucial to their self-understanding and if we recognise that the loss of core, i.e. identity-related, visions in the individual can lead to severe depression, then we realise that the creation of a vision which convinces the employees, clients and partners of an organisation is neither a trivial nor a simple matter.

By way of example, let us take an organisation which is seeking a new vision and whose employees, clients and partners range between being

- strongly observant of and strongly opposed to hierarchical structures
- strongly religious (e.g. believing in a transcendental purpose) and strongly irreligious
- strongly conservative and strongly liberal concerning moral values
- strongly averse towards uncertainty (e.g. highly anticipatory and guarded) and strongly pragmatic
- strongly collectivistic and strongly individualistic
- strongly orientated towards proactivity and achievement and strongly orientated to being one with nature.

This would mean that the significance of identifying with a corporate vision would vary widely from stakeholder to stakeholder both within the organisation and also at its interfaces with the outside world. For some, the corporate vision would be deeply subordinate, if linked at all, to a vision provided from a higher authority, and their employment might primarily be a source of income which enables them to lead a worldly life which will earn a reward in after-life; for others, the corporate vision would be subordinate to, perhaps a vehicle for, the fulfilment of a personal vision of material success, self-actualisation, symbiosis with the environment etc.; for others, as mentioned in Section 1, the corporate vision would be their ultimate purpose, superordinate to all others, and the source of an immediate sense of purpose, security and personal recognition.

Given the wide variety of possible forms and intensities of significance which could be attached to the corporate vision, the senior management of such an organisation is confronted with three main clusters of challenges in crafting it:

1. Which process should be chosen for the creation of the new corporate vision; what were the previous explicit and implicit understandings of the organisation's vision and to what extent should these be considered; to what extent should the aspirations and personal vision(s) of the current owners/shareholders be considered; should the vision be provided top-down or created in a participative process; if a participative process is most appropriate, who should participate?

2. How should the spirit of the new corporate vision be captured; which stakeholders should be the principal addressees of the vision's content and form; where are the energies of the vision focussed, e.g. to what extent should the content of the vision reflect the premise of self-determinism or that of service to others; what are the veritable motives and ethics behind the vision and how will these be perceived; to what extent should there be one vision for all in a global organisation; how can the content of the corporate vision(s) be formulated in such a way as to be inclusive and simultaneously concrete enough to provide adequate credibility and catalyse maximally strong identification, i.e. collective affirmative passion?

3. How can the corporate vision(s) be implemented in order to attain validity and with which anticipated time horizon; to what extent is a visionary leader needed and with what possible consequences?

Before turning to a corporate example, we will examine one which involves culture and ideology. In a famous refrain, U.S. singer-songwriter, Alan Jackson, alludes to a vision shared by people in his home state, Georgia, as:

Where I come from, from a lot of front porch sittin' … tryin' to make a livin', and workin' hard to get to heaven …

With his choice of words for this song which is entitled 'Where I come from', Alan Jackson does not himself speak from a position of higher authority. He leaves the meaning of the vision open for co-Georgians of a wide variety of stations in life to make for themselves, and

includes the possible interpretation of an allusion, rather like that of Pope Francis cited above, to a superordinate, transcendental purpose and future.

The tone of this song, which was released in July 2001, is markedly different from the one which he sang in public in November of the same year entitled 'Where were you (when the world stopped turning)'. Alan Jackson wrote this particular song to capture the emotions which surrounded the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. and he uses numerous largely apolitical questions, one of them being:

> *Did you look up to heaven for some kind of answer?*

With the song's lyrics, Alan Jackson reflects the broken American dream, the broken visions of so many people, of so many families in New York and around the world: the choice of words suggests that he finds himself unable to offer his listeners any replacement vision, merely questions. One notices also that he chooses questions which invoke a personal answer without stepping into the area of encouragement, i.e. he avoids an affirmative message which could be perceived as inappropriate at a time of deep disorientation and mourning. Very carefully, Alan Jackson also avoids explicitly posing the most central question of all, the one which he knows almost everyone is asking: Why? And, upon reflection, it becomes clear that the why-question is in fact very cleverly embedded within the line cited above and left unanswerable, not least because he does not explicitly pose it. Notable also is the ambiguity of the 'you' in the title of the song: in one of its interpretations, the 'you' contains a covert why-question to God: 'Where were You?' i.e. 'Why did You let this happen?'

We now turn to an example of an attempt by an international automobile manufacturer, Volkswagen, to launch a new corporate vision following a major ethical scandal.

In various presentations, all in-line with the 2010 annual report to the shareholders, the renowned perfectionist, Prof. Dr Martin Winterkorn, Chairman of the Board of Management, had consistently cited the corporate vision as follows:

> *Our pursuit of innovation and perfection and our responsible approach are designed to make us the leading automaker by 2018 – both economically and ecologically.*

The credibility of this vision statement was suddenly shattered in September 2015 when the diesel emissions scandal first hit the world media. As the organisation later admitted, certain series of diesel-powered vehicles had been intentionally fitted with technology to activate emissions controls under emissions laboratory testing, i.e. a deliberate technological manipulation, a deliberate client deception and a deliberate juridical violation.

Nine months later, on June 16th 2016, the new CEO of the Volkswagen Group, Matthias Müller, portrayed his vision for the group as follows:

> *The Volkswagen of the future will inspire its customers with fascinating vehicles, financial services tailored to demand, and smart mobility solutions. We will be a technology leader and role model when it comes to environment, safety and integrity. The Group will achieve competitive profitability, and so remain both an attractive investment and an excellent, reliable and secure employer. In short, Volkswagen will be an enterprise we can all be proud of.*

Here we see an unenviable, but unavoidable attempt under extremely challenging economic, legal and ethical circumstances to provide a replacement vision which will adequately convince the organisation's thousands of thoroughly disillusioned shareholders, employees and partners. It is probably fair to assume that the new vision is intended to restore faith in the economic future of the organisation, the technological acumen of the brand and the integrity of its management: we can fairly assume that each word will have been chosen even more carefully than was the case with the previous vision to find as much resonance as possible with the various

stakeholder groups. Key elements of the vision statement include:

1. the self-assertive kick-off phrase The Volkswagen of the future which can be interpreted as a corporate 'reset' and a clean break from the past – leaving the audience with the question as to whether the 'virus' has been isolated and removed;

2. the autoreferential, deterministic will, a word which is used 4 times overall, and which is perhaps intended to leave no room for doubt or suspicion, thereby begging the question, however, as to whether the management themselves or any other stakeholders find the absoluteness of the will adequately credible; probably by design, the statement omits a date by which the vision will become reality and this omission adds a vital mystic element – which we termed a 'teasing receptor of affirmative human energy' in Section 3 above – without detracting too much from the self-asserting, deterministic will;

3. the phrase role model when it comes to environment which is particularly salient in the context of the emissions scandal and which arguably needed to explicitly included in the new vision for the sake of credibility (see Point 5 below); given the context and the general autoreferential and assertive wording of the statement, this phrase leaves no room for mysticism but is an affirmation inherently pleading for (acts of) affirmation: i.e. believe in us, remain faithful through this adversity, and we will prove it;

4. the word remain which relativises the introductory break with the past (see Point 1) and indicates that whilst the 'software' has been reset, the 'hardware' of the organisation remains intact, thus asserting longevity and, once more, appealing to loyalty;

5. finally, the phrase will be an enterprise we can all be proud of which reemphasises the 'reset' message, explicitly declares the future to be the focus of energy and implicitly admits that the organisation is in a state of shame having lost its pride,

thereby subtly using ethics in the form of honesty as a further attempt to boost the credibility of the new vision.

The credibility of the vision-statement will, of course, be short-lived – if it can ever get off the ground under such circumstances – unless the vision is adequately dovetailed with veritably new ethics, a veritably new culture and the solid implementation of a corresponding new strategy.

Interestingly, in the Annual Report of 2010 just below the sections on emissions and references to 'intelligent technology', we find various statements concerning litigation risks such as class actions in the U.S. for vehicle deficits including the following:

> … *highly cost-intensive measures may have to be taken and substantial compensation or punitive damages paid … the possibility of loss or damage not being covered by the insured amounts and provisions cannot be ruled out.*

Whilst such risk statements belong to general practice in the writing of risk reports for organisations of this stature, people who read the whole 395-page report are left wondering if the management of the time was indeed fully aware of what could and did later transpire, especially when readers take what is written in the sections on technology and emissions into account – a matter to which we will return below.

In reading the 2015 Annual Report, one notices a strong emphasis on integrity, on the future human resource strategy and on strict compliance, i.e. a declared commitment to a change in the culture and ethics of the organisation to match the new vision.

This new cultural and ethical emphasis is aligned with a new technological strategy, one which was publicised a few months after the 2015 Annual Report, to become the world's leader in e-mobility, i.e. a decision to leave the diesel technology and the associated scandal behind and a commitment to fully embrace a technology which aims to reduce the negative impact of mobility on the environment. Another key element of the strategy lies in both openly admitting

the technological manipulation and undertaking significant changes at the figurehead level of the organisation. The previous senior management had disqualified itself from its functional responsibility and thereby from making any adequately credible contributions to the future. Consequently, the replacement of the CEO who then, in turn, demonstratively overhauled the management was crucial. Equally crucial in the strategy, albeit in the context of legally enforced punitive damages, was for the organisation to be seen to provide substantial financial compensation to its customers. It would thus be able to terminate the legal exposure as soon as possible in order to be able to press the 'reset-button' and open a new era in the organisation's history. At the time of writing of this paper, the future health of the Volkswagen group and its stakeholders is acutely at stake and awaits a consistent implementation of what has been portrayed as a close alignment between its new vision, culture, ethics and strategy. The success or failure of each element of this crucial alignment lies in the hands of the new senior management.

Let us now return to the matter of possible previous knowledge at the senior management level of the intentional emission-testing manipulation. It is well known in the area of compliance that global organisations which work across national and cultural borders take very conscious and calculated risks in relation to local legal constraints and contractual infringements. Provisions are made for compensation and punitive damages for cases where the organisation gets 'caught out': the estimated worst-case damages are calculated in relation to the upside of the risk and the latter needs to be economically significantly higher than the downside, i.e. the costs of getting caught out. As we have discussed in other papers[3,4], the responsibility for doing everything possible to achieve economic success requires an ethical system in its own right and, as mentioned at the start of this section, it is a fact of corporate and private life today that we live and function in a multi-ethical world where diverse ethical systems co-exist and often compete against each other. Time and time again, we see organisations struggling and often failing quite miserably with the corporate 'game' of adopting a strategy of ethics in order to attain competitive advantage and economic success, i.e. using ethics as an instrument for monetary profit. Thus, as we will discuss in another paper, it is crucial, when aligning visions with the 'right' strategy, culture and ethics, to reflect on the veritable motives and ethics of the creators, including their ethical histories, and to be aware of the distinction between 'a strategy of ethics' and 'an ethical strategy'.

The increasing recognition and acceptance of ethical diversity goes hand-in-hand with the spread of secularism and individualism which, in combination, lead to the growth of a global society of individuals who each aspire to personal visions based on self-crafted ethics.

The fact that we live in a multi-ethical outer world is made more complex by a further fact, namely that a very high percentage of the world's population has been, and still is, socially and educationally conditioned to think monoethically. The latter manifests itself in people's thoughts and statements when they classify behaviour into ethical and unethical categories: they distinguish between behaviour which is 'ethical' and that which is 'unethical'. It also manifests itself in the fact that a high percentage of dysfunction and depression is caused by ethical dissonance, i.e. serious discord between differing mono-ethical systems each of which is de facto inherently rigid in order for such dissonance to occur. A significant consequence of mono-ethical conditioning is that those so-conditioned tend not to recognise that not only the outer world is multi-ethical, but also their own inner world. We can observe this when people make what are termed 'hypocritical' statements without realising it, i.e. when they criticise the 'unethical' behaviour of others while being 'guilty' of exactly the same 'ethical violations' themselves. We see it in reports about the 'unethical' behaviour of organisations and individuals who appear to be aware that they are held as moral role-models, e.g. in a report about a religiously-devoted priest who is purported to have been abusing children or in a report about an incumbent U.S. president who is purported to have been having an extra-marital affair and then lying about it. We see it yet again in what could

be termed 'ethically-contradictory' activities of ardently-convinced and militant environmental activists who regularly make use of aeroplanes and cars. These are all examples of people whose inner world may well be far from being mono-ethical, but who may find this hard to admit due to their own mono-ethical conditioning and/or the mono-ethical conditioning of their social environment.

Very often, the factual multi-ethical behaviour of the individual does not pose a major problem for that person until dissonance with a certain mono-ethical standpoint triggers an explicit confrontation and invokes non-trivial consequences. The latter can arise through dissonance with third-parties who, for example, then voice purported transgressions for a whole variety of reasons and motives which are generally portrayed as being ethically-grounded and justified: examples include a call for someone's resignation due to ethical transgressions or character assassination following a major dysfunctionality between two partners. As we have seen so evidently in the recent presidential election process in the U.S., such ethically-grounded voicings of purported transgressions are often what one might term 'hypocritical' or, in the terms of this paper, which fail to declare the multi-ethicality of the orator, let alone that of the target. In some instances, people are accused of being 'hypocritical' or having 'double standards' which again are expressions which emanate from mono-ethical conditioning.

Non-trivial consequences can also arise through dissonance at the individual level in the form of an intrapersonal conflict, e.g. a deeply bad conscience leading to a severe depression and even suicide, where one of the ethical systems within the person retrospectively negatively evaluates his/her behaviour in a certain situation where he/she had factually acted according to a different ethical system. As we see again and again in the media, examples of this phenomenon are rife in corporate, political, ideological and private life.

Returning to Volkswagen, it is reasonable to assume that the operative and strategic levels of the organisation are managed and implemented by a high proportion of mono-ethically conditioned, factually multi-ethical individuals; further, we can reasonably assume that, because of the increasing influence of the democracy-based legitimatisation of the acceptance of cultural and belief-system diversity and until the sources of mono-ethical conditioning are identified and dissolved, these individuals are expected to work and function successfully in a factually multi-ethical and increasingly mono-ethically critical outer world.

What do these facts and reflections concerning the significance and complexity of cultural and ethical phenomena mean for the creation, crafting and implementation of visions and strategies?

In the case of the Volkswagen example which we have been discussing, the processes related to the building of a new vision and strategy would need to integrate the fact and implications of both mono-ethicality and multi-ethicality, i.e. achieve a paradigmatic balance as mentioned in Section 1 of this paper. In the creation and implementation of their corporate vision and strategy statements, the senior management of Volkswagen – despite the scandal or enhanced by it – should seek to attain a state of adequate credibility with its mono-ethically conditioned, factually multi-ethical stakeholders. In practical terms, the senior management must integrate the fact that in the United States, as also in other countries around the world including Germany, there are hundreds of thousands of car owners who will have been glad to receive considerable financial compensation for the fact that the diesel emission controls had been manipulated: this unexpected cash will have helped them financially to uphold one of their ethical obligations, e.g. to support their families; at the same time, many of these car owners are otherwise ethically oblivious to the environmental consequences of air pollution from diesel engines: such issues do not form part of their fundamental ethics and were not a central criterion when they originally purchased their vehicle. Additionally, the management of Volkswagen needs to integrate the fact that the 'ethics card' is often played by national governments in order to protect their own coun-

try's economic interests and also that the political basis for policies and legislation relating to topics such as air pollution can vary extremely one president and ruling party to another within the same country. Simultaneously, Volkswagen management needs to integrate the consideration that among its 600'000 employees there may well be a high proportion who are highly loyal and whose livelihoods, mental health and performance are dependent on being employed by an economically successful organisation with what is, for them personally, an adequately credible vision which matches their ethical convictions and which is implemented by ethically and culturally role-model managers who ensure that the corporate culture and the strategy are perceivably fully aligned and adhered to.

Prior to deciding on the content and formulation of its corporate vision, culture and strategy, Volkswagen also needs to reflect and make fundamental decisions concerning the genuine focus of its energies and the extent to which it intends to follow a mono- or a multicultural approach in its core activities. What we mean by the genuine focus of its energies can be illustrated by returning to Alan Jackson's song 'Where were you (when the world stopped turning)?' In this song, his numerous questions are all altero-referential and non-deterministic; with the use of 'you', the main energies are directed away from the singer and focussed on the individual Other. Significantly, the lyrics do not incite collective abhorrence or collective deterministic retaliation against any individual or collective Other: in other words, Alan Jackson subtly and effectively changes the ethical paradigm which was embedded in the 9/11 act. In the chorus, we notice that the singer becomes auto-referential, thereby including himself in the collective mental and emotional state: without offering solace with a new vision for a collective of Others, he mentions, as if in passing, his individual faith in Love. Importantly, the singer, too, adheres to the change of ethical paradigm in each of the verses.

Returning to the case of organisations seeking to focus their corporate energies through visions, companies like Volkswagen also have to decide whether their main focus is auto-or altero-referential. Currently, there are strong socio-philosophical arguments for a genuine focus on the Other, i.e. altero-referentialism, rather than on the Self, particularly in service organisations – which, of course, begs the question as to which organisations today are not factually providing a service of one kind or another. In the case of Volkswagen, we notice not only that there were strong monocultural, auto-referential, self-deterministic ethical premises in the vision of 2010 and that these did not change in 2016. The extent to which this interpretably 'hegemonial' approach could have been one of the contributory factors to Volkswagen's recent demise is currently unknown to us, but we do suggest that very strong arguments would be needed to justify what the 2016 vision clearly expresses, i.e. a lack of ethical paradigm change and paradigmatic balance in the organisation's approach to crisis-management and vision-evolution.

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29th November 2016

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