

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

Reader's Notes on Stuart Robinson's Article about Visions

In a series of conversations, I have had the pleasure of discussing Stuart Robinson's recent article on corporate visions with him. These talks have been quite enlightening to me and have revealed many additional insights into Stuart's thinking about visions: in particular, their immense significance in corporate settings, including their impact on the health of organisations and individuals.

I now understand even better why people repeatedly comment on Stuart's pioneering and visionary work, i.e. his ability to anticipate fundamental topics decades before their importance becomes obvious to the corporate world and indeed society at large. Previous examples of this foresight include the need for cross-cultural competence and inter-cultural conflict conciliation in business and politics, the importance of the furtherance of cultural and ethical neutrality in the fields of psychotherapy and consultancy, as well as the necessity for adequate expertise in dealing with the serious health implications of living in an increasingly multi-ethical world.

This comprehensive document is commenced by a synopsis of Stuart's article followed by the article itself with added line numbering¹. Following the main text, some thoughts about individual passages taken from my conversations with Stuart are presented in the form of annotations to the article. I hope that these notes might be of interest to other readers by providing a glimpse into some of the deep and complex interwoven fabric of thoughts which underlie his writing.

Synopsis

At the beginning, the reader is presented with four key questions which serve as a structure for the sections which follow:

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?

Before engaging with these questions, a few preliminary thoughts are provided, such as the definition of the term 'vision', which is given to be an answer to questions which are fundamental to the human condition. In the course of the article, the immense significance of the role of visions is highlighted and showcased nicely at the beginning with inspirational examples from CERN and the ICRC.

Concerning the question as to why individuals and organisations seek and create visions, Stuart begins by proposing that truly powerful visions explicitly address the human quest for meaning. Visions can also evoke strong positive emotions in what is labelled "collective affirmative passion". They often emerge when people are answering their own fundamental questions, and are often readily adopted by others who are seeking answers to similar questions. While the significance of addressing such questions may vary depending on one's circumstances, the underlying quest for meaning is deeply ingrained in all human beings. Stuart deduces that the thirst for answers to fundamental questions - and consequently for adequately captivating visions - remains a vital, necessarily unquenchable need in people's lives.

¹ A standalone copy of the article can be obtained at www.bbv-consultancy.com or by contacting the author.

The article continues by showing how, in a corporate context, employee performance and loyalty are linked to the answers provided by corporate visions and why the provision of an affirmative corporate vision is an ethical obligation and task for senior management.

The fact that corporate visions are generally strongly influenced by the personal visions of their creator explains why one often finds poor levels of genuine buy-in within organisations and even within senior management. This finding begs the question of how truly powerful visions can be crafted in such a way as to truly captivate an organisation's main stakeholders and gain their loyalty. The article goes on to highlight the importance of aligning a corporate vision with strategy, culture and ethics in order to generate a powerful positive effect rather than negative spirals of cynicism, apathy and scepticism towards management.

The section is concluded by considering why many managers are reluctant to create visions themselves and why they are wary of visionaries. Stuart illustrates various aspects of these interrelated questions in examples from Alphabet Inc., Schindler Group AG and H. Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd.

The second main question dealt with in the article addresses why visions are inherently linked to the health both of individuals and organisations. The theme of the significance of truly captivating visions in people's lives is revisited and directly linked to their well-being through contemporary insights from the field of psychology. Stuart then emphasises the importance of anticipating how people might perceive the motives and ethics of vision-creators, a point which he drives home impressively in relation to the tragic suicide of an internationally renowned visionary and CEO.

Next, the article revisits the theme of why many people feel uneasy about visions and visionaries. Initially, the paradox is explored that whilst there is substantial literature which portrays charismatic visionaries in a negative light, nevertheless millions of people do indeed follow such visionaries and seem to benefit from doing so. One reason given is the need of many humans to receive affirmation from a higher authority. This argument is widened by considering examples of visions given by Pope Francis both of a personal nature and in relation to the Catholic church. An important finding in this discussion is that visions seem to gain captivational power – and indeed obtain faith and the affirmative passion mentioned above – when they contain what Stuart calls a “mystic, wonder-full element of doubt”. A deeper examination reveals how society plays a subtle game of outwardly professing a strong belief while inwardly retaining a deep element of doubt – as indeed the very definition of “belief” implies. An aspect of this game is the pretended positivity underlying many visions, which contributes to the widespread wariness towards visions and visionaries. The significance of the belief in visions is illustrated by the thought-provoking analysis of an excerpt from Dante's Divine Comedy which concludes the treatise of the third question in the article.

In the last section of the article, Stuart discusses how the impact and sustainability of corporate visions depends on the level of alignment between corporate strategy, culture and ethics. After showing why, in today's society, the task of creating a captivating vision for an organisation's heterogeneous stakeholders is far from trivial, three clusters of decision-making challenges are outlined which require particular attention:

1. which creation process should be followed, including to what extent past visions and present stakeholders should be considered;
2. who are the primary addressees of the vision, what are the veritable motives and ethics of the creators, and which special considerations may apply for large and heterogeneous organisations;
3. how should implementation be planned and to what extent is there a need for a visionary leader.

Two intertwined examples accompany the remainder of the article: one centres on the lyrics of American singer-songwriter Alan Jackson, the other studying the fascinating development of Volkswagen's vision as the group's diesel emission scandal unfolded. In particular, the ethical implications and interdependencies are considered, together with ramifications for personal and corporate health.

These thoughts are finally wrapped up in a dramatic finale with revealing conclusions drawing on previously mentioned examples.

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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?

59 In accordance with his request to be buried like
60 a dog, Henri Dunant was interred without cere-
61 mony. The award money, which he had never
62 spent on himself, he bequeathed to charity.

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

70 Henri Dunant was an agnostic and, when we
71 look behind his life's work and at that final rhe-
72 torical question 'Where has humanity gone?', we
73 recognise that his personal vision, i.e. to create
74 an international humanitarian organisation de-
75 voted to the alleviation of human suffering, was
76 an answer to several implicit fundamental why-
77 questions – ones which could be formulated as
78 follows:

- 79 - Why does being human make belief in an
80 omnipotent God an inadequate answer?
- 81 - Why can a God of compassion and salva-
82 tion to whom we delegate responsibility
83 not exist?
- 84 - Why are we the way we are?
- 85 - Why are we human?

86 Like the Red Cross, CERN was also the brain-
87 child of truly visionary individuals, a group of
88 scientists including Raoul Dautry, Pierre Auger,
89 Lew Kowarski, Edoardo Amaldi, Niels Bohr and
90 Louis de Broglie who foresaw significant value-
91 creation and meaning for mankind in addressing
92 fundamental human why-questions by conduct-
93 ing high-level research into atomic physics in a
94 context of transnational cooperation.

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

99 The reader is asked to note that, as we address
100 these particular questions, we will not be distin-
101 guishing between the words 'vision' and
102 'mission' which, in corporate and other environ-
103 ments, are often used interchangeably. For the

104 purposes of this paper, we will be using the term
105 'vision' only.

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

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

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

131 In the introduction, we defined visions as
132 'answers' and looked at two examples. In this
133 section, we are going to add in the factor of emo-
134 tionality. We propose that the world's most
135 powerful visions tend to provide not only ex-
136 plicit answers to the most fundamental questions
137 in life, but also, in so doing and in order to be
138 truly visionary, powerful visions possess quali-
139 ties which can catalyse a strong and lasting emo-
140 tional resonance, which we will term a 'collec-
141 tive affirmative passion'.

142 In order to understand the full significance and
143 potential of visions to individuals and organisa-
144 tions and how collective affirmative passion is
145 catalysed, it may be helpful firstly to examine the

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

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

152 Questions like these have kept philosophers,
153 psychotherapists, priests from all denomina-
154 tions, teachers and social workers ‘in business’
155 from one generation to another and they will
156 probably continue to do so for many generations
157 to come. Currently, there is a huge and ever-
158 expanding volume of literature, products, ser-
159 vices and institutions which address the needs of
160 people looking for meaning in their lives and
161 which often ‘succeed’ in capturing their emo-
162 tions. One can look at this phenomenon from at
163 least two perspectives. On the one hand, there are
164 organisations and individuals who have a talent
165 for recognising and fulfilling ‘market’ needs for
166 a variety of motives, some self-serving and
167 others more altruistic. On the other, perhaps not
168 surprisingly, visions tend to be born precisely
169 when people have been addressing their own
170 fundamental why-questions and are in the pro-
171 cess of answering them, either individually or
172 collectively. The resulting visions are answers
173 which can quite naturally appeal to an audience
174 of people who have been asking similar ques-
175 tions and are in need of an answer; many are
176 looking for an affirmative meaning in their ac-
177 tivities and their life in general.

178 At certain times in people’s lives, their search for
179 meaning is subdued, i.e. comfortably at rest in a
180 sort of ‘on hold’ status; sometimes it is con-
181 sciously suppressed or unconsciously repressed;
182 at other times, it poses itself acutely and often in
183 the foreground of their conscious minds. Under
184 particular circumstances, the why-question can
185 become so acute and unanswerable that a person
186 can see no option but to take his/her own life, or
187 that of others. It is at such points in life where the
188 why-question is no longer asked with an under-
189 lying premise of affirmation, but with one of
190 negation.

191 Whether subdued, suppressed, repressed or
192 acutely present, the search for meaning seems to

193 draw people through their lives, each looking for
194 a fully satisfactory, life-affirming answer until
195 they naturally part company with the physical
196 world or capitulate in some way. This search
197 seems to be so deeply wired into the cognitive
198 and emotional workings of the sentient human
199 organism, due at least partly to the complex,
200 multi-layered, bi-hemispheric constitution of the
201 cerebral cortex, that science and artificial intelli-
202 gence currently seem likely to remain unable to
203 provide the ultimate, irrefutable answer, let
204 alone eradicate the question: If so, the thirst of
205 human nature for seeking convincing, affirma-
206 tive why-answers in the form of visions, will also
207 remain indefinitely – something to which we will
208 return below.

209 Of course, not all why-questions are existential
210 ones. The why-question can be posed in relation
211 to all types of concrete and abstract phenomena
212 and for a wide variety of motives and reasons
213 including curiosity and the furtherance of
214 knowledge and/or confidence. Natural scientists,
215 social scientists, philosophers, artists, inventors,
216 explorers all actively and emotionally go about
217 their various pursuits asking ‘Why this?’, ‘Why
218 that?’, ‘Why the other?’ In private life, too, peo-
219 ple constantly ask themselves and others the
220 same questions in all sorts of contexts and very
221 often accompanied by a high degree of emotion-
222 ality manifesting an affirmative, a neutral or a
223 negative disposition.

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

- 232 - Why do I do this work?
- 233 - Why do I do it here?
- 234 - Why do I stay?
- 235 - Why don’t I leave?

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

240 and how affirmatively convinced they are, both
241 in their conscious thoughts and in their uncon-
242 conscious feelings, about those answers. The role of
243 unconscious feelings in this matter can often be
244 overlooked, not least because of the inherent dif-
245 ficulties in accessing the unconscious. However,
246 despite these difficulties, we propose that one of
247 the central ingredients in the creation of power-
248 ful corporate visions lies in the ability to catalyse
249 strong unconscious feelings and emotional
250 resonance in the form of collective affirmative
251 passion among the employees. Corporate visions
252 which unleash sustainable passion through offer-
253 ing adequately convincing, affirmative answers
254 to the employees' most fundamental questions
255 can impact positively not only on their perfor-
256 mance and loyalty, but also on their mental-emo-
257 tional health, as we will discuss in the third sec-
258 tion. This effect is particularly and increasingly
259 so in secular societies where, for very many peo-
260 ple, employment, work, recognition and per-
261 sonal achievement constitute an ultimate, exis-
262 tential purpose. Since there are few employers
263 who do not seek to recruit and retain people with
264 the ultimate work ethic, the provision of an af-
265 firmative corporate vision then arguably
266 becomes an ethically-grounded obligation –
267 something which is often underestimated,
268 neglected or avoided by senior management,
269 sometimes for very personal reasons.

270 Depending on the size and history of an organi-
271 sation, there can be a strong overlap between the
272 personal vision of one or more senior managers
273 and the corporate vision. Not surprisingly, the
274 levels of aspiration, tangibility, attainability,
275 consciousness and explicitness of personal
276 visions, as well as the degree of their orientation
277 towards the Self or the Other, are all expressions
278 of the personality structures, mental-emotional
279 dispositions, cultures and ethics of their creators.
280 This fact has the consequence that one cannot al-
281 ways assume that there is an adequate degree of
282 alignment and agreement among the senior man-
283 agers; at the same time, it raises the question as
284 to how corporate visions can be crafted in order
285 to create genuine collective buy-in and affirma-
286 tive passion among an organisation's employees.
287 The content and form of visions reveal a lot not

288 only about their creators, but also about their fol-
289 lowers, as we vividly see in political, corporate
290 and private life.

291 Vision statements are often attempts to catalyse
292 thoughts of conviction and feelings of loyalty
293 among a variety of stakeholders, including the
294 employees. The greater the number of employ-
295 ees who are able to embrace a corporate vision,
296 the greater the sense of collective belonging and
297 the greater the common 'raison d'être' tends to
298 be. This is particularly the case when the em-
299 ployees feel that the content of the vision is
300 aligned with themselves and with the 'soul' of
301 the organisation, i.e. with its veritable culture
302 and ethics, and also with its strategy. If people
303 get the feeling that a given vision is being imple-
304 mented with the right strategy, then that vision
305 can often become luminary, rather like a light-
306 house radiating solidity and safety in a sea of un-
307 predictability and potential danger. If, on the
308 other hand, adequate alignment between the
309 vision, strategy, culture and ethics is felt to be
310 missing, then the employees and others will tend
311 to regard the corporate vision with as much skep-
312 sis as they do the management and the rest of its
313 initiatives and directives; a corporate vision then
314 becomes just one more source of incredulity, jibe
315 and collective apathy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

392 *Doing now what patients need next.*

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

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

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

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

419 As we will discuss in Section 4, for many people,
420 having a vision, or being able to contribute to
421 someone else's, is something central to their per-
422 sonal well-being; it gives them something to live
423 and work for, something to have faith in, an en-
424 ergy-catalysing projection into the future.
425 Visions can engender belief in a positive future
426 and, at a deep-psychological level, they can avert
427 feelings of insecurity and fears of stasis or de-
428 generation. In many cultures, including secular
429 societies, visions can serve to distract the indi-
430 vidual's thoughts from the inevitability of
431 human finitude.

432 The link between visions and psychological
433 well-being manifests itself in the fact that people
434 who are suffering from certain types of severe
435 depression can, in contrast to their 'happier',
436 more euthymic counterparts, find it difficult to
437 create visions autonomously or to identify them-
438 selves with those of others. The plethora of pub-
439 lished medical research has shown that there are
440 numerous possible sources, triggers and intensi-
441 fiers of mental-emotional vitality and depres-
442 sion; new scientific insights into happiness and
443 depression are progressively being gained
444 through research into the role of gut microbiota
445 and the enteric nervous system. A common fac-
446 tor among many of the event-triggered, i.e. non-
447 genetic, forms of depression with which patients,
448 psychiatrists and psychotherapists are con-
449 fronted is the phenomenon of deep-level disap-
450 pointment, as in lost and/or abused positive faith
451 in others: in the context of this paper, we might
452 use the term 'dis-envisionment' for this type of
453 event-triggered depression. In Western medi-
454 cine, the term 'psychotic depression' is used for
455 a particular subcategory of depressive disorder
456 which expresses itself in persistent negative feel-
457 ings in combination with certain forms of loss of
458 contact with reality, including delusional beliefs.
459 In psychotic and certain other forms of depres-
460 sion, we see an almost pure opposite of the pos-
461 itive mental-emotional energy and affirmative
462 passion which visions can – and are often
463 intended to – generate.

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

479 One of the keys to avoiding the negative risks of
480 offering visions to others, e.g. in a corporate en-
481 vironment, lies in anticipating the perceptions of
482 relevant third-parties concerning the motives and
483 ethics of the vision-creator. Such anticipation
484 starts, of course, with an adequate reflection of
485 the creator's true motives and ethics. These
486 matters, which we have also discussed elsewhere
487 in greater depth^{1,2}, will be key topics in the fol-
488 lowing two sections.

489 An example of corporate visioning which shows
490 both sides of the consequences of offering an ex-
491 plicit, passion-generating answer to the funda-
492 mental why-questions of employees, partners
493 and shareholders is to be found at the Swiss tele-
494 communications provider, Swisscom AG. In its
495 2010 and 2011 annual report and other presenta-
496 tions, the company made the following
497 'promise' to all its stakeholders:

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

502 This promise was modified in 2012 as follows:

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

508 Following the suicide of the company's CEO, an
509 internationally renowned visionary, on 23rd July
510 2013, the annual report of 2013 declares:

511 *Offering the best in service and quality to*
512 *our customers.*

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

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

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

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

524 Whilst the change in the last two vision state-
525 ments can be regarded as minor, both of these
526 differ very strongly to those of 2010-2012 when
527 the company was being led by its former vision-
528 ary CEO. For several years following the latter's
529 self-chosen death, Swisscom's vision statements
530 make no allusions to earlier visionary elements
531 such as 'zest for life', 'trustworthy companion'
532 or 'feel secure' – and, in order to attain an ade-
533 quate level of credibility, there certainly cannot
534 be any such allusions for as long as corporate
535 stakeholders remain aware that their visionary
536 capitulated. Whatever the true reasons for his
537 personal decision, for many, their CEO's suicide
538 may well have been perceived an act of annihila-
539 tion: the visionary himself would have negated
540 belief in the corporate vision, he would have ne-
541 gated his own answer to the existential why-
542 question not only for the organisation and its
543 stakeholders, but also, being a family father, for
544 his children.

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

545 Whilst there is a lot of literature which casts a
546 negative shadow over visionaries and highly
547 charismatic people, there is also a lot of evidence

548 to show that many millions of people around the
549 world find solace, inspiration, purpose and faith
550 in what it is that charismatic leaders say and do.
551 Narcissism, which can co-occur with strong cha-
552 risma, has been reported in numerous studies to
553 be prevalent at the top management level of a
554 high percentage of organisations in the western
555 world and is therefore a managerial selection cri-
556 terion by dint of fact, even if not by conscious
557 design. E.O. Wilson has published numerous
558 well-renowned books including 'Consilience:
559 The Unity of Knowledge' where he writes that,
560 despite all the advances of science, the human
561 species is still God-struck and craves for affir-
562 mation and authority. This could be at least one
563 explanation as to how the ultimate answers pro-
564 vided by charismatic visionaries and religious
565 figures continue to fulfil a basic human need.

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

570 *The Lord is active and at work in the field.*

571 He also stated his personal vision:

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

575 These statements suggest that for Pope Francis
576 his personal vision is subordinate to, i.e. embed-
577 ded within, the former contextual statement.
578 Pope Francis then added:

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

581 The wording of this imperative to the audience,
582 i.e. to act on his words, suggests that he is speak-
583 ing from a position of higher authority and, in the
584 context of the Catholic religion, it may well be
585 understood that there will be reward for doing so,
586 affirmed by the Pope. This he states explicitly on
587 the following day, in the Holy Mass address en-
588 titled 'Homily of His Holiness'

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

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

598 *At the root of the mystery of salvation, in*
599 *fact, lies the will of a merciful God who does*
600 *not want to surrender to the misunderstand-*
601 *ings, failures and misery of man, but gives*
602 *himself to the point of becoming a man*
603 *himself in order to meet each person in his*
604 *or her actual condition.*

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

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

614 The phrase ‘adequately credible’ is used here to
615 indicate the non-absolute dimension of faith –
616 and of ethics, in general. Interestingly, on the
617 same day, in his earlier address to the ‘World of
618 Labour’, Pope Francis appealed to his audience
619 to have adequate faith and thereby face adver-
620 sity, when he said:

621 *... there is no faith without risk.*

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

627 As with other visions, the Pope’s appeal to peo-
628 ple’s faith shows that the offered vision, the
629 offered promise of mercy and salvation, holds no
630 absolute guarantee. The answer to the fundamen-
631 tal why-question contains another why-question:
632 no answer is ever ultimate. We are left wonder-
633 ing: a phenomenon which, as mentioned earlier,
634 corresponds to, or leaves room for, the mystic
635 element of the human condition. This is one of
636 the fascinating things about the why-question:

637 deep inside ourselves, we seldom feel fully con-
638 vinced about the answers which are given to us.
639 Sometimes, we reject visions outright or show
640 no particular conviction either for or against
641 them, but, even in cases where we do demon-
642 strate full acceptance of them, there remains an
643 inkling of doubt. Unsurprisingly, this phenome-
644 non applies not only to the answers and visions
645 which we get from others, but also, if we are
646 fully truthful, to those which we generate our-
647 selves.

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

656 It follows that the presence of an inherent doubt
657 factor in declared belief in a vision constitutes a
658 game which we play with ourselves and with
659 others. Couples just getting married, churchgo-
660 ers standing next to each other in the nave, em-
661 ployees and their managers at an annual gather-
662 ing are all playing a game: in demonstrating that
663 they absolutely believe in the attainment of the
664 promise/vision, deep-down they are each hold-
665 ing on to their personal doubts. A further part of
666 the game is that, in holding on to their own
667 doubts, they know intuitively that the other is
668 holding on to his/her doubts as well.

669 Holding on to doubts can, of course, take on var-
670 ious forms such as blatant, vehement denial and
671 subtle, innocuous suppression, but these are all
672 part of the same game, just like the outbreaks of
673 anger, depression or despair which take place
674 when the vision is fundamentally questioned by
675 a third party or when it fails to materialise. It is a
676 game which one plays with others and, of course,
677 with oneself. By definition, one can only believe
678 where there is doubt; one can only become dis-
679 illusioned if an illusion, or a delusion, was pre-
680 sent in the first place.

681 A further element of this game, one which un-
682 doubtedly contributes to our general wariness,
683 concerns the phenomenon of ‘pretended

684 positivity'. Behind the façade of certain very
685 affirmatively communicated visions lies a funda-
686 mental, negative conviction which is an expres-
687 sion of deeply-seated doubt. Whilst it is obvious
688 that such visions lack authenticity, numerous
689 people have misled themselves into putting their
690 faith – and in many cases their money – into
691 them. We will address the issue of motives and
692 ethics in the final section of this paper.

693 At this point in the discussion, we can conclude
694 that belief in visions is one the most serious
695 games which the human condition requires us to
696 play. Writing at the beginning of the 14th Cen-
697 tury, Dante refers to this game throughout his
698 most famous work, the 'Divine Comedy' and
699 very pointedly at the end of Canto 26 of 'In-
700 ferno':

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

705 In this passage concerning the shipwreck of
706 Ulysses, the sea closes in on the boat as its prow
707 plunges deep below the waves **as it pleased An-**
708 **other/The Other** or **as if it pleased An-**
709 **other/The Other**. The three-word phrase in the
710 Italian original has a multiplicity of possible
711 interpretations which include the hope of salva-
712 tion through a compassionate God, masterfully
713 opened with ambiguity in the word *com'* (short
714 for *come*) to mean either 'like/as' or 'as if', i.e.
715 as if it is – or would be – God's will. Again, we
716 see that the salvatory vision and why-answer
717 contain yet another why-question. As Dante
718 shows us so vividly with this picture, the ulti-
719 mate unanswerability of the why-question con-
720 stitutes the tense life-line which, if it yields or if
721 we let go, renders life to be completely futile to
722 the sentient human-being. It is perhaps not sur-
723 prising that some of the world's greatest comedi-
724 ans and intellectuals who have devoted their
725 lives and professions to exploring the tension in
726 that life-line eventually commit suicide.

727 In corporate contexts, providing stakeholders
728 with a vision which they can hold on to is a very
729 serious health-game. We are right to let our-

730 selves be amused by it from time to time, hope-
731 fully without turning cynical. We are well-
732 advised to respect our own uneasiness about it,
733 hopefully without losing our sanity. But, as we
734 will discuss below, there is a very strong argu-
735 ment that senior management has an obligation
736 to undertake the offering of an adequately credi-
737 ble vision with genuine affirmative sobriety.

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

738 In many societies, organisations are confronted
739 today with two developments which impact
740 strongly on the existential why-question and
741 consequently on the creation, the pursuit and the
742 degree of significance of corporate visions. One
743 of these is the widely increasing spread of agnos-
744 ticism, atheism and secularism and the other is
745 the recognition of global and intra-societal reli-
746 gious, cultural and ethical pluralism as a fact.

747 If we assume that the premodern, modern and
748 postmodern ages all address, albeit differently,
749 the human's almost insatiable quest for existen-
750 tial meaning and that this quest paves the way for
751 vision-type answers, then we can appreciate how
752 a multitude of belief-systems, including Scien-
753 tific Rationalism, have rooted themselves in var-
754 ious societies all over the world, each belief sys-
755 tem offering its own affirmative vision and cer-
756 titude about our 'raison d'être'.

757 If we further assume that organisations have em-
758 ployees, clients and partners who have been
759 socialised within differing cultures, ethical sys-
760 tems and belief systems, including agnosticism,
761 atheism and secularism, if we are also cognisant
762 of the fact that many millions of people have lost
763 their faith in visions which for a certain period of
764 time were crucial to their self-understanding and
765 if we recognise that the loss of core, i.e. identity-
766 related, visions in the individual can lead to
767 severe depression, then we realise that the crea-
768 tion of a vision which convinces the employees,
769 clients and partners of an organisation is neither
770 a trivial nor a simple matter.

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

- 775 - strongly observant of and strongly
 776 opposed to hierarchical structures
- 777 - strongly religious (e.g. believing in a
 778 transcendental purpose) and strongly
 779 irreligious
- 780 - strongly conservative and strongly liberal
 781 concerning moral values
- 782 - strongly averse towards uncertainty (e.g.
 783 highly anticipatory and guarded) and
 784 strongly pragmatic
- 785 - strongly collectivistic and strongly indi-
 786 vidualistic
- 787 - strongly orientated towards proactivity
 788 and achievement and strongly orientated
 789 to being one with nature.

790 This would mean that the significance of identi-
 791 fying with a corporate vision would vary widely
 792 from stakeholder to stakeholder both within the
 793 organisation and also at its interfaces with the
 794 outside world. For some, the corporate vision
 795 would be deeply subordinate, if linked at all, to
 796 a vision provided from a higher authority, and
 797 their employment might primarily be a source of
 798 income which enables them to lead a worldly life
 799 which will earn a reward in after-life; for others,
 800 the corporate vision would be subordinate to,
 801 perhaps a vehicle for, the fulfilment of a personal
 802 vision of material success, self-actualisation,
 803 symbiosis with the environment etc.; for others,
 804 as mentioned in Section 1, the corporate vision
 805 would be their ultimate purpose, superordinate to
 806 all others, and the source of an immediate sense
 807 of purpose, security and personal recognition.

808 Given the wide variety of possible forms and
 809 intensities of significance which could be
 810 attached to the corporate vision, the senior
 811 management of such an organisation is con-
 812 fronted with three main clusters of challenges in
 813 crafting it:

- 814 1. Which process should be chosen for the
 815 creation of the new corporate vision; what
 816 were the previous explicit and implicit
 817 understandings of the organisation's

818 vision and to what extent should these be
 819 considered; to what extent should the
 820 aspirations and personal vision(s) of the
 821 current owners/shareholders be con-
 822 sidered; should the vision be provided top-
 823 down or created in a participative process;
 824 if a participative process is most appropri-
 825 ate, who should participate?

- 826
- 827 2. How should the spirit of the new corporate
 828 vision be captured; which stakeholders
 829 should be the principal addressees of the
 830 vision's content and form; where are the
 831 energies of the vision focussed, e.g. to
 832 what extent should the content of the
 833 vision reflect the premise of self-deter-
 834 minism or that of service to others; what
 835 are the veritable motives and ethics behind
 836 the vision and how will these be per-
 837 ceived; to what extent should there be one
 838 vision for all in a global organisation; how
 839 can the content of the corporate vision(s)
 840 be formulated in such a way as to be
 841 inclusive and simultaneously concrete
 842 enough to provide adequate credibility
 843 and catalyse maximally strong identifica-
 844 tion, i.e. collective affirmative passion?
 845
- 846 3. How can the corporate vision(s) be imple-
 847 mented in order to attain validity and with
 848 which anticipated time horizon; to what
 849 extent is a visionary leader needed and
 850 with what possible consequences?

851 Before turning to a corporate example, we will
 852 examine one which involves culture and ideol-
 853 ogy. In a famous refrain, U.S. singer-songwriter,
 854 Alan Jackson, alludes to a vision shared by peo-
 855 ple in his home state, Georgia, as:

856 *Where I come from, from a lot of front porch*
 857 *sittin' ... tryin' to make a livin', and workin'*
 858 *hard to get to heaven ...*

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

865 includes the possible interpretation of an allu-
866 sion, rather like that of Pope Francis cited above,
867 to a superordinate, transcendental purpose and
868 future.

869 The tone of this song, which was released in July
870 2001, is markedly different from the one which
871 he sang in public in November of the same year
872 entitled ‘Where were you (when the world
873 stopped turning)’. Alan Jackson wrote this par-
874 ticular song to capture the emotions which sur-
875 rounded the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. and he uses
876 numerous largely apolitical questions, one of
877 them being:

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

880 With the song’s lyrics, Alan Jackson reflects the
881 broken American dream, the broken visions of
882 so many people, of so many families in New
883 York and around the world: the choice of words
884 suggests that he finds himself unable to offer his
885 listeners any replacement vision, merely ques-
886 tions. One notices also that he chooses questions
887 which invoke a personal answer without step-
888 ping into the area of encouragement, i.e. he
889 avoids an affirmative message which could be
890 perceived as inappropriate at a time of deep dis-
891 orientation and mourning. Very carefully, Alan
892 Jackson also avoids explicitly posing the most
893 central question of all, the one which he knows
894 almost everyone is asking: Why? And, upon
895 reflection, it becomes clear that the why-ques-
896 tion is in fact very cleverly embedded within the
897 line cited above and left unanswerable, not least
898 because he does not explicitly pose it. Notable
899 also is the ambiguity of the ‘you’ in the title of
900 the song: in one of its interpretations, the ‘you’
901 contains a covert why-question to God: ‘Where
902 were You?’ i.e. ‘Why did You let this happen?’

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

907 In various presentations, all in-line with the 2010
908 annual report to the shareholders, the renowned
909 perfectionist, Prof. Dr Martin Winterkorn,

910 Chairman of the Board of Management, had con-
911 sistentlly cited the corporate vision as follows:

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

916 The credibility of this vision statement was sud-
917 denly shattered in September 2015 when the
918 diesel emissions scandal first hit the world
919 media. As the organisation later admitted, cer-
920 tain series of diesel-powered vehicles had been
921 intentionally fitted with technology to activate
922 emissions controls under emissions laboratory
923 testing, i.e. a deliberate technological manipula-
924 tion, a deliberate client deception and a deliber-
925 ate juridical violation.

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

930 *The Volkswagen of the future will inspire its*
931 *customers with fascinating vehicles, finan-*
932 *cial services tailored to demand, and smart*
933 *mobility solutions. We will be a technology*
934 *leader and role model when it comes to en-*
935 *vironment, safety and integrity. The Group*
936 *will achieve competitive profitability, and*
937 *so remain both an attractive investment and*
938 *an excellent, reliable and secure employer.*
939 *In short, Volkswagen will be an enterprise*
940 *we can all be proud of.*

941 Here we see an unenviable, but unavoidable
942 attempt under extremely challenging economic,
943 legal and ethical circumstances to provide a re-
944 placement vision which will adequately con-
945 vince the organisation’s thousands of thoroughly
946 disillusioned shareholders, employees and part-
947 ners. It is probably fair to assume that the new
948 vision is intended to restore faith in the economic
949 future of the organisation, the technological
950 acumen of the brand and the integrity of its man-
951 agement: we can fairly assume that each word
952 will have been chosen even more carefully than
953 was the case with the previous vision to find as
954 much resonance as possible with the various

955 stakeholder groups. Key elements of the vision
956 statement include:

- 957 1. the self-assertive kick-off phrase The
958 Volkswagen of the future which can be in-
959 terpreted as a corporate ‘reset’ and a clean
960 break from the past – leaving the audience
961 with the question as to whether the ‘virus’
962 has been isolated and removed;
- 963 2. the autoreferential, deterministic will, a
964 word which is used 4 times overall, and
965 which is perhaps intended to leave no
966 room for doubt or suspicion, thereby beg-
967 ging the question, however, as to whether
968 the management themselves or any other
969 stakeholders find the absoluteness of the
970 will adequately credible; probably by de-
971 sign, the statement omits a date by which
972 the vision will become reality and this
973 omission adds a vital mystic element –
974 which we termed a ‘teasing receptor of af-
975 firmative human energy’ in Section 3
976 above – without detracting too much from
977 the self-asserting, deterministic will;
- 978 3. the phrase role model when it comes to en-
979 vironment which is particularly salient in
980 the context of the emissions scandal and
981 which arguably needed to explicitly in-
982 cluded in the new vision for the sake of
983 credibility (see Point 5 below); given the
984 context and the general autoreferential
985 and assertive wording of the statement,
986 this phrase leaves no room for mysticism
987 but is an affirmation inherently pleading
988 for (acts of) affirmation: i.e. believe in us,
989 remain faithful through this adversity, and
990 we will prove it;
- 991 4. the word remain which relativises the in-
992 troductory break with the past (see Point
993 1) and indicates that whilst the ‘software’
994 has been reset, the ‘hardware’ of the
995 organisation remains intact, thus asserting
996 longevity and, once more, appealing to
997 loyalty;
- 998 5. finally, the phrase will be an enterprise we
999 can all be proud of which reemphasises
1000 the ‘reset’ message, explicitly declares the
1001 future to be the focus of energy and im-
1002 plicitly admits that the organisation is in a
1003 state of shame having lost its pride,

1004 thereby subtly using ethics in the form of
1005 honesty as a further attempt to boost the
1006 credibility of the new vision.

1007 The credibility of the vision-statement will, of
1008 course, be short-lived – if it can ever get off the
1009 ground under such circumstances – unless the
1010 vision is adequately dovetailed with veritably
1011 new ethics, a veritably new culture and the solid
1012 implementation of a corresponding new strategy.

1013 Interestingly, in the Annual Report of 2010 just
1014 below the sections on emissions and references
1015 to ‘intelligent technology’, we find various state-
1016 ments concerning litigation risks such as class
1017 actions in the U.S. for vehicle deficits including
1018 the following:

1019 *... highly cost-intensive measures may have*
1020 *to be taken and substantial compensation or*
1021 *punitive damages paid ... the possibility of*
1022 *loss or damage not being covered by the in-*
1023 *sured amounts and provisions cannot be*
1024 *ruled out.*

1025 Whilst such risk statements belong to general
1026 practice in the writing of risk reports for organi-
1027 sations of this stature, people who read the whole
1028 395-page report are left wondering if the man-
1029 agement of the time was indeed fully aware of
1030 what could and did later transpire, especially
1031 when readers take what is written in the sections
1032 on technology and emissions into account – a
1033 matter to which we will return below.

1034 In reading the 2015 Annual Report, one notices
1035 a strong emphasis on integrity, on the future
1036 human resource strategy and on strict compli-
1037 ance, i.e. a declared commitment to a change in
1038 the culture and ethics of the organisation to
1039 match the new vision.

1040 This new cultural and ethical emphasis is aligned
1041 with a new technological strategy, one which
1042 was publicised a few months after the 2015
1043 Annual Report, to become the world’s leader in
1044 e-mobility, i.e. a decision to leave the diesel
1045 technology and the associated scandal behind
1046 and a commitment to fully embrace a technology
1047 which aims to reduce the negative impact of
1048 mobility on the environment. Another key ele-
1049 ment of the strategy lies in both openly admitting

1050 the technological manipulation and undertaking
1051 significant changes at the figurehead level of the
1052 organisation. The previous senior management
1053 had disqualified itself from its functional respon-
1054 sibility and thereby from making any adequately
1055 credible contributions to the future. Conse-
1056 quently, the replacement of the CEO who then,
1057 in turn, demonstratively overhauled the manage-
1058 ment was crucial. Equally crucial in the strategy,
1059 albeit in the context of legally enforced punitive
1060 damages, was for the organisation to be seen to
1061 provide substantial financial compensation to its
1062 customers. It would thus be able to terminate the
1063 legal exposure as soon as possible in order to be
1064 able to press the ‘reset-button’ and open a new
1065 era in the organisation’s history. At the time of
1066 writing of this paper, the future health of the
1067 Volkswagen group and its stakeholders is
1068 acutely at stake and awaits a consistent imple-
1069 mentation of what has been portrayed as a close
1070 alignment between its new vision, culture, ethics
1071 and strategy. The success or failure of each ele-
1072 ment of this crucial alignment lies in the hands
1073 of the new senior management.

1074 Let us now return to the matter of possible pre-
1075 vious knowledge at the senior management level
1076 of the intentional emission-testing manipulation.
1077 It is well known in the area of compliance that
1078 global organisations which work across national
1079 and cultural borders take very conscious and cal-
1080 culated risks in relation to local legal constraints
1081 and contractual infringements. Provisions are
1082 made for compensation and punitive damages
1083 for cases where the organisation gets ‘caught
1084 out’: the estimated worst-case damages are cal-
1085 culated in relation to the upside of the risk and
1086 the latter needs to be economically significantly
1087 higher than the downside, i.e. the costs of getting
1088 caught out. As we have discussed in other
1089 papers^{3,4}, the responsibility for doing everything
1090 possible to achieve economic success requires an
1091 ethical system in its own right and, as mentioned
1092 at the start of this section, it is a fact of corporate
1093 and private life today that we live and function
1094 in a multi-ethical world where diverse ethical
1095 systems co-exist and often compete against each
1096 other. Time and time again, we see organisations
1097 struggling and often failing quite miserably with
1098 the corporate ‘game’ of adopting a strategy of

1099 ethics in order to attain competitive advantage
1100 and economic success, i.e. using ethics as an in-
1101 strument for monetary profit. Thus, as we will
1102 discuss in another paper, it is crucial, when
1103 aligning visions with the ‘right’ strategy, culture
1104 and ethics, to reflect on the veritable motives and
1105 ethics of the creators, including their ethical
1106 histories, and to be aware of the distinction be-
1107 tween ‘a strategy of ethics’ and ‘an ethical
1108 strategy’.

1109 The increasing recognition and acceptance of
1110 ethical diversity goes hand-in-hand with the
1111 spread of secularism and individualism which, in
1112 combination, lead to the growth of a global soci-
1113 ety of individuals who each aspire to personal
1114 visions based on self-crafted ethics.

1115 The fact that we live in a multi-ethical outer
1116 world is made more complex by a further fact,
1117 namely that a very high percentage of the
1118 world’s population has been, and still is, socially
1119 and educationally conditioned to think mono-
1120 ethically. The latter manifests itself in people’s
1121 thoughts and statements when they classify
1122 behaviour into ethical and unethical categories:
1123 they distinguish between behaviour which is
1124 ‘ethical’ and that which is ‘unethical’. It also
1125 manifests itself in the fact that a high percentage
1126 of dysfunction and depression is caused by ethi-
1127 cal dissonance, i.e. serious discord between dif-
1128 fering mono-ethical systems each of which is de
1129 facto inherently rigid in order for such disson-
1130 nance to occur. A significant consequence of
1131 mono-ethical conditioning is that those so-condi-
1132 tioned tend not to recognise that not only the
1133 outer world is multi-ethical, but also their own
1134 inner world. We can observe this when people
1135 make what are termed ‘hypocritical’ statements
1136 without realising it, i.e. when they criticise the
1137 ‘unethical’ behaviour of others while being
1138 ‘guilty’ of exactly the same ‘ethical violations’
1139 themselves. We see it in reports about the ‘un-
1140 ethical’ behaviour of organisations and individ-
1141 uals who appear to be aware that they are held as
1142 moral role-models, e.g. in a report about a reli-
1143 giously-devoted priest who is purported to have
1144 been abusing children or in a report about an
1145 incumbent U.S. president who is purported to
1146 have been having an extra-marital affair and then
1147 lying about it. We see it yet again in what could

1148 be termed ‘ethically-contradictory’ activities of
1149 ardently-convicted and militant environmental
1150 activists who regularly make use of aeroplanes
1151 and cars. These are all examples of people whose
1152 inner world may well be far from being mono-
1153 ethical, but who may find this hard to admit due
1154 to their own mono-ethical conditioning and/or
1155 the mono-ethical conditioning of their social en-
1156 vironment.

1157 Very often, the factual multi-ethical behaviour of
1158 the individual does not pose a major problem for
1159 that person until dissonance with a certain mono-
1160 ethical standpoint triggers an explicit confronta-
1161 tion and invokes non-trivial consequences. The
1162 latter can arise through dissonance with third-
1163 parties who, for example, then voice purported
1164 transgressions for a whole variety of reasons and
1165 motives which are generally portrayed as being
1166 ethically-grounded and justified: examples in-
1167 clude a call for someone’s resignation due to
1168 ethical transgressions or character assassination
1169 following a major dysfunctionality between two
1170 partners. As we have seen so evidently in the
1171 recent presidential election process in the U.S.,
1172 such ethically-grounded voicings of purported
1173 transgressions are often what one might term
1174 ‘hypocritical’ or, in the terms of this paper,
1175 which fail to declare the multi-ethicality of the
1176 orator, let alone that of the target. In some in-
1177 stances, people are accused of being ‘hypocriti-
1178 cal’ or having ‘double standards’ which again
1179 are expressions which emanate from mono-ethi-
1180 cal conditioning.

1181 Non-trivial consequences can also arise through
1182 dissonance at the individual level in the form of
1183 an intrapersonal conflict, e.g. a deeply bad con-
1184 science leading to a severe depression and even
1185 suicide, where one of the ethical systems within
1186 the person retrospectively negatively evaluates
1187 his/her behaviour in a certain situation where
1188 he/she had factually acted according to a differ-
1189 ent ethical system. As we see again and again in
1190 the media, examples of this phenomenon are rife
1191 in corporate, political, ideological and private
1192 life.

1193 Returning to Volkswagen, it is reasonable to
1194 assume that the operative and strategic levels of
1195 the organisation are managed and implemented

1196 by a high proportion of mono-ethically condi-
1197 tioned, factually multi-ethical individuals;
1198 further, we can reasonably assume that, because
1199 of the increasing influence of the democracy-
1200 based legitimatisation of the acceptance of cul-
1201 tural and belief-system diversity and until the
1202 sources of mono-ethical conditioning are identi-
1203 fied and dissolved, these individuals are ex-
1204 pected to work and function successfully in a
1205 factually multi-ethical and increasingly mono-
1206 ethically critical outer world.

1207 What do these facts and reflections concerning
1208 the significance and complexity of cultural and
1209 ethical phenomena mean for the creation, craft-
1210 ing and implementation of visions and strate-
1211 gies?

1212 In the case of the Volkswagen example which we
1213 have been discussing, the processes related to the
1214 building of a new vision and strategy would need
1215 to integrate the fact and implications of both
1216 mono-ethicality and multi-ethicality, i.e. achieve
1217 a paradigmatic balance as mentioned in Section
1218 1 of this paper. In the creation and implementa-
1219 tion of their corporate vision and strategy state-
1220 ments, the senior management of Volkswagen –
1221 despite the scandal or enhanced by it – should
1222 seek to attain a state of adequate credibility with
1223 its mono-ethically conditioned, factually multi-
1224 ethical stakeholders. In practical terms, the
1225 senior management must integrate the fact that
1226 in the United States, as also in other countries
1227 around the world including Germany, there are
1228 hundreds of thousands of car owners who will
1229 have been glad to receive considerable financial
1230 compensation for the fact that the diesel emis-
1231 sion controls had been manipulated: this unex-
1232 pected cash will have helped them financially to
1233 uphold one of their ethical obligations, e.g. to
1234 support their families; at the same time, many of
1235 these car owners are otherwise ethically obli-
1236 vious to the environmental consequences of air
1237 pollution from diesel engines: such issues do not
1238 form part of their fundamental ethics and were
1239 not a central criterion when they originally pur-
1240 chased their vehicle. Additionally, the manage-
1241 ment of Volkswagen needs to integrate the fact
1242 that the ‘ethics card’ is often played by national
1243 governments in order to protect their own coun-

1244 try's economic interests and also that the politi-
1245 cal basis for policies and legislation relating to
1246 topics such as air pollution can vary extremely
1247 one president and ruling party to another within
1248 the same country. Simultaneously, Volkswagen
1249 management needs to integrate the consideration
1250 that among its 600'000 employees there may
1251 well be a high proportion who are highly loyal
1252 and whose livelihoods, mental health and perfor-
1253 mance are dependent on being employed by an
1254 economically successful organisation with what
1255 is, for them personally, an adequately credible
1256 vision which matches their ethical convictions
1257 and which is implemented by ethically and cul-
1258 turally role-model managers who ensure that the
1259 corporate culture and the strategy are perceiva-
1260 bly fully aligned and adhered to.

1261 Prior to deciding on the content and formulation
1262 of its corporate vision, culture and strategy,
1263 Volkswagen also needs to reflect and make fun-
1264 damental decisions concerning the genuine focus
1265 of its energies and the extent to which it intends
1266 to follow a mono- or a multicultural approach in
1267 its core activities. What we mean by the genuine
1268 focus of its energies can be illustrated by return-
1269 ing to Alan Jackson's song 'Where were you
1270 (when the world stopped turning)?' In this song,
1271 his numerous questions are all altero-referential
1272 and non-deterministic; with the use of 'you', the
1273 main energies are directed away from the singer
1274 and focussed on the individual Other. Signifi-
1275 cantly, the lyrics do not incite collective abhor-
1276 rence or collective deterministic retaliation
1277 against any individual or collective Other: in

1278 other words, Alan Jackson subtly and effectively
1279 changes the ethical paradigm which was embed-
1280 ded in the 9/11 act. In the chorus, we notice that
1281 the singer becomes auto-referential, thereby in-
1282 cluding himself in the collective mental and
1283 emotional state: without offering solace with a
1284 new vision for a collective of Others, he men-
1285 tions, as if in passing, his individual faith in
1286 Love. Importantly, the singer, too, adheres to the
1287 change of ethical paradigm in each of the verses.

1288 Returning to the case of organisations seeking to
1289 focus their corporate energies through visions,
1290 companies like Volkswagen also have to decide
1291 whether their main focus is auto-or altero-refer-
1292 ential. Currently, there are strong socio-philo-
1293 sopherical arguments for a genuine focus on the
1294 Other, i.e. altero-referentialism, rather than on
1295 the Self, particularly in service organisations –
1296 which, of course, begs the question as to which
1297 organisations today are not factually providing a
1298 service of one kind or another. In the case of
1299 Volkswagen, we notice not only that there were
1300 strong monocultural, auto-referential, self-deter-
1301 ministic ethical premises in the vision of 2010
1302 and that these did not change in 2016. The extent
1303 to which this interpretably 'hegemonial'
1304 approach could have been one of the contribu-
1305 tory factors to Volkswagen's recent demise is
1306 currently unknown to us, but we do suggest that
1307 very strong arguments would be needed to jus-
1308 tify what the 2016 vision clearly expresses, i.e. a
1309 lack of ethical paradigm change and paradigm-
1310 atic balance in the organisation's approach to
1311 crisis-management and vision-evolution.

Stuart D.G. Robinson

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¹ Robinson, Stuart D.G., 'Ethical Health Management – an Introduction to Central Terms and Concepts', in the Journal for Ethical Health Management, 5C Centre, Zug, Switzerland, 2016.

² Robinson, Stuart D.G., 'Ethical Health Management in Practice', in the Journal for Ethical Health Management, 5C Centre, Zug, Switzerland, 2016.

³ Robinson, Stuart D.G., 'The Value of Neutrality', 5C Centre, Zug, Switzerland, 2007.

⁴ Robinson, Stuart D.G., 'Interethical Competence', 5C Centre, Zug, Switzerland, 2012.

Annotations

Line no.

- 15-36: CERN and the IFRC are clearly examples of non-commercial organisations where one can readily recognise the link to “the world’s most powerful visions” (line 9) and the fact that these visions directly address fundamental why-questions.
- Importantly, there are also commercial organisations which do not immediately evoke a comparably “visionary” or idealistic aura, but which do have their own powerful vision statements and do indeed provide explicit answers to fundamental why questions. As the reader will go on to see, having one of the most powerful visions in the world can only be achieved by beholder’s judgement and, given this fact, prerequisites a truly visionary purpose.
- 79: While the implicit fundamental why-question “Why does being human make belief in an omnipotent God an inadequate answer?” might seem like a long shot at this point in the text on first reading, it can be understood as an invitation to engage with the thoughts presented in the following sections – in line with Stuart’s style of writing which generally invites one to think a long way ahead. Stuart’s article is one of those texts which can be appreciated at different levels, ranging from the more immediately tangible to the genuinely fundamental and radical. For me, it was revealing to return to this statement after engaging with the article in its entirety. My real take-away was recognising how, at a meta-level, Stuart’s way of thinking catalyses courage for one’s own genuinely visionary thinking – which can be an immensely valuable asset when creating one’s own personal or corporate visions.
- 81: There are, obviously, different ways of approaching and attempting to answer the fundamental why-question (I deliberately use the singular form here, since, as we will see, the apparent multiplicity of this kind of questions can be understood as one). One finds various examples in religions, in humanitarian fields, such as highlighted in the Henri Dunant example, and in science, e.g. CERN. The multiplicity of such possible approaches is a link to the topic of multi-ethnicity which is explored in later sections. The human need to seek answers to fundamental why-questions is explored in the thoughts presented in section 1.
- 85: The question “why are we human?” encompasses elements of the related questions “what does it mean to be human?” and “what makes us human?” but adds a deeply philosophical element referring to the very meaning of life, a theme which is elaborated in the context of the significance of visions in the paragraphs starting at line 142. At the same time, the question plays with possible “humanitarian” connotations of “human”, hinting back to Henri Dunant’s final question “where has humanity gone?” and further serves to motivate the question of why individuals and organisations seek and create visions discussed in section 1.
- 53-56: For the purpose of this article, Stuart uses the words “vision” and “mission” synonymously. In other contexts, it may well prove to be helpful to distinguish the two terms by using a choice of the numerous – and, especially in the case of “mission” often conflicting – definitions used in practice.
- 99-105: The change of perspective offered in this paragraph is a recurring element in Stuart’s thinking: the interpretive authority lies with the beholder rather than with the creator of a statement with potential claim to being a vision. The evoked effect is pertinent, rather than the creator’s original intention. It is therefore presumably in the creator’s interest to make a statement which causes the desired effect (in this case of being a vision, or even visionary) – within the intended beholder-group, as is explained in the second part of this paragraph. This said, a question worth considering is under what circumstances is it meaningful to declare the visionary nature of one’s own vision statement.
- 122-130: Whether visions are core elements of the human condition or not is a question which cannot be answered in an absolute manner. By all means, it establishes a reference to “why are we

human?” asked a few lines above and gives a hint towards a potential answer. Considering the question from a self-determined perspective, in-line with Enlightenment thinking, which has left its mark on Western societies, the premise of being able to choose whether to create or follow a vision does indeed make us human. Importantly, this does not hold true from numerous other perspectives, e.g. those drawing on predetermination.

- 134-141: In what I feel is a key sentence right at the beginning of the first section, Stuart proposes that additionally to providing elements of answers to the fundamental questions of life, truly powerful and visionary visions evoke strong positive passion in their beholders. In my understanding, this is the very same feeling which grips one when one truly believes in a cause and feels endlessly energised and enthusiastic in furthering it. Interestingly, while trying to describe this powerful feeling, I feel I have naturally been drawn to the word “believe” – as Stuart will explain later in the article (introduced within the example about Pope Francis, cf. line 566ff), the act or state of believing contributes significantly to truly powerful visions. Stuart introduces the term “collective affirmative passion” for this feeling. The constituent term “collectiveness” reinforces the earlier point of the relevance of a vision’s beholder-group and the impact of its magnitude.
- 172-177: As seen above, the appeal and consequently the adoption of a given vision is what qualifies it as a vision in the first place. When individuals adopt a vision because they have been asking fundamental why-questions, the likelihood of the vision in question being seen as truly visionary (cf. line 107ff) surely increases.
- 196-208: The “thirst of human nature for seeking (...) why-answers in the form of visions” which will “remain indefinitely” resonates in various passages of the article. Significant instances include the following:
- 420ff: “having a vision, or being able to contribute to someone else’s, is something central to their [people’s] personal well-being”.
 - 630ff: the “inkling of doubt” which remains with fundamental why-questions is what generates our perpetual desire “thirst” to pursue the corresponding answers and is also the “catalyst of individual and collective affirmative passion.”.
 - 717ff: the “ultimate unanswerability” of why-questions gives sense to sentient human beings and drives our quest for answers.
- 224: At this point in the text, Stuart for the first time uses the singular form to indicate how one fundamental why-question leads to another and hence they can all be understood as one, cf. line 630ff. The fundamental why-question takes on various forms and centres around “why are we here?”, but also “why am I here?” and “why are we human?”, cf. also line 85 and the corresponding annotation above.
- 224-228: The questions which many owners may ask about their companies have the character of existential questions (cf. the discussion in lines 142ff), at organisational level. The topic of owners shaping the answers to these questions and shaping corporate visions, as opposed to their knowledge-craving attitude portrayed here, is explored in lines 270ff.
- 228: While the text explicitly refers to “employees”, corporate visions are typically crafted with a broader range of stakeholders as addressees. The article first discusses employees as one of the most important stakeholder groups and returns to other stakeholders later, either implicitly or explicitly, cf. e.g. line 291ff, 727ff or 790ff. In line 827ff, the question of how to select those stakeholder groups to be the primary addressees of a vision is included in one of the main clusters of challenges proposed as having paramount importance in vision creation.
- 264: Note Stuart’s distinction between “work ethic” (i.e. the belief that work is morally good) and (potentially work-related) ethics. The two concepts are linked in line 266 when it is suggested that the provision of a vision may be an ethically-grounded obligation.

- 267-269: Possible reasons for the avoidance of this ethically-grounded obligation are explored in lines 316ff.
- 287-290: The underlying premise here is that followers follow out of their own free will – if and when such a concept may apply – and that they do so due to the vision itself. Alternatively, one could imagine implicit followers of a vision who become associated with the vision-creating entity for some other reason than the vision itself and henceforth may be erroneously perceived as true “visionary” followers.
- As a possible extension of the statement provided, the questions asked about a well-crafted vision by (potential) followers, such as employees and other stakeholders, can in my own experience often be at least equally revealing.
- 291-294: The nature of loyalty may vary significantly between different stakeholder groups, depending on their relationship to the vision-giving entity. Capturing the potential loyalty of e.g. employees and clients is relatively straightforward, whereas it may be less immediately obvious and subtler for other stakeholders.
- 298-315: These lines provide a partial answer to the question “Why do the impact and sustainability of corporate visions depend on having the ‘right’ culture, ethics and strategy?” which is dealt with in more depth in section 4.
- 300-302: The soul of an organisation is given by Stuart as its veritable culture and ethics. This definition expands some alternatively-held views of “organisational soul” by integrating the often-neglected aspect of ethics, which – as numerous examples have revealed in recent years (including some in the article) – is crucially important.
- 325-327: The explanation for the wariness which many managers feel towards visions and visionaries is discussed in line 445ff (“dis-envisionment”), 469ff (“risk of being psychological damaging”) and of course throughout section 3.
- 328-333: It is interesting to become conscious of the fact that Larry Page states his own *personal* vision for the organisation Alphabet Inc.. This raises the question, to what extent it is acceptable for individuals to influence an organisation with their own personal visions – and how this may be legitimised within the organisation, clearly differing from the situation where a vision is created explicitly by fully legitimised representatives of an organisation. The potentially momentous impact of individual’s visions on an organisation is touched upon repeatedly in this article – e.g. very explicitly in the Swisscom example starting at line 489. The impact of individuals’ personality structures on such visions is discussed in line 270ff above.
- 343: An envelope in geometry is a curve in a plane – or (hyper-) surface in higher dimensions – which tightly encompasses (is tangent to) all curves within a family of curves being investigated (i.e. their “boundary”).
- 358: The “mystic” element emanates from the phrase “push the envelope”, i.e. the journey into terra incognita.
- 359: “paradigmatic balance” is a term coined by Stuart which refers to the equilibrium achieved between seemingly opposing paradigms. For example, in Larry Page’s quote, a balance is struck between mathematics and poetry. Starting at line 1216, the article discusses the balance of different ethical paradigms.
- 378-386: While the potential to generate affirmative confidence is highlighted as a characteristic of Schindler’s vision statement, its remarkable lack of specificity, as alluded to in Stuart’s remark “... and possibly leaves the answer subtly open for individual interpretation”, could be seen as detrimental to such an intention.

- 445-453: The “abused positive faith in others” may also refer to the alter ego of a person who created a vision which he or she subsequently becomes “dis-envisioned” with.
- 566-580: The discussion of the impact of the personal vision of an organisation’s figurehead on the organisation itself is continued here. As stated in lines 581ff, the Pope’s authority within the Catholic church is undoubtedly very strong and differs from the role played by many figureheads in corporate settings (cf. lines 249ff for possible arguments to the contrary). Note the distinction between Pope Francis’ *personal* vision for the Catholic church and his own personal, self-referential, vision – the two of which at first sight seem quite different.
- 581-588: The promised reward is, of course, salvation – the attainment of which can be seen as the Church’s approach to addressing the fundamental why-question as discussed in lines 605ff (and first alluded to in line 81, cf. the corresponding annotations above).
- 612-613: Stating that “adequately credible visions” receive faith leads to asking the question of what the veritable motives of the vision-creator may be (cf. lines 834ff and 1100ff). Having faith in a vision leads to loyalty (e.g. employee loyalty, cf. lines 236ff and 291ff). Importantly, the same psychological mechanisms seem to apply both to a religious setting (as in the example of Pope Francis) and a corporate setting.
- 632-635: The “mystic element of the human condition” is one of the “core elements of the human condition” referred to in line 127.
- 669-680: Based on the societal game we are playing, we should be aware of the unattainability of pursued visions. Nevertheless, we may get dis-envisioned when a vision “fails to materialise” – potentially with all the described implications. The sweet spot in terms of energy appears to lie at the very border between believing in a vision and being aware of its unreachability.
- 696-726: With the selection of the quoted passage, Stuart highlights one element of the Divine Comedy relevant to the topic of visions, namely the belief in the salvatory vision given by the Church.
- 727-729: In this final paragraph of section 3, an explicit reference back to the health-relevance of visions and the guiding question of section 2 “Why are visions inextricably linked with the health of individuals and organisations?” is made based on the findings of the immediately preceding paragraphs.
- 738-746: It can be deduced, that in many contexts corporate visions can take the place of visions provided by religion in former times.
- 757-770: The link between the loss of a vision which conveys identity to an individual (cf. lines 471ff) and depression is used to reinforce previous arguments (cf. e.g. lines 419ff and 464ff) about the significance and challenging nature of creating visions.
- 790-807: Up to this point, the article has elaborated on the potentially huge significance of visions and the effects which the giving and following of visions can have on individuals and organisations (cf. e.g. lines 191ff referenced in this paragraph). This paragraph (based on the fictive but altogether realistic example organisation introduced in lines 771ff) explicitly sketches the varying degrees to which corporate visions impact on stakeholders of different predispositions.
- 1109-1114: The growing society of individuals who each hold a personal vision based on self-defined ethics stands in contrast to other individuals and societal groups which have the need to adopt external visions and ethics (cf. above). This raises the question as to how not only societies and organisations can handle these different perspectives but also individuals confronted with the same dilemma inside themselves.
- 1217: The paradigmatic balance referred to here is concerned with the equilibrium between taking a mono-ethical and a multi-ethical approach for vision- and strategy-creation.

1292-1298: This passage referring to the increasing pervasiveness of service-orientation motivates the change of perspective (altero-referentialism) encouraged by Stuart for such organisations, cf. also the Hoffmann-La Roche example, and, in particular, lines 396-407.