

## Bringing **Vision** into Focus: Tackling the Lowest-Rated Facet in the Bates Model of Executive Presence

By Scott Weighart, Bates, Director of Learning and Development

At this point, over 1,000 leaders have taken the Bates Executive Presence Index (or Bates ExPI™), a multi-rater assessment where leader compare their self-ratings against how they are perceived by their supervisor, peers, direct reports, and others. We measure 15 different facets that collectively comprise executive presence. Which one gets rated dead last of the 15 qualities that are key to engaging, aligning, and inspiring others? Vision.

In the Bates model, Vision is equal parts strategic thinking and inspiration. Some leaders get high or low ratings on both elements, while some receive more mixed reviews—relatively high on items related to strategic thinking but much lower on inspiration, for example. There are 90 items on the ExPI assessment—six items for each of 15 facets. Three of the six items under Vision rank in the bottom 10 in mean scores among all leaders who have taken the assessment:

- Makes even daunting goals and aspirations seem realistic, exciting, and achievable
- Paints a vivid and compelling picture of what could be
- Portrayal of goals and plans is both credible and inspiring

That means half of the items in Vision are among the lowest of the 90 on the ExPI assessment—and all of them are a blend of strategic thinking (“realistic,” “vivid,” and “credible”) and inspiration (“exciting,” “compelling,” and “inspiring”).

As you might imagine, then, this topic of Vision comes up very frequently when we conduct ExPI insights conversations. Over time, this has led me to an understanding of why the scores in this facet tend to be so low and—more importantly—what can be done about it.

### **Why Vision is the Lowest-Rated Facet**

Through getting into dialogue with leaders around their lower ratings in the Vision facet, we’ve seen several epiphanies emerge explaining why Vision often is ranked relatively low by ExPI raters:



### 1. Leaders may confuse a quantitative goal with an inspiring vision.

In one insights conversation I conducted a few months ago, one leader ranted to me about her low scores on Vision. “I’ve given my Gen Y employees everything they could possibly want in a vision, and still they give me low scores!” she fumed. “So what’s your vision?” I asked. She said that she had clearly communicated that revenues needed to go up by 8% that year. I asked her why this would be an *inspiring* vision for her team, and she said that was sufficient for her and should be for her team as well. But when I asked her what really fired her up about her role and purpose as a leader, she was dumbstruck. “Well, that’s an interesting question!” she said, realizing that she had no answer.

Although there are exceptions, most people don’t feel passionate about their jobs because someone has asked them to increase market share or reduce costs by a certain percentage. They need something that gives them a sense of purpose and meaning—having a positive impact on themselves, others, or maybe the world at large (or some small corner of it at least). Goals are necessary but not a substitute for an inspiring, meaningful vision.

### 2. Leaders believe that articulating a vision is not really their job.

Another form of pushback I get when questioning leaders about their Vision ratings is that “Vision is not really my job.” Many leaders believe that articulating a vision is only applicable to the most senior leaders in the company—those in the C-suite. This is a fallacy. While it’s true that the CEO, CFO, and others may make the biggest decisions in steering the corporate ship, it can be helpful to revisit those Vision items that tend to receive the lowest ratings. Don’t all leaders at all levels need to make “daunting goals realistic, exciting, and attainable”? Even if you’re just trying to create buy-in among your cross-functional peers, won’t you have much more influence if you can paint “a vivid and compelling picture of what could be”?

You may not be charting the course for your whole organization, but you do need to connect with hearts and minds, rallying people around initiatives and driving great outcomes. If you’re buying into the idea that this is not your job, people won’t be buying into your ideas at all.

### 3. Leaders get the idea that they need to be the *source* of the inspiring vision.

Some leaders tell me that they just don’t have a vision in mind. “I’m not that creative!” they protest. “I *can’t* come up with a vision.” My response to this: “Has anyone told you that you need to go off on a mountaintop until an inspirational vision comes into mind, at which point you

would carve it into tablets and bring it down to share with the masses?” Of course not. Yet another misconception is that the leader needs to be the originator of the vision that inspires engagement, alignment, and action. There are other ways to come up with a vivid, compelling picture of what could be, and we’ll review those shortly.

#### **4. Some leaders believe that being emotionally inspirational is just not in their DNA.**

If some leaders believe they lack the cognitive horsepower or creativity to come up with a strategic vision, others may have a perfectly good vision... only to struggle when it comes to getting others excited about it. I’ve dealt with a number of leaders who have low-key, introverted personalities and who are definitely thinkers rather than feelers. Leaders with these traits may recoil when seeing feedback suggesting that they need to be exciting or inspiring. They start thinking that they need to develop the dramatic flair of a Steve Jobs or the presentation skills of a Bill Clinton. Ironically, this turns the idea of being a visionary leader into a daunting goal that is neither realistic nor exciting nor attainable!

### **Five Tips for Amplifying the Facet of Vision**

Although this facet challenges many leaders, there are several steps you can start taking this week to come across as that much more of a visionary leader who gets people excited about where the organization, function, or team is going and why:

#### **1. Go on a “Vision Listening Tour” to learn more about what fires people up and what may be possible.**

In a speech, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey quoted the science fiction writer William Gibson—the guy who coined the term “cyberspace.” Gibson once said, “The future has already arrived—it’s just not evenly distributed yet.” The idea is that there are tons of great ideas across any organization that have yet to be shared or discovered. If you go on a 30-day Vision Listening Tour, you can ask people questions about what the future could look for your function, team, or customers. In fact, leaders who are high in other facets such as Humility, Inclusiveness, and Resonance will find this to be pretty easy to do. Go out there and ask questions, listen, capture answers, and synthesize the best of what you hear into a vision that you can share with others. Intentionally seek out people who may offer different perspectives and who will be pleased they were invited to contribute, and be sure to give credit where it’s due to those who came up with great ideas.

## **2. Be sure to talk about a powerful purpose or mission—not just quantitative goals.**

Martin Luther King didn't emphasize quantitative goals about integration and equal opportunity. He moved hearts and minds by getting people to imagine a future world where "my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color or their skin, but by the content of their character."

While our own visions may not be as grand or noble as that, we, too, need to get people envisioning a better future and a sense of being empowered to make it a reality. Not sure of what that might be? Try asking yourself and others questions about it:

- What makes you want to get up and come to work every day?
- When you have felt the most excited at work during the last few months?
- If we could fast forward to one year from today, what would you like to be different for ourselves or for our team/function/customers? What would make the future more exciting and meaningful for all?

## **3. Share stories to help make your vision feel more realistic, exciting, and attainable.**

Even when leaders have worthy qualitative goals, they can be rather abstract and theoretical. At worst, they can become empty platitudes that are ultimately meaningless because they're not linked to concrete actions and behaviors. A hospital can talk about aiming to provide "the ultimate patient-centered experience." That could be fantastic, but what does it really mean? Giving patients access to highly-paid specialists on demand?

This is where storytelling is a powerful tool to make the vision real for people. When you share a story about a team member, a customer, or a project, you can show people what the vision really looks like in action. The stories you choose to share will say everything about the behaviors and values you're looking to drive.

## **4. Remember that you can be inspiring without going against the grain of your authentic voice and style.**

You don't have to speak loudly or use fiery rhetoric to get people inspired. If you're a low-key leader, that will be uncomfortable for you and feel inauthentic to your stakeholders. It's great to show some emotion if you can, but, if not, you can always talk about your emotions, sharing why you're excited and others should be in your own low-

key, quiet way. If you think of professional sports coaches who have had tremendous success in motivating their teams, some are loud and wear their hearts on their sleeves. Others have a more rational, calmer approach as they quietly lay out brilliant game plans. While you do need to find a way to get people fired up about where they're going and why, nothing says that you have to do so with an electrifying speech or a deeply emotional story. Think about ways you can talk about the future and share your passion in ways that feel comfortable and authentic for you.

**5. Remember that articulating a vision is a job for every leader... and set aside time for it.**

If you believe that articulating a vision is more the job of someone at a more senior level or a higher pay grade, think again. All leaders at every level need to help their direct reports and peers understand not only *what* to do but *why* they're doing it—the “so what” behind the “what.” If you simply tell people what to do, they may *comply* with your requests, but they are unlikely to feel *committed* to making it happen to the best of their ability. Explaining the rationale for a goal, telling a story about what good looks like, and asking others to share their ideas about an exciting future are all great ways to make that happen.

However, that won't happen magically. Another common obstacle is that leaders don't set aside time to develop and articulate a vision—whether on their own or with the help of others. It's all too easy to get “in the weeds” of the more tactical elements of leadership rather than the big-picture strategy. Scheduling regular slots on your calendar to develop, refine, and articulate your vision can make a big difference—as long as you honor those commitments.

### **Final Thoughts on Articulating a Vision**

If articulating a vivid and compelling vision is difficult for you, take some comfort in the fact that you're in good company! On the Bates ExPI, leaders who get high scores in the facet of Vision are definitely in the minority. To flip that around, though, imagine how much you'll stand out among other leaders if you can turn this quality from a

development theme into a strength! When you bring Vision into focus, your stakeholders will be ready to set their sights on a future that feels realistic, exciting, and attainable.