Toward a behavioral theory of vision in organizational settings

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to propose a behavioral theory of organizational vision.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on existing theoretical concepts and empirical evidence, this new theory development compares a diverse set of plausible logical, empirical, and/or epistemological conjectures so that highlighting occurs to form the substance of the new vision theory.

Findings – The approach takes the form of an emerging vision theory, which explains how vision attributes create an impact on organizational performance.

Originality/value – While vision is core to the prevailing vision-based leadership theories, little is theoretically and empirically known about attributes for effective vision. Moreover, there is no existing leadership theory, which explains the process by which vision attributes create positive effects on organizational performance. The paper proposes a vision theory to fill this gap.

Keywords Visual perception, Organizational performance, Leadership

Paper type Conceptual paper

The emphasis on leadership has since the 1980s shifted from traits and leader behaviors to the need for leaders to articulate visions to their followers, particularly those in organizations undergoing major change (e.g. Bass, 1990; Conger, 1991; Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Lucey *et al.*, 2005). Vision itself has alternated from being construed as a faddish and trendy concept, and being viewed as a fundamental attribute of effective leadership, a basis of one's power to lead and a force field leaders can use as a formative influence (e.g. Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Wheatley, 1999; Zaccaro and Banks, 2004). Shared vision among organizational members is also said to be fundamental to network organizations of the future (Avery, 2004). More critically, researchers (e.g. Avery, 2005; Hamel and Prahalad, 1989) have asserted that an organization with a well-articulated vision can achieve sustained competitive advantage over those organizations lacking such a vision. Many leadership scholars have endorsed vision as fundamental to leadership, strategy implementation, and change (Avery, 2004; Collins and Porras, 1994; Doz and Prahalad, 1987; Humphreys, 2004; Hunt, 1991; Kotter, 1990; Robbins and Duncan, 1988; Sashkin, 1988). Clearly, the importance of vision has been emphasized by leadership scholars in both theoretical discussions (e.g. Avery, 2004; Maccoby, 1981; Peters, 1987; Slater, 1993) and research (e.g. Kantabutra, 2008b; Kantabutra and Avery, 2007; Kotter, 1990; Larwood *et al.*, 1995). Time and time again, if a corporate leader is successful, his or her vision is cited as the cause and lauded as the foundation of the leader's greatness (Humphreys, 2004). Although some managers argue against visions as relevant to business performance (see Rynes *et al.*, 2002), businesses need a purpose (Avery, 2005). Handy (2002) argues

that the purpose of a business goes beyond making a profit, to something "better", a higher-level purpose.

Although vision is emphasized as core among the prevailing vision-based leadership theories (Bass, 1990; Conger, 1989; Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Tichy and Devanna, 1986; Westley and Mintzberg, 1989), and many characteristics of effective vision have been introduced, none of the prevailing theories has exhaustively explained how each vision characteristic might create an impact on organizational performance. This missing area is critical because vision is said to be the starting point of a long, evolving transformational process (e.g. Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Nanus, 1992; Yukl, 1998). Therefore, the objective of this paper is to fill in this gap by proposing a vision theory for further refinement, given that theory building is an ever-evolving process, and as a result, the development of any new theory has to start somewhere (Kaplan, 1998).

The following sections discuss theory development approach adopted in this paper, a vision definition, a vision theory and future research directions.

Theory development approach

According to DiMaggio (1995), there are at least three views of what a theory should be. The first view is that theories should consist of covering laws: generalizations that, taken together, describe the world as we see (or measure) it. The second view of theory, especially prominent in the social sciences influenced by the humanities, is as a device of sudden enlightenment with the purpose not to generalize, but serve as a tool to enlightenment. A theory from this perspective is indeed a set of categories and domain assumptions aimed at clearing away conventional notions to make room for artful and exciting insights. The third perspective views theory as an account of a social process, with emphasis on empirical tests of the plausibility of the narrative as well as careful attention to the scope conditions of the account. This approach simply requires that hypotheses detailing regularities in relations among variables be accompanied by plausible accounts of how the actions of real humans could produce the associations predicted and observed (Collins, 1981). Since theories from this perspective are often intuitive, they may employ references, diagrams or graphic presentations of data, as rhetorical devices to elicit epiphanies (DiMaggio, 1995).

This paper proposes a vision theory for further refinement by combining the three approaches of covering-law, enlightenment, and process (DiMaggio, 1995). The development of the proposed vision theory will be based on existing theoretical concepts and empirical evidence (e.g. Laughlin, 1995; Parker and Roffey, 1997; Whetten, 1989). As Weick (1989) pointed out, theory building calls for comparing a diverse set of plausible conjectures so that highlighting can occur. These plausible conjectures can be logical, empirical, and/or epistemological (Whetten, 1989). Since theory building is an ever-evolving process, the proposed vision theory may be modified, as additional information becomes available (Beard, 2000). Theorizing has also been considered as the development of new propositions for empirical testing (Beard, 2000). In developing the proposed vision theory, an initial set of questions, propositions, and generalizations are formulated to guide future research (Kaplan, 1998).

Accordingly, the following sections advance existing knowledge about vision by integrating findings and relevant concepts into a coherent theory of vision in

organizational settings, attempting to make generalizations about characteristics of visions enhancing organizational performance, serve as a tool to enlightenment about the effect of each vision attribute on organizational performance, and explain the process by which each vision attribute creates an impact on organizational performance. An initial set of propositions about relationships between the seven vision attributes and organizational performance for further research is also generated.

Vision definition

Despite its apparent importance, vision is still not defined in a generally agreed upon manner (Kantabutra and Avery, 2002), which is critical because theorizing on vision may be affected by the various ways in which vision has been defined. Considerable disagreement also exists over whether terms like mission, goals, core values, strategy, and organizational philosophy differ from vision (Kantabutra, 2008a). Clearly, little agreement appears to exist among academics as to what "vision" is. The situation does not appear very different among practitioners, as they are equally confused with the titles of mission, vision, values, beliefs, principles and strategic intent/direction (Baetz and Bart, 1996).

Taking a practical approach to resolve the definitional confusion, Baum *et al.* (1998) chose to define the term vision as each leader defines it, because it is the leader's actual vision that guides his/her choices and actions. Later on, Mumford and Strange (2005) suggest that vision is ultimately a cognitive construction or specifically a mental model, a conceptual representation used to both understand system operations and guide actions within the system. Most recently, Kantabutra (2008a) adapted Locke *et al.* (1991) and Mumford and Strange's (2005) by defining vision as a mental model that a leader defines, given that it is the actual mental model that guides his/her choices and actions. This vision definition is adopted in the present paper.

Vision theory

Senge (1990) argues that two types of vision exist: positive and negative visions. Negative visions limit in three ways: by diverting energy that could be put into something new into prevention; by carrying the message that the group only pulls together when it is threatened; and by being inevitably short term. In fact, negative visions are more common than positive ones. Despite the diverging views on how to define a vision, many leadership scholars appear to agree with Senge by providing different attributes seen to be necessary for a vision to be "positive". Among the proposed attributes, there are seven commonly shared attributes, as shown in Table I that includes definitions derived from Baum (1996), Baum *et al.* (1998) and Locke *et al.* (1991) who are among a few scholars studying the commonly shared vision attributes.

Empirically, a few studies have investigated the positive effect of the seven vision attributes on organizational performance. Baum *et al.* (1998) are among the first group of researchers who investigated the relationship between the seven vision attributes and organizational performance in American new ventures. They found that vision attributes of brevity, clarity, future orientation, stability, challenge, abstractness, desirability or ability to inspire impacted venture growth positively, both directly and indirectly, via vision communication. Later research also endorses the seven vision attributes as attributes for effective visions. Kantabutra and Avery (2007) found in Australian retail stores that when one or more of vision attributes were removed, the

No.	Shared attributes	Definitions
1	Brevity	A vision should be brief, but brevity should not overrule the endeavor to state the vision definitely
2	Clarity	A vision should be clear and precise in such a way that it is understood and accepted. Clarity makes the overarching goals understandable to everyone
3	Future orientation	A vision should focus on the long-term perspective of the organization and the environment in which it functions. It should guide the organization far into the future
4	Stability	A vision should be general and abstract enough not to be affected by most of the changes in the market or in technology
5	Challenge	A vision should motivate people to work toward a desirable outcome. Visions challenge people to do their best
6	Abstractness	A vision should represent a general idea as opposed to a specific achievement. It is not a narrow, one-time goal that can be met, then discarded
7	Desirability or ability to inspire	A vision should represent an ideal that is worth working toward for the followers. If followers do not perceive the vision as an attractive goal, they will never commit

Table I.
Commonly shared vision attributes

remaining vision attributes rendered no significant effect on organizational performance. On the contrary, when all seven attributes were combined, the vision turned out to be an indirect predictor of improved store performance via customer and staff satisfaction in Thai retail stores (Kantabutra, 2008b).

Although the seven vision attributes have gained empirical support as attributes for effective visions, how each attribute could impact organizational performance is little known. Filling in the gap of the prevailing vision-based leadership theories (Bass, 1990; Conger, 1989; Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Tichy and Devanna, 1986; Westley and Mintzberg, 1989), the following vision theory extends the previous studies on seven vision attributes by exhaustively explaining the process by which each attribute creates a positive impact on organizational performance initially through emotionally committed followers.

Essentially, vision-based leaders depend on emotionally committed followers who accept and help to execute their vision (Daft, 2005), given that the source of followers' commitment comes from the influence of the leaders' charisma and/or the shared vision (Avery, 2004). Followers of a vision-based leader are not expected to be passive, but have a responsibility to participate in the group, work towards the vision and make their voices heard in influencing what is accomplished (Avery, 2004). When each follower understands and embraces a vision, the organization becomes self-adapting (Daft, 2005). Although each individual acts independently, everyone is working in the same direction. In doing so, followers' use of their leader's vision in guiding their work is central (e.g. Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Lipton, 1996; Senge, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1990; Shamir et al., 1993). One function of a vision is therefore to facilitate decision making, initiative, and discretion by followers at all levels (Yukl, 1998). Visions characterized

by the seven vision attributes improve organizational performance initially through follower commitment to espousing the vision.

The process by which each vision attribute, interactively with the other six vision attributes, creates a positive effect on organizational performance through emotionally committed followers is explained below. Eight propositions are also advanced accordingly.

Vision brevity
Effective visions are brief. Brevity herein means the extent to which a vision contains approximately 11-22 words, the length found to make a significant impact (Kantabutra, 2008b; Kantabutra and Avery, 2007). The essence of brevity has been widely recognized because followers can understand a brief vision message more quickly than a lengthy one (Downs and Conrad, 1978). More critically, a brief vision allows for massive, continuing, frequent communication, which is needed for a vision to be successful (e.g. Kotter, 1995; Yukl, 1998). A top manager needs to communicate a vision frequently to people at all organizational levels to gain support from organizational members so that change can be successfully initiated (Witherspoon, 1997). This assertion is endorsed by a report that where managers communicated their vision to staff members in Australian retail stores, staff satisfaction was positively affected (Kantabutra and Avery, 2007).

In his/her attempt to frequently communicate a vision, a leader needs to speak about the vision briefly so that followers can grasp the message immediately. Followers can then use the brief vision to guide daily operations, which was found to be critical to enhancing follower satisfaction (Kantabutra and Avery, 2007). When followers share a direction, they are not confused and do not get lost on their way. They know what they are supposed to be doing within their roles and responsibilities to achieve the vision. When they are satisfied, productivity often increases. Satisfied organizational members also in turn bring about satisfied customers (Heskett *et al.*, 1997). Lending support to this view, speaking about brief messages was reported as most important for effective subordinates who were doing what they were supposed to be doing (Downs and Conrad, 1978). This finding supports the earlier view that subordinates can understand brief messages more effectively than lengthy ones. When subordinates continuously receive the vision message, and genuinely desire to achieve it, they are likely to do their best within their roles and responsibilities to make it a reality (e.g. Kotter, 1995; Yukl, 1998).

Therefore, the following proposition is advanced for the relationship between vision attribute of brevity and organizational performance.

P1. Taking into account vision clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, and desirability or ability to inspire, a vision which contain approximately 11-22 words increase the prospect of improvements in organizational performance, because a leader can communicate his/her vision frequently and continuously, and followers can then remember and understand the vision more easily. As a result, followers can use the vision more effectively in guiding their daily operations, which improves organizational performance.

Vision clarity

In addition to brevity, clear visions are more effective than obscure ones. This assertion concurs with the view of numerous organizational communication scholars (e.g. Conrad, 1990; Pace and Faules, 1989; Witherspoon, 1997) that a message must be clear to get the right thing done in an organization, which enhances organizational efficiency and effectiveness. A vision as a leader's message should, therefore, be clear. Clarity is defined as the extent to which a vision can be made clear in approximately five minutes (Kotter, 1995). A clear vision of what an organization could accomplish or become helps followers to understand the purpose, objectives, and priorities of the organization (Yukl, 1998), particularly in today's frequently-dispersed organization in which a top leader needs to communicate to make sure followers down the line are guided by the same vision. It is also argued that a vision should be unambiguous enough to serve as a guide to strategy and action, and to be internalized by those whose efforts are needed to turn the vision into reality (Nanus, 1992). Clear messages were also reported as most important for effective subordinates (Downs and Conrad, 1978), because they then could do what they were supposed to be doing. Most critically, lack of a clear vision was said to be a major reason for declining effectiveness of many organizations in the 1970s and 1980s (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). A similar view about vision clarity and organizational effectiveness has also been expressed by other scholars (e.g. Peters and Waterman, 1982). In addition, vision clarity was found to have a significant effect upon organizational performance via customer and staff satisfaction in Australian retail stores (Kantabutra, 2003).

Additionally, clear vision articulation crystallizes in followers' mind what is wanted (Nutt and Backoff, 1997), creating a picture that can be carried around in followers' heads to guide what to be done to foster change. Clear vision articulation, thus, provides support for followers in using the vision to guide their daily operations. Vision guiding made a significant impact on followers' own satisfaction in Australian retail stores (Kantabutra and Avery, 2007).

A clear vision also impacts followers' emotional commitment and enrolment (Nutt and Backoff, 1997). Emotional commitment and enrolment are required to realize a vision, according to many authors (e.g. Senge, 1990; Shamir *et al.*, 1993), and staff members' being committed to their store manager's vision affects organizational performance as measured by both customer and staff satisfaction in Australian retail stores (Kantabutra and Avery, 2007). Emotional commitment and enrolment prospects improve when a vision has clear articulation (Nutt and Backoff, 1997), because clear articulation moves people between stages of resistance to genuine compliance that requires both commitment and enrolment to develop (El-Namaki, 1992). To be enrolled, followers drawn to the vision embrace its inherent values by taking both requested and self-initiated actions to realize its aims (Nutt and Backoff, 1997). These followers do whatever can be done, within reason, to carry out the vision.

Additionally, Kantabutra (2008b) argue that, to be clear in approximately five minutes, a vision must point directly at a prime goal. Endorsing this view, goal setting has been critical to organizational research and performance at many levels: individual, group and organization (Rousseau, 1997). In field research, researchers investigated the role of goal setting to a firm's planning, processes, strategy, and performance (Rogers and Hunter, 1991), and found that there were significant effects of goal setting on firm productivity. In addition, scholars argued that effective policies should reflect the goals

of the organization (Pace and Faules, 1989). Thus, by knowing the policies of the organization, followers ought to have a fairly clear idea of what the organization is about and what it values, demonstrating the need for clarity in organizational goals.

Accordingly, the following proposition is formed for the relationship between vision attribute of clarity and organizational performance.

P2. Taking into account vision brevity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, and desirability or ability to inspire, a vision which directly points at a prime goal it wants to achieve increases the prospect of improvements in organizational performance, because followers know exactly what their organization wants to accomplish. Therefore, clear vision in followers' minds direct their full energies toward achieving the organizational goal.

Vision abstractness
Clarity and brevity are not sufficient for a vision to create a significant impact on organizational performance. Effective visions must also be abstract. Abstractness means the extent to which a vision is not a one-time, specific goal that can be met, then the vision is discarded (Kantabutra, 2008b; Kantabutra and Avery, 2007; Locke *et al.*, 1991).

Endorsing abstract vision, Canetti (1960) pointed out that vagueness suggests a longer-lasting goal, and thus a longer-lasting organization, which is desirable for followers. More importantly, the abstractness criterion prevents a too specific group boundary (Tarnow, 1997) that can form too many groups to manage. In addition, social psychologists (Messick and Mackie, 1989) found empirically that categorization along one dimension was just enough to create group formation, which is necessary for organizational effectiveness. This is consistent with psychologist Freud's (1921) early observation that identification of only one single common trait and the acknowledgement of the possession of a single substance could help form a group. According to Freud (1921), two or more dimensions were often one too many.

Abstractness can also be more inclusive of all organizational interests, and allows for individually-creative interpretations among followers (Tarnow, 1997). This individually-creative interpretation is especially critical when followers are allowed considerable autonomy and discretion in their work decision, and use the vision to guide their actions and decisions. Particularly in large organizations, follower vision guiding helps to improve organizational effectiveness and efficiency. Follower vision guiding is also associated with enhanced follower satisfaction (Kantabutra and Avery, 2007), in turn frequently impacting enhanced customer satisfaction. Considerable autonomy and discretion in the followers' work were said to be important in visionary organizations (Collins and Porras, 1994). Consistent to this view, the extent to which store managers delegated to staff members wherever possible, provided resources and support services to staff members, and encouraged staff members to make their own decisions regarding their daily operations, was significantly correlated with staff satisfaction in Australian retail stores (Kantabutra, 2003).

To demonstrate the essence of abstractness, "to be the best professional retailer in London" implies that any followers who agree with this vision statement are emotionally part of the organization, and those who do not agree are not. This abstract vision suggests categorization along one dimension and creation of group formation to

carry it out, and could really mean anything because "the best" is sufficiently vague. This sufficient vagueness is critical because all followers can use their imaginative interpretations to favor themselves, thus making the vision inclusive of all organizational interests. Moreover, being the best professional retailer sounds intuitively much better than being the best professional beverage retailers, which is too specific (Tarnow, 1997). Thus, abstractness makes vision more appealing to all followers.

Accordingly, the following proposition is formed for the relationship between vision attribute of abstractness and organizational performance.

P3. Taking into account vision brevity, clarity, challenge, future orientation, stability, and desirability or ability to inspire, a vision which is not a one-time, specific goal that can be met, then discarded, increases the prospect of improvements in organizational performance, because such an abstract vision suggests a longer-lasting organization that is desirable to followers, and encourages effective group formation to carry out the vision.

Vision challenge
In addition to brevity, clarity, and abstractness, effective visions are challenging. Challenge means the extent to which a vision motivates followers to try their best to achieve a desirable outcome (Kantabutra, 2008b; Kantabutra and Avery, 2007; Locke *et al.*, 1991). The greater the discrepancy between the vision and the status quo, i.e. the more challenging the vision, the more likely is the attribution that the leader has an extraordinary vision, not just an ordinary goal (Conger, 1999), and the more likely followers are to attribute extraordinary vision to the leader (Conger and Kanungo, 1987).

Endorsing this view, Collins and Porras (1996) suggested the concept of "Big Hairy Audacious Goals" which refers to visionary companies they observed that deliberately set themselves audacious and risky objectives, some of which "bet the company" (Deal and Kennedy, 1988). These risky and difficult objectives challenge the whole company and force change upon it, as well as reinforce the market leadership typically enjoyed by visionary companies. Lending support to this view, studies (e.g. Locke and Latham, 1984) also reported that greater difficulty leads to higher performance. By presenting a very discrepant and idealized vision, a leader provides his/her followers with a sense of difficulty and challenge, and a motivating force for change (Conger and Kanungo, 1987). This is because a maximum discrepant position within the latitude of acceptance puts the greatest amount of pressure on followers to change their attitudes (Hovland and Pritzker, 1957; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981). Since vision represents a perspective from the leader, and his/her hopes and aspirations, it tends to be within the latitude of acceptance, notwithstanding the extreme discrepancy.

Effective vision, as a result, should represent a degree of discrepancy between the vision and the status quo, in turn challenging followers to do their best within their roles and responsibilities to achieve superior organizational outcomes. By having a challenging vision, followers can also raise their self-esteem in their attempt to achieve the vision (Gecas and Seff, 1990), which in turn satisfies and motivates themselves (i.e. Maslow, 1943). This assertion is endorsed by a report that motivation of staff, a measure of which was defined as the extent to which a store manager challenged

his/her staff members to do their jobs better, was directly predictive of enhanced staff satisfaction in Australian retail stores (Kantabutra and Avery, 2007). When motivated followers are satisfied, customers are also satisfied, impacting organizational performance in positive ways (Heskett *et al.*, 1997).

Therefore, the following proposition is developed for the relationship between vision attribute of challenge and organizational performance.

P4. Taking into account vision brevity, clarity, abstractness, future orientation, stability, and desirability or ability to inspire, a vision which challenges followers to try their best to achieve a desirable outcome by representing a degree of discrepancy between a vision and its status quo increases the prospect of improvements in organizational performance, because the greater the discrepancy between vision and its status quo, the more motivated the followers are to work toward the vision.

Vision future orientation
Besides being brief, clear, abstract, and challenging, effective visions are future-oriented. Future orientation means the extent to which a vision indicates the long-term perspective of an organization (Kantabutra, 2008b; Kantabutra and Avery, 2007; Locke *et al.*, 1991). Many scholars suggested that vision is always about a desirable future because the purpose of the visionary process is to transform an organization into a new, desired future state (e.g. Parikh and Neubauer, 1993). Therefore, it is necessary to establish a future picture of the organization. This future picture allows for "creative tension" which is integral, because a leader has to create and manage creative tension around the gap between vision and reality to create a fundamental shift toward the vision (Senge, 1990). This tension can be used to draw organizational members from where they presently are, to the vision.

Endorsing the concept of future-oriented vision, Bennis and Nanus (1985) reported that all of the effective leaders in their study had a vision of a desirable and possible future for their organization. This view makes much sense because a vision has no power to inspire people or attract their commitment unless it offers a view of the future which is clearly better for the organization, the followers, and/or the society in which the organization operates (Nanus, 1992). Moreover, visions are not formulated for use in the short term. Instead, a vision is seen as the starting point of a long, evolving transformational process (e.g. Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Nanus, 1992; Yukl, 1998). As a consequence, an effective vision should contain the long-term perspective of an organization.

The following proposition is developed accordingly for the relationship between vision attribute of future orientation and organizational performance.

P5. Taking into account vision brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, stability, and desirability or ability to inspire, a vision, which indicates the long-term perspective of an organization increases the prospect of improvements in organizational performance, because the future picture of the organization attracts commitment of followers, and draws followers from where they presently are to work toward the vision.

Vision stability

In addition to brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, and future orientation, stability constitutes effective visions for several reasons. Stability means the extent to which a vision is unlikely to be changed by any market or technology development (Kantabutra, 2008b; Kantabutra and Avery, 2007; Locke *et al.*, 1991). Since a vision is meant to guide followers over time, it should not be easily affected by short-term events. When changes are to be made to a vision, they should only be minor to reflect changes in the operating environment (Peters, 1987). More importantly, an effective vision should represent a general idea and not change dramatically over time (Gabarro, 1987; Tichy and Devanna, 1986). Since a vision is seen as a leader's base for planning and implementation (e.g. Bass, 1985; Bennis and Nanus, 1985), a vision which changes dramatically over time negatively affects planning and on-going implementation of an existing vision. As a result, many on-going activities toward the existing vision would be suspended, wasting organizational resources and efforts. Unstable visions also bring about confusion among followers who are executing strategies and plans, eventually leading to deterioration in follower commitment to vision and organizational performance.

Additionally, vision is widely recognized as a tool for leaders. By communicating an unstable vision, a leader is perceived as inconsistent, something which outstanding leaders should not do, because outstanding leaders do not "flip-flop" on positions but stand firm, having once taken a position (Bennis, 1984; Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Consistent behavior also reflects leadership's integrity (e.g. Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Locke *et al.*, 1991). Numerous studies (e.g. Bass, 1990; Kotter, 1988) found that effective leaders were consistently viewed as credible and outstandingly trustworthy. A leader's integrity is, therefore, critical to organizational performance because followers recognize very soon the extent to which a manager really stands behind the vision, not only within his/her mind, but also with his/her heart (Parikh and Neubauer, 1993). By expressing an unstable vision, the leader's integrity can be questioned by followers. The moment followers start doubting the seriousness of the manager toward implementing the vision, cynicism is invariably the consequence (Parikh and Neubauer, 1993), bringing about deterioration in organizational performance. This assertion is supported by a report that a store manager behaving consistently with his/her vision affected improved staff satisfaction in Australian retail stores (Kantabutra, 2003). When followers are satisfied, customers are also satisfied, enhancing organizational performance (Heskett *et al.*, 1997).

The following proposition is developed for the relationship between vision attribute of stability and organizational performance.

> *P6.* Taking into account vision brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, and desirability or ability to inspire, a vision which is unlikely to be affected by market or technology change increases the prospect of improvements in organizational performance, because a stable vision (a) demonstrates leadership's integrity which draws follower commitment to work toward the vision, and (b) does not bring about unnecessary costs associated with implementing previous visions.

Vision desirability or ability to inspire
Since leaders use vision as a tool to induce their followers to work toward a common goal (Locke *et al.*, 1991), effective visions are desirable or inspiring. Desirability or ability to inspire means the extent to which a vision states a goal that directly attracts followers (Kantabutra, 2008b; Kantabutra and Avery, 2007). Management scholars have long emphasized the importance of vision being desirable or inspiring, proposing that it should draw on an organization's values and culture to be inspiring (e.g. Bryman, 1992; El-Namaki, 1992; Gardner, 1990; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1996; Linstone, 1984; Quinn, 1988; Shamir *et al.*, 1993). Effective visions must connect the possibilities contained in them to organizational values, and make these values clear (Nadler and Hibino, 1990; Oakley and Krug, 1993; Wilkens, 1989) so that the visions seem desirable (e.g. Dupree, 1992; Galbraith *et al.*, 1993; Wheatley, 1999). In effect, desirable vision can widen a leader's support base by reflecting the needs and aspiration of many stakeholders, transcending individual differences, and drawing stakeholders into a community of concerns about the future of the organization (Nanus, 1992).

Effective visions therefore meet followers' desires. Research has shown that effective visionary leaders tune in to their followers' needs (Gilmore and Shea, 1997). These leaders obtain their considerable power from various sources, two of which are their appealing vision and followers' emotional attachments to the vision (Shamir *et al.*, 1993). They motivate and excite followers to be self-motivating through the followers' attraction to the vision and identification with the group's values, as well as seeing their work as meaningful and important (Bono and Judge, 2003). In addition, leaders need to make sure that their followers know why their jobs are important (Morden, 1997). Inspiring visions are seen as the best way to help to motivate the followers to grasp the meaning and outcome of their work (Morden, 1997). When followers see the meaning and outcome of their work, they tend to be more satisfied, and thus frequently more productive. As a result, customers are also satisfied, enhancing organizational performance (Heskett *et al.*, 1997).

Since shared visions between leaders and their followers were critical to organizational performance via customer and follower satisfaction (Kantabutra, 2006; Kantabutra and Avery, 2005), for a leader's vision to be shared by the followers, the vision must at least be desirable or inspiring (Parikh and Neubauer, 1993). A desirable or inspiring vision in turn motivates followers and draws their affective commitment to achieving organizational goals, in turn affecting overall productivity, given that inspiration is a form of motivation (Morden, 1997). In addition, an inspiring vision creates a spark of excitement that lifts the organization out of the mundane (Parikh and Neubauer, 1993), nurturing a more pleasant workplace for followers. This in turn enhances follower satisfaction.

The following proposition for the relationship between vision attribute of desirability or ability to inspire and organizational performance is formed.

P7. Taking into account vision brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, and stability, a vision declaring a goal which inspires followers increases the prospect of improvements in organizational performance, because a desirable or inspiring vision motivates followers and draws their affective commitment to working toward the vision.

Visionary leadership is effective only if followers become committed to the vision promoted by the leader (Avery, 2004). A visionary leader can create an impression that he or she has high competence and a vision to achieve success (Jing and Avery, 2008). Followers then are expected to respond with enthusiasm and commitment to the leadership objectives, and may be recruited because they share the vision. Visionary leaders indeed inspire and activate followers to perform beyond normal expectations (Bass, 1985, 1998). Followers, who are satisfied with their jobs and/or their relationship with their leader, more easily embrace and share their leader's vision, akin to Howell and Shamir's (2005) concept of a personalized relationship with a leader. Some followers become emotionally attracted to the leader as person, and then become influenced by the leader's vision. Under the socialized view of attachment, followers are attracted to workplaces where they share the vision and values of the leader (Howell and Shamir, 2005). When they share the vision, they will be emotionally committed to achieving desirable performance outcomes. Emotional commitment from followers to their leader's vision is considered critical for a vision to take effect, because when followers are committed, they tend to be willing to work toward the vision (Collins and Porras, 1994; Lipton, 1996; Shamir *et al.*, 1993). Vision inspires people by transcending the bottom line (Nanus, 1992). When followers are emotionally committed, they will be willing, even eager, to commit voluntarily and completely to something that enables their own organization to grow and progress. That is why a firm's scientists and engineers may be willing to work day and night to achieve an important technological breakthrough or why middle managers in some companies are willing to forego their vacation year after year to ensure their firm's success (Nanus, 1992).

Endorsing this view, previous research in Australian retail stores (Kantabutra and Avery, 2006) revealed that staff emotional commitment to their store manager's vision was critical to enhanced organizational performance as measured by both customer and staff satisfaction. Moreover, staff emotional commitment to a vision was associated with customer satisfaction, taking into account staff vision guiding. These findings suggest that the more staff members believe in their store manager's vision and do whatever it takes to achieve the vision, the higher the customer and staff satisfaction. Satisfied customers might also motivate employees and raise the intrinsic value of effort, benefiting the store where staff behavior aligns with the vision.

In theory, the seven vision attributes help to facilitate the process by which followers become emotionally committed to the vision, thereby enhancing organizational performance. The following proposition for the relationship between follower emotional commitment to a vision characterized by brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, desirability or ability to inspire, and organizational performance is formed.

P8. Follower emotional commitment to a vision characterized by brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, desirability or ability to inspire increases the prospect of improvements in organizational performance, because emotionally committed followers are willing, even eager, to commit voluntarily and completely to growing their organization.

A vision statement that meets the seven vision attributes criteria is demonstrated and discussed in the following:

To be the most trustworthy healthcare services provider in Asia through excellence in research and education.

This vision statement is brief and clear, pointing directly at a prime goal. Therefore, leaders can communicate the vision frequently to their followers to ensure that everyone works toward a common direction. This in turn collectively enhances organizational performance. Being challenged and inspired by the vision, followers will be motivated to do their work better, bringing about better quality of services. In the process of providing the most trustworthy healthcare services in the Asia, followers will also be able to raise their self-esteem. This again would bring about better quality of services. The vision is also abstract. It does not suggest a one-time specific goal that can be met, and then the vision is discarded. It allows for individually-creative interpretation throughout the organization, no matter which department a follower works for. Indeed, a vision such as this facilitates the use of vision among followers to guide their daily operations. No matter how far the vision is projected into the future, it is stable, unlikely to be affected by technology or market change. A vision that is changed too often brings about unnecessary costs associated with implementing the previous vision. An unstable vision also affects leadership's integrity, thus negatively affecting follower satisfaction. Dissatisfied followers can also bring about inconsistent quality of services, where customer dissatisfaction develops. Moreover, the vision statement is future oriented. It indicates the long-term view of the organization, which allows for "creative tension" that leaders use to create and manage creative tension around the gap between vision and reality to create a fundamental shift toward the vision. Future oriented vision helps to improve organizational performance in terms of planning future business activities.

Future research directions

Clearly, research is needed to explore the eight propositions. One critical area is to explore is whether visions characterized by brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, and desirability are associated with improvements in organizational performance than visions without these attributes, across different organization sizes and industries. This area of research indeed is a significant contribution to the leadership field, given that there has been limited research that has specifically addressed the relationship between leadership behavior and organizational performance (Jing and Avery, 2008). Suggested areas for measuring organizational performance are financial outcomes, process improvements, customer and employee satisfaction. Moreover, one could also explore the process by which each attribute creates an impact on organizational performance, and how the seven attributes interact to create such an impact. Of equal interest is to identify relative importance among the seven attributes. Findings from future research will enhance our understanding about vision attributes and further refine the proposed vision theory. Eventually, by means of repeating studies systematically, researchers can compare and contrast results generated from several focal areas (Tsang and Kwan, 1999). This will lead to further refinement of the theory concerned, and help to identify its boundary.

Conclusion

Filling in the gap among the prevailing vision-based leadership theories, the present vision theory asserts that seven vision attributes of brevity, clarity, challenge, stability,

abstractness, future orientation, desirability or ability to inspire interact to create positive effects on organizational performance initially through emotionally committed followers. A vision that is too brief will not positively impact organizational performance unless it is clear to followers what needs to be done, or it may not appear to challenge followers to do their best. A clear vision does not positively influence follower commitment because it may be too lengthy, preventing a leader to communicate it massively and frequently. It also may be too abstract, therefore possibly creating conflicts among groups with different specific purposes and not allowing for individual creative interpretation among followers. A too specific vision makes it difficult to form an effective group to carry out the vision. Moreover, abstractness reflects stability in the vision because it implies no dramatic change over time. An unstable vision suggests to followers a serious lack of managerial integrity and commitment to the vision, negatively affecting follower morale. A vision that is brief, clear, abstract, challenging and stable will not draw follower commitment in working toward the vision unless the vision is also inspiring or desirable. In addition, when a vision is not inspiring or desirable, it is unlikely to nurture a shared vision, which is critical to organizational performance. An inspiring vision that is clear, brief, abstract, challenging, and stable will not be able to attract affective commitment from followers unless it offers a compelling view of a better future. Without a desirable future picture, followers are unlikely to be drawn from where they presently are to work toward the vision. Eight propositions are advanced accordingly. Future research directions have also been pointed out.

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