

# Anyone Can Have A Vision. Building Competence Is Often More Important

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In 1993, when asked about his vision for the failing company he was chosen to lead, Lou Gerstner [famously said](#), “The last thing IBM needs right now is a vision.” What he meant was that if IBM couldn’t figure out how to improve operations to the point where it could start making money again, no vision would matter.

Plenty of people have visions. Elizabeth Holmes had one for Theranos, but its [product was a fraud](#) and the company failed. Many still believe in Uber’s vision of “gig economy” taxis, but even after more than 10 years and [\\$25 billion invested](#), it still [loses billions](#). WeWork’s proven business model [became a failure when warped by a vision](#).

The truth is that anyone can have a vision. Look at any successful organization, distill its approach down to a vision statement and you will easily be able to find an equal or greater success that does things very differently. [There is no silver bullet](#). Successful leaders are not the ones with the most compelling vision, but those who build the skills to make it a reality.

## Gandhi’s “Himalyan Miscalculation”

When [Mahatma Gandhi](#) returned to India in 1915, after more than two decades spent fighting for Indian rights in South Africa, he had a vision for the future of his country. His view, which he laid out in his book [Hind Swaraj](#), was that the British were only able to rule because of Indian cooperation. If that cooperation were withheld, the British Raj would fall.

In 1919, when the British passed the repressive [Rowlatt Acts](#), which gave the police the power to arrest anyone for any reason whatsoever, he saw an opportunity to make his vision a reality. He called for a nationwide campaign of civil disobedience, called a [hartal](#), in which Indians would refuse to work or do business.

At first, it was a huge success and the country came to a standstill. But soon things spun wildly out of control and eventually led to the [massacre at Amritsar](#), in which British soldiers left hundreds dead and more than a thousand wounded. He would later call the series of events his [Himalayan Miscalculation](#) and vowed never to repeat his mistake.

What Gandhi realized was that his vision was worthless without people trained in his [Satyagraha philosophy](#) and capable of implementing his methods. He began focusing his efforts on indoctrinating his followers and, a decade later, set out on the [Salt March](#) with only about 70 of his most disciplined disciples.

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This time, he triumphed in what is remembered as his greatest victory. In the end, it wasn't Gandhi's vision, but what he learned along the way that made him a historic icon.

### **The Real Magic Behind Amazon's 6-Page Memo**

We tend to fetishize the habits of successful people. We probe for anomalies and, when we find something out of the ordinary, we praise it as not only for its originality, but consider it to be the source of success. There is no better example of this delusion than Jeff Bezos's insistence on using six-page memos rather than PowerPoint in meetings at Amazon.

There are two parts to this myth. First is the aversion to PowerPoint, which most corporate professionals use, but few use well. Second, the novelty of a memo, structured in a particular way, as the basis for structuring a meeting. Put them together and you have a unique ritual which, given Amazon's incredible success, has taken on legendary status.

But delve a little deeper and you find it's not the memos themselves, but [Amazon's writing culture](#) that makes the difference. When you look at the company, which thrives in such a variety of industries, there are a dizzying array of skills that need to be integrated to make it work smoothly. That doesn't just happen by itself.

What Jeff Bezos has done is put an emphasis on communication skills, in general and writing in particular. Amazon executives, from the time they are hired, learn that the best way to get ahead in the company is to learn how to write with clarity and power. They hone that skill over the course of their careers and, if they are to succeed, must learn to excel at it.

Anyone can ban PowerPoint and mandate memos. Building top-notch communication skills across a massive enterprise, on the other hand, is not so easy.

### **The Real Genius Of Elon Musk**

In 2007, an ambitious entrepreneur launched a new company with a compelling vision. Determined to drive the shift from fossil fuels to renewables, he would create an enterprise to bring electric cars to the masses. A master salesman, he was able to raise hundreds of millions of dollars as well as the endorsement of celebrities and famous politicians.

Yet the entrepreneur wasn't Elon Musk and the company wasn't Tesla. The young man's name was [Shai Agassi](#) and his company, [Better Place](#), failed miserably within a few years. Despite all of the glitz and glamour he was able to generate, the basic fact was that Agassi knew nothing about building cars or the economics of lithium-ion batteries.

Musk, on the other hand, did the opposite. He did not attempt to build a car for the masses, but rather for Silicon Valley millionaires who wouldn't need to rely on a Tesla to bring the kids to soccer practice, but could use it to zoom around and show off to their friends. That gave Musk the opportunity to learn how to manufacture cars efficiently and effectively. In other words, to build competency.

When we have a big vision, we tend to want to search out the largest addressable market. Unfortunately, that is where you'll find stiff competition and customers who are already fairly well-served. That's why it's almost always better to identify a [hair-on-fire use case](#)—something that a small subset of customers want or need so badly they almost literally have their hair on fire—and scale up from there.

As [Steve Blank](#) likes to put it, “no business plan survives first contact with a customer.” Every vision is wrong. Some are off by a little and some are off by a lot. But they're all wrong in some way. The key to executing on a vision is by identifying vulnerabilities early on and then building the competencies to overcome them.

### **Why So Many Visions Become Delusions**

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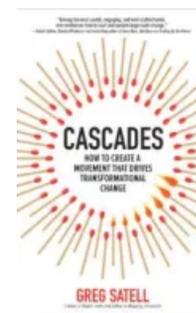
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When you look at the truly colossal business failures of the last 20 years, going back to [Enron](#) and [LTCM](#) at the beginning of the century to the “unicorns” of today, a common theme is the inability to make basic distinctions between visions and delusions. Delusions, like myths, always contain some kernel of truth, but dissipate when confronted with real world problems.

Also underlying these delusions is a mistrust of experts and the establishment. After all, if a fledgling venture has the right idea then, almost by definition, the establishment must have the wrong idea. As [Sam Arbesman](#) pointed out in [The Half Life of Facts](#), what we know to be true changes all the time.

Yet that’s [why we need experts](#). Not to give us answers, but to help us ask better questions. That’s how we can find flaws in our ideas and learn to ask better questions ourselves. Unfortunately recent evidence [suggests](#) that “founder culture” in Silicon Valley has gotten so out of hand that investors no longer ask hard questions for fear of getting cut out of deals. \

The time has come for us to retrench, much like Gerstner did a generation ago, and recommit ourselves to competence. Of course, every enterprise needs a vision, but a vision is meaningless without the ability to achieve it. That takes more than a lot of fancy talk, it requires the guts to see the world as it really is and still have the courage to try to change it.

– Greg

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