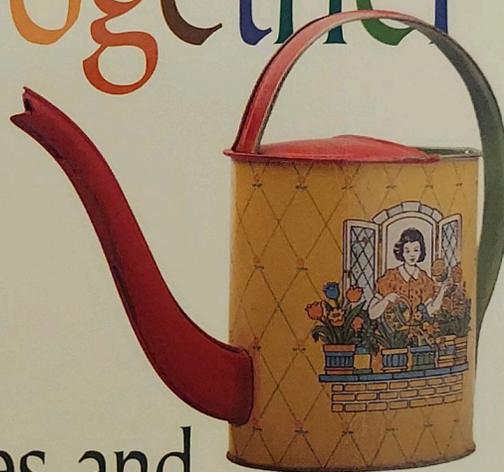


Creating a Life Together

Practical
Tools
to Grow

Ecovillages and
Intentional Communities



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Foreword by Patch Adams

Chapter 4

Community Vision — What It Is, Why You Need It

IT WAS CRISIS TIME at a community I'll call Willow Bend. This small community in the rural Midwest launched itself in the early nineties with no vision or vision statement. That means they had no shared expression of their desired future, no "why we're here" agreement that aligned community members and inspired them to work toward their shared aspirations.

Then the bottom fell out of the market for the wooden children's toys they manufactured as their primary community business. Overnight they lost almost half of their annual income base. Under severe financial strain, the members held long meetings to figure out what to do. Unfortunately different Willow Benders had widely different ideas about their purpose for being a community.

"We're here to show people a low-consumption lifestyle that works financially," says Tom. "We've got to recoup our losses somehow."

"No way!" exclaims Kathleen. "We're just here to enjoy ourselves and not have to work for the man. We'll just eat beans for awhile."

"How can you say that?," asks Andy, incredulous. "We're supposed to radicalize people! We're supposed to show that you don't have to compete

so much and can share things equally and all get along!"

Except they weren't getting along, and were competing mightily themselves, for the underlying basis of Willow Bend's reality. With no common vision, they had nothing to return to — no common touchstone of values, purpose, or aspirations about why their community life mattered, how it fit into the larger world. Because they use consensus decision making, no majority of Willow Benders with the same vision could determine the vision for the whole group. On the surface it looks like they were arguing about money. But they were actually expressing the inherent structural conflict of not all standing on the same ground. And unlike folks in forming-community groups, people with different visions can't simply go their separate ways and start different communities. Willow Bend was their home, and no one could ask anyone else to leave because of their "wrong" vision. As the conflict grew intense several people saw no way out and left the community. Now Willow Bend had two crises — not enough money and not enough people to carry out the tasks of their other community businesses.

I hope this (true) story illustrates why it's so important to establish why we're here as a basis for creating community — and why everyone in the community needs to be on the same page.

Kat Kinkade, cofounder of Twin Oaks community in Virginia, describes a similar circumstance. Once some friends of hers were appalled by what they read in the vision documents of a particular community. But when they met someone from that community whom they liked very much, they decided to visit, and found everyone there to be friendly, warm, and charming. Figuring that actions speak louder than words they decided to ignore the community's declared vision and values and join anyway.

But as Kat's friends lived there over the months, they found themselves increasingly at odds with the community's founders. While everyone was warm and courteous at first, the newcomers' values and goals weren't compatible with the community's, and soon they were embroiled in serious conflict over the direction the community. Eventually the dissension and distrust grew so bitter that Kat's friends left the community — and so did several other members, disillusioned by the bad blood generated by power struggles over vision and values.

"This left the group weak, angry, and exhausted," says Kat. "It was a community tragedy, and not an uncommon one." I've heard this same story more than once about other communities.

So the first major task members of a forming community group is to clarify and write down their vision, and make sure they all agree on it.

Some well-known, long-lived, apparently successful communities don't have and never had a common vision, or at least, never wrote anything down. This can work — but in my opinion it doesn't work well for long. Not having a com-

mon vision can blow a community apart when a major challenge or crisis occurs. Or it can slowly erode everyone's vitality and well-being over the years as each conflict arising from different visions adds to the accumulation of resentment.

"A common vision is neither necessary nor sufficient for starting a new community, since many have gotten by without one, and some that had one failed," observes community activist Tree Bressen. "But a common vision greatly increases the probability of success. If your group is going to all the trouble to start a community, can you afford not to give yourselves the best possible chance?"

Sound a Clear Note

A vision doesn't start out as necessarily "visual," and although written down, it's much more than a collection of words. It begins as a quality of energy that grabs you and doesn't let go. It's like a beam of energy leading your group from where you are to where you want to go.

Your vision must be articulated in a way that others can understand easily. It must be simple, clear, and authentic. As Sirius cofounders Corrine McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson say, it must "sound a clear note on inner levels," so it will attract others who resonate with that note.

"It's like a tuning fork against which you measure your resonance," says Adam Wolpert, cofounder of Sowing Circle/Occidental Arts & Ecology Center. "It shows how well you're doing in the theory-practice gap. It helps you aim high."

Once it's written down, a well-crafted vision:

- Describes the shared future you want to create.
- Reveals and announces your group's core values.

- Expresses something each of you can identify with.
- Helps unify your effort.
- Gives you a reference point to return to during confusion or disagreement.
- Keeps your group inspired.
- Draws out the commitment of the people in your group.

"By describing what we want to have happen," says Adam Wolpert, "it's like an insurance policy for the future, for what we *don't* want to have happen."

Elements of a Community's Vision

The terms "mission," "purpose," "values," "goals," "objectives," "aspirations," "interests," and "strategy" are often associated with a community's vision. These words mean different things to different communities, as you'll see in the sample vision documents. Here's how I use these terms.

Vision. This is the shared future you want to create, your shared image of what's possible, the thing that motivates your actions to create community. It's often expressed as the "who," the "what" and the "why" of your endeavor. Ideally it's described in the present tense, as if it were happening now.

Mission, Purpose. Your group's mission or purpose expresses your vision in concrete, physical terms. It's what you'll be physically doing as well as experiencing as you manifest your shared image of what's possible. To understand the difference between "vision" and "mission," consider a community with the vision: "A world where everyone has adequate, healthy shelter." Its mission, to express this vision physically, could be: "To build a model demonstration village using

low-cost natural building materials, and through outreach programs teach our building methods, particularly in Third-world countries."

Values. Your group's vision arises out of its shared values, the characteristics and processes you deem worthy. Values are expressed by how you behave now, and how you intend to behave, on a daily basis, as you live in community. In the above example, the community might hold values of sustainability, fairness, kindness, generosity, service, accessibility, thrift, and conservation of resources.

Interests. This includes experiences, states of being, or physical things people may be interested in relative to your future community. Interests usually arise from values and can be expressed as goals. Many of you may be interested in composting, perhaps because you value sustainability, and express that as a goal to build compost for your future community garden.

Goals, Objectives. Goals or objectives are milestones you commit yourselves to accomplish, but short-term, often in a few months or a year. Your community's goals are measurable: you know when you've accomplished them. In the above example, the group might want to finish building their model village in three years, and in the following year begin their outreach program to countries in Central America.

Aspirations. These are strong desires or ambitions for inspired, elevated goals, arising from values. Your community may have a goal to construct a meeting hall for 100 people in two years, and, because you value beauty and sacred space, your aspiration is to build a meeting hall that will be beautiful, calming, and uplifting.

Strategy. Your strategy affirms a series of goals in a particular time-frame. If your vision expresses the "who," "what," and "why" of your community, your strategy encompasses the "how," "where," and "when." It usually involves budgets and cash-flow projections and time lines. Altering your vision will completely change the future you're creating, but altering your strategy only changes how you end up getting there. In the above example, the group's strategy for achieving their goals might be to raise \$500,000 and share low-cost building methods in the first two years by offering public workshops and seeking grants from private donors and public foundations.

As we'll see in the next chapter, a community's vision arises in part from the resonance of its individual members' combined values, interests, aspirations, and goals.

Nature's Spirit, an aspiring spiritual community in South Carolina, expressed the difference between their vision (their dream), mission (their physical activities), and goals (their specific, measurable actions) this way:

Vision: A world that values the diversity of all life and provides for its sustainability by living in harmony with nature and spirit.

Mission: To create a community in which we work to expand our consciousness by living in the question: How does one live sustainably in harmony with nature and spirit? This will enable us to be of service, share our experiences, and link with similar local and global efforts.

Goals:

- Procure and care for a commons — a land trust that will ecologically support a small village of 50+ people.

- Build a self-sustaining infrastructure to support our basic needs.
- Create homes, gathering places and guest facilities using sustainable building methods and energy sources.
- Maintain an organic stewardship of the land that will provide for our own and others' food needs while giving back to the Earth.
- Create and nurture a spiritual center as the core of our community.
- Create an interdependent social system.
- Initiate necessary enterprises to assure economic viability with minimal dependence on institutional structures and the market system.
- Establish educational, leadership, internship, and exchange programs that will enable us to be of service to others, communicate and share our experiences, and link with similar local and global efforts.

Your Vision Documents and Vision Statement

Some communities have formal vision documents that describe in inspirational terms the shared future they hope to create together. Other groups may have various documents that give a sense of their vision, often conveyed through a vision statement, possibly a brief description of their purpose or mission, inspirational or factual paragraphs about their community and what they hope for it, and sometimes lists of shared values and goals. These can appear in internal agreements and covenants or formal documents associated with the legal entity through which the community owns land (corporate bylaws, partnership agreements, or operating agreements), and in promo-