



## FOUR KEYS TO CREATING LASTING VISION FOR A NONPROFIT

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Years before releasing his influential book, Good to Great, Jim Collins teamed with Jerry Porras to author an article in Harvard Business Review titled, *Building Your Company's Vision*, examining one aspect of how companies had created lasting success – vision. Central to their theories of visionary companies is the idea that “companies that enjoy enduring success have core values and a core purpose that remain fixed while their business strategies and practices endlessly adapt to a changing world.” This same idea applies with equal force to the nonprofit sector (as Collin subsequently noted in Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great).

So what is “vision?” Collins and Porras define “vision” as consisting of two major components: core ideology and envisioned future, with the core ideology being composed of core values and core purpose and envisioned future being ten to thirty-year goals. Working together, core ideology and envisioned future combined to form a vision for the organization, functioning in the role of a “North Star” for the foundation and its board.

I suggest there are four keys to creating lasting vision in the nonprofit context:

1 | **Conceptualizing Vision:** Whether done at the founding stage of the organization or after, the board should take time to distill the core values (the essence of the organization) and core purpose (the reason for being) of the organization. What values and purpose should stand the test of time, remaining fixed despite the changing world.

2 | **Stabilizing Vision:** Once the core values and core purpose (together, the core ideology according to Collins and Porras) have been conceptualized, the board should embed that core ideology into the foundational aspects of the organization. This will look different depending on the type of organization but may include choosing a specific form or entity to further the core ideology, drafting a specific purpose statement (as opposed to the standard broad purpose statement) into the governing documents, making choices such as whether a foundation is to be perpetual or a spend-down foundation, and considering other provisions such as requiring super-majority votes or external court approval to amend specific purpose provisions of the governing documents.

3 | **Institutionalizing Vision:** Because most nonprofits are created with a potential perpetual duration, and because boards change over time, the vision must move from individual to institution, from entrepreneur to enterprise. This is accomplished through board initiation, ongoing board training (particularly including training on fiduciary duties), and strategic planning (including succession planning). Where the organization is a family foundation, the use of junior advisory boards can be a great way to pass on vision to successive generations.

4 | **Contextualizing Vision:** While core values and purpose should remain fixed, strategies and practices must adapt to the changing world, making the organization relevant and effective to its particular time and place. Contextualizing the vision will necessarily look differently depending upon the variables involved—the board members, the investment climate, technological advances, the needs to be met, and those to be benefited by the organization’s work. This requires the hard work of the board to differentiate between what is part of the core ideology of the organization and what is not. It also requires ongoing study of what is working in the organization’s field. Finally it requires the willingness and courage to make changes to strategies and practices.