



What Really  
Matters

A GUIDE TO

# DEFINING AND REALIZING YOUR COMPANY'S ASPIRATIONS



*\*The cover image for this eBook represents the 'Big Hairy Audacious Goal', or BHAG. You can learn more about the term here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big\\_Hairy\\_Audacious\\_Goal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Hairy_Audacious_Goal)*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD.....	2
INTRODUCTION to Company Aspirations.....	5
COMPANY Aspirations Defined.....	7
ASPIRATIONS as a Company-Level Strategy.....	10
A THREE-PHASE Approach to Company Aspirations.....	12
ROLES and Metrics for Company Aspirations.....	22
COMPANY Aspirations Challenges and Solutions.....	25
GETTING Started with Company Aspirations.....	27

## **Extras:**

- \* [Workbook: Developing Your Company Aspirations](#)
- \* [Developing You Aspirations: A Facilitator's Guide](#)
- \* [Aspirations of Top Technology Companies](#)

# FOREWORD

---

**BUILDING** a brand today is very different from building a brand 50 years ago. It used to be that a few people got together in a room, decided what the brand positioning was going to be, and then spent a lot of money buying advertising and telling people what their brand was. If you were able to spend enough money, then you were able to build your brand.

It's a very different world today. With the Internet connecting everyone together, companies are becoming more and more transparent -- whether they like it or not. An unhappy customer or disgruntled employee can blog about a bad experience with a company, and the story can spread like wildfire over email or with tools like Twitter. The good news is that the reverse is true as well. A great experience with a company can be read by millions of people almost instantaneously. The fundamental problem is that you can't possibly anticipate every possible touch point that could influence the perception of your company's brand.

For example, if you happen to meet an employee of Company X at a bar, even if the employee isn't working, how you perceive your interaction with that employee will affect how you perceive Company X, and therefore Company X's brand. It can be a positive influence, or a negative influence. But the point is that *every employee* can affect your company's brand, not just the front-line team members that are paid to talk to customers.

At [Zappos.com](http://Zappos.com), we decided a long time ago that we didn't want our brand to be just about shoes, or clothing, or even online retailing. We decided that we wanted to build our brand to be about the very best customer service and experience. We believe that customer service shouldn't be just a single department; it should be the entire company.

Advertising can only get your brand so far. If you ask most people what the 'brand' of the airline industry as a whole is (not any specific airline, but the entire industry), they will usually say something about bad customer service or poor customer experience.

If you ask people what their perception of the U.S. auto industry is today, chances are the responses you get won't be in line with what the automakers project in their advertising.

So what's a company to do if you can't just buy your way into building the brand you want? What's the best way to build a brand for the long term?

In a word: **culture**.

At Zappos, our belief is that if you get the culture right, most of the other stuff -- like great customer service, building a great long-term brand, or passionate employees and customers -- will happen naturally on its own. Your culture is your brand.

**We've formally defined the Zappos culture in terms of 10 core values:**

1. Deliver WOW through service
2. Embrace and drive change
3. Create fun and a little weirdness
4. Be adventurous, creative, and open-minded
5. Pursue growth and learning
6. Build open and honest relationships with communication
7. Build a positive team and family spirit
8. Do more with less
9. Be passionate and determined
10. Be humble

Many companies have core values but don't really commit to them. They usually sound more like something you'd read in a press release. Maybe you learn about these values on Day 1 of orientation, but after that it's all just a meaningless plaque on the wall of the lobby.

We believe it's really important to come up with core values that you can commit to. And by commit, we mean that you're willing to hire and fire based on them. If you're willing to do that, then you're well on your way to building a company culture that is in line with the brand you want to build. You can let all of your employees be your brand ambassadors, not just the marketing or PR department. And they can be brand ambassadors both inside and outside the office.

At the end of the day, just remember that if you get the culture and aspirations right, most of the other stuff -- including building a great brand -- will fall into place on its own.

### **TONY HSIEH**

CEO of [Zappos.com, Inc.](http://Zappos.com)  
New York Times bestselling author of  
*Delivering Happiness*

*\*The preceding foreword originally appeared on Zappos.com in a post titled, "Your Culture is Your Brand."*



# INTRODUCTION TO COMPANY ASPIRATIONS

---

**IT'S KNOWN AS** “the domino effect”: one object tumbles, and everything else falls into place.

Unfortunately, in life, things are hardly ever this simple – particularly in the business world. It's rarely one thing alone that sets a company on the right path to world domination, but instead a culmination of factors that come together in just the right way. A great product helps, of course, but more than a few businesses with great product ideas have failed to reach their full potential.

So what's the secret? Talk to leaders from most successful startups, and you'll inevitably find that one of the keys involved having the right group of people, all moving in the same direction toward clearly defined goals. This is where the development of company aspirations comes into play.

***The only question is how to get there.***

During the early years of a company's life, the founders and senior leaders generally focus on *product development* and *customer development*. During this period of formation, the team is working out its basic product, initial value proposition, market focus, and go-to-market approaches. Once the product and customer development has reached a reasonable point of maturity, the team then begins to turn its attention toward *company development*.

One of the best steps an organization can take at this point is to become an aspirations-driven company (also referred to as mission-driven or vision-driven). An aspirations-driven company is one whose leaders make clear the organization's mission, vision, values, and priorities.

These aspirations, in turn, serve as a guide for all employees and market participants involved with the company.

To be truly effective, aspirations have to be more than just words on paper. The management team must be committed to expressing and living the aspirations on a daily basis. This eBook is designed to show leaders who are ready to *identify, express, and live* their company aspirations where to begin.

“Know your core competencies and focus on being great at them. Pay up for people in your core competencies. Get the best. Outside of the core competencies, hire people that fit your culture - but are cheap.”

**MARK CUBAN**  
Owner, [Dallas Mavericks](#)  
Chairman, [HDNet](#)



# COMPANY ASPIRATIONS DEFINED

---

Put simply, your aspirations are what you aim to be as a company. They are the longest-term and most aggressive goals for your business. Your aspirations can be organized in many different ways, but most frequently are set as your **mission, vision, values, and priorities**.

The ultimate goal of identifying, expressing, and living your company aspirations is for everyone in and around your organization to embrace and act in a manner consistent with those objectives. Essentially, you reach your aspirations by *living* your aspirations. As mentioned before, your aspiration goal can be broken down into **mission, vision, value, and priority** goals:

- **Mission Goal** — All of the people in your organization understand your company's purpose, and work toward realizing that purpose in their daily work. Essentially, you are answering the question, "Why are we building this organization?"
- **Vision Goal** — All of the people in your organization understand what you want your company and customer set to "look like" in the long term, and they use this understanding to both motivate and guide their work. Essentially, you are answering the question, "What are we aiming to achieve?"
- **Value Goal** — All of the people in your organization work in a manner that is consistent with your values and principles. Essentially, you are answering the question, "How should we act?"
- **Priorities** — All of the people in your organization understand your priorities if there is ever any conflict between individual aspirations.



Aspirations serve as a guide to everyone inside and outside of your organization for explaining who you are, where you want to go, and how you're going to get there. But aspirations are a confused idea in most companies. Some think of aspirations as a poster to motivate employees. Other companies have senior managers who believe that aspirations are for the "troops" but not for them.

These issues, and others, have led the vast majority of companies to develop very poor aspiration practices, and most people to have a general disregard for or disbelief in the practice. Clearly, these approaches do not meet the goals of true aspirations and the poor approaches used by other companies make it much more difficult for you to implement the proper practices.

Company aspirations are often – but should not be – confused with "product aspirations," "brand aspirations," "customer aspirations," "business unit aspirations," "functional aspirations," "employee aspirations" or any other aspirations that can be developed for a specific initiative or around a specific stakeholder. Company aspirations are different in that they are the umbrella over all the other aspirations.



**SCOTT DORSEY**  
CEO, [ExactTarget](#)

“For young companies, it’s critical to build a team with character, core values, and integrity. Find people who have different strengths and experiences than you, but whose styles are complementary. Defining your company mission and values from the start will help ensure that your team remains focused on the company’s core vision as your business grows.”

## Business Benefits of Company Aspirations

As your company grows, it's important to communicate who you are to new and existing employees and other stakeholders, which company aspirations help you do. Company aspirations help everyone in the company guide their *activities*, *behaviors*, and *decisions*. When aspirations are well expressed and baked into a company's culture, they help you:

- Hire the people who best fit your aspirations
- Help the “right-fit” people know that you are the best company to work for
- Help the “wrong-fit” people know that your company is not the right company for them
- Inspire your staff
- Separate staff that are not aligned with your aspirations
- Give guidance for the millions of activities, behaviors, and decisions that are made in your company every week
- Enable your product market participants to understand where you're going, why you exist, and what is important to you
- Inspire your product market participants to purchase and use your products and services

An aspirations-driven company gives people, both inside and surrounding the company, extreme clarity on what to expect and what is expected, which helps you accelerate at a higher velocity toward your goals.

# ASPIRATIONS AS A COMPANY-LEVEL STRATEGY

**ASPIRATIONS** are one of the most important company-level strategies in an organization. Implemented from the top-down, aspirations need your careful consideration, execution, continuous reinforcement, and ongoing support if you are going to meet your goal of having everyone in the organization live them out.

Specifically, as the company's senior leaders, you must:

- Identify, agree on, and commit to your aspirations
- Communicate your aspirations to the entire organization
- Live your aspirations
- Help others to understand and live your aspirations
- Measure how well the company aspirations are understood and used throughout the organization and make adjustments based on this feedback
- Continuously reinforce your aspirations

To become truly useful, aspirations must become part of your organization's culture. As leaders of your company, you must communicate your aspirations regularly and act as role models by referring to them when you develop strategies, set goals, make decisions, and take action.

The key to setting good aspirations is to keep in mind that they will set the direction and give guidance to the company for a long period of time. However, that does not mean that your aspirations won't change. While aspirations are important to get right from the onset, you also should review and adjust them on an annual basis. During the annual review, most companies will find that their aspirations are pretty well set – perhaps they need to fine-tune the wording, but for the most part, the aspirations are serving the company well.

Other companies will find that they need to adjust and extend their vision. Still others will find that they have grown to the point that they need to bring their aspirations to a new level.

## THE INSPIRATION BEHIND COMPANY ASPIRATIONS

Aspirations are about reach and daring. They are about focus and believing.

I find that aspirations can serve as both rudder and sail. For us, they play a huge role in almost everything we do. They shape our thinking, living, working, strategizing, risk-taking, deciding, and doing. We know their power. We trust their worth.

At times, aspirations get a bad rap because of the gaps that can often exist between what people, companies, or websites say, what they do, and who they actually are. Aligning our “words of aspiration” with “our actions and deeds of aspiration” is essential. We believe in realizing what Henry David Thoreau once wrote: “Our truest life is when we are in dreams awake.”

Aspirations are about giving yourself and others the permission to not only have a roadmap for working, but for *living*. They allow individuals to let it rip, to go for it, to be alive, to walk with a bounce in their step, and to look clearly into solutions that are rooted in the fabric of knowing and goodness.

They can inspire a great life (both at and away from work). They invite staff, clients, and stakeholders to the table of empowerment, confidence, courage, and grace. We don't just *like* aspirations; we've built our business on them.



**SUSAN KERR**

CEO, Writer, [Advancing Inspiration](#)

# A THREE-PHASE APPROACH TO ASPIRATIONS

---

**ASPIRATIONS** can be truly inspirational to your employees, customers, and influential people in your market. That said, as with any management initiative, it takes real work to identify, craft, communicate, and *live* your aspirations.

We have developed a three-phase approach to help you, described below. But you will still find that it takes *real* work to create a significant impact. As we reviewed this eBook with our community for feedback, some of the comments that we got back centered on ideas like, “Aspirations are supposed to be inspiring, but your eBook makes it sound like work!” Frankly, it *is* work. The results are inspirational, but the path to get there takes real work.

If you want more on the inspiration, we highly recommend Tony Hsieh’s book, *Delivering Happiness: A Path to Profits, Passion, and Purpose*, or *Behind the Cloud: The Untold Story of How Salesforce.com Went from Idea to Billion-Dollar Company—and Revolutionized an Industry*, by Marc Benioff. Both are great first-hand accounts of how CEOs built significant companies, at least partially by being aspiration-driven. We hope that reading their stories will help give you the inspiration to do the real work.

When you are ready to do the hard work of building your own aspiration-driven company, follow our three-phase approach below and use the templates and workbooks that accompany this eBook. It’s hard work, but there is nothing better than being part of a company that is driven by something important. As with all practices, there are many approaches for implementing this practice within your organization. This is the process we recommend:

1. **Identify Your Aspirations**, where the CEO and senior management team discuss and debate possible aspirations and identify the right set for your company;
2. **Express Your Aspirations**, where the CEO and senior management team communicate the aspirations into the organization; and
3. **Live and Reinforce Your Aspirations**, where all of the people in the organization are asked to live the aspirations, and the use of aspirations is measured and reinforced on a quarterly basis.

Each of these phases is discussed in turn.

## I. Identify Your Aspirations

A one-day, off-site meeting is the ideal place to develop your company aspirations. The goal for this meeting is to create your *mission, vision, values, and priorities* statements. All of the company's senior leaders must be present.

This meeting will be most effective if there is an outside facilitator (someone who is familiar with the topic and is not part of the senior management team); however, many teams have created successful aspirations without the use of a facilitator. The day should be planned out as follows:

### **STEP 1: CREATE YOUR MISSION STATEMENT**

Your mission statement presents the broadest and longest perspective of the purpose of your organization (generally, the commitments that you are making to your key stakeholders).

#### *Questions to ask while drafting your mission statement:*

1. What is the purpose of the organization (i.e., why do you exist)?
2. What does the company aspire to be?
3. Who are the key stakeholders?
4. What promises are you making to the stakeholders?
5. How is your company distinguished from all of the others?
6. What are the company's limits in terms of products, services, markets, and primary customers?
7. What does the company value or prioritize?

#### *Questions to ask about your draft mission statement:*

1. Is it clear and understandable to all stakeholders (i.e., is it easy to grasp)?
2. Does it make the right promises to the most important stakeholders?
3. Does it distinguish the company from all others?
4. Is it compelling to the key stakeholders (i.e., would you want to work for, be a customer of, or invest in this company)?
5. Does it inspire support and ongoing commitment?

6. Does it motivate those who are important to the organization's success?
7. Can it be shorter?
8. Are the verbs proactive?
9. Is it free of jargon?
10. Can it be easily memorized and repeated?
11. Will it serve the company well over time (i.e., is it broad enough to allow the company to evolve in the right direction over time)?
12. Is it narrow enough to guide the key stakeholders and will it help avoid distractions?

## **STEP 2: DEFINE YOUR VISION**

Your vision statement presents a vivid image of your organization's future; it paints a picture of what you intend your company to look like in 1 to 5 years or longer. The vivid image serves as a target to help guide overall strategy and strategic and operating decisions, and also serves as a source of inspiration for everyone surrounding the organization.

Some managers tend to be very high-level and esoteric with their attempts at writing a vision statement, while others will try to create too much detail. The best vision statements will be used to identify strategies, so they need to be descriptive enough about the long-term goals for your company, but also as short and concise as possible.

### *Guidelines for drafting your vision statement:*

#### **Describe your future in a way that creates a vivid image.**

1. What does the organization want to become? (This should stretch your current capabilities but also be achievable)
2. What is your timeline for getting there?

#### **A good pragmatic vision statement:**

- Offers measurable long-term goals
- Defines the product-market focus
- Defines your differentiation, how you will be uniquely valuable to your target customers
- Gives a timeline

### *Questions to ask about your draft vision statement:*

1. Is it clear and understandable to all stakeholders (i.e., is it easy to grasp)?
2. Is it unambiguous?
3. Does it describe a bright future for the company?
4. Does it stretch the current organization?
5. Is it vivid, powerful, valuable, attractive, and inspirational — does it make people feel proud and excited?
6. Does it distinguish the company from all others?
7. Does it:
  - » Quantify the vision?
  - » Define the product-market focus?
  - » Give a timeline?
8. Can it be shorter?
9. Is it free of jargon?
10. Can it be easily memorized and repeated?
11. Is it narrow enough to guide the key stakeholders and will it help avoid distractions?
12. Does it align with the company's mission and values?

### **STEP 3: ARTICULATE YOUR VALUES**

Values are important and enduring beliefs or ideals shared by people in the company about what is valuable to consider when making decisions, taking action, and interacting with others. Values exert major influence on individual behaviors and serve as broad guidelines in all situations. Values represent the priorities in a company's culture, including how the employees make decisions and act.

Unlike mission and vision statements, core values are generally more difficult to articulate. It will take significant focus, determination, and several iterations on your part before you are satisfied with the outcome. Also, unlike mission and vision statements, values are written in many different formats and sometimes take several pages to communicate.



### *Guidelines for drafting your values:*

1. What values are important for the long-term success of the business (i.e., what values will give additional guidance to those involved with the company and significantly contribute to the success of the company's mission and vision)?
2. What values are important to the people in the business?
3. Which of the values above are important to develop across the entire organization?
4. Take the values and draft them in a manner that reflects the company's style and personality.

### *Questions to ask about your draft values:*

1. Are the values clear and understandable to all stakeholders (i.e., are they easy to grasp)?
2. Are they important?
3. Are they the minimum necessary to communicate?
4. Will they offer guidance to the current organization?
5. Will people understand, appreciate, and incorporate them?
6. Do they distinguish the company from all others?
7. Are they free of jargon and written in a manner that fits the company?
8. Can they be easily memorized and repeated?
9. Are they narrow enough to help guide the key stakeholders and will they help avoid distractions?
10. Do they align with the company's mission and vision and key people in the organization?

# FINE-TUNING YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

Developing core values can be tricky because you're transferring something that's very personal into a group and business setting. As you work toward developing a values statement for your organization, beware of the personal and emotional connection most of your team members have with creating the values statement.

## HERE ARE SOME GUIDELINES:

- \* **One word isn't enough to convey the real meaning of a value.**  
Create phrases, but not paragraphs.
- \* **Values should be specific, not generic.**  
More than one word is needed to define specificity.
- \* **Values need to be shared.**  
Although you don't need consensus from everyone in your organization, you *do* need agreement from senior management.
- \* **The list should include between five and seven values.**  
Values need to be memorable to your staff, so having a few statements is better than having so many that nobody remembers any.

You don't set or establish core values; you discover them. Focus on discovering shared values within your organization by starting with individuals' values and moving up to the organization.

## ASK THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- \* **What are the core values and beliefs of our company?**
- \* **What values and beliefs guide our daily interactions?**
- \* **What are we really committed to?**

Developing a set of values is one thing; living by them is something completely different. Having a values statement that's all talk and no commitment undermines your leadership and the management team's credibility.

**ERICA OLSEN**

Co-founder and COO, [M3 Planning](#)



#### STEP 4: DEFINE YOUR PRIORITIES

If you mention multiple stakeholders or have other ambiguity in your mission, vision, and values statements, you can clarify your priorities with a priorities statement.

Priorities statements are useful for helping guide decisions when the mission, vision, and value statements do not provide guidance (e.g., when a decision that would be good for one stakeholder would be at the expense of another stakeholder).

#### *Example: OpenView Venture Partners*

OpenView mentions portfolio companies, investors, and staff in its mission statement. The OpenView priority statement clarifies its priorities as follows:

1. Portfolio companies are our first priority
2. Firm/investors are our second priority
3. Individuals are our third priority

You should be able to get your senior management team to a level of agreement on your aspirations (mission, vision, values, and priorities) if you turn off your phones and computers, take out your flip charts, and work collaboratively over the course of one full day.

Once you have general agreement on your aspirations, you can get a good sense of how they sound by asking each senior manager to present them aloud to the rest of the team at the end of the day. This will help you identify and fix any issues, reinforce the aspirations among each member of the senior team, and give everyone practice with presenting the aspirations.

A good way to finish the session is to go around the room and ask if each senior manager is committed to living, communicating, and reinforcing the aspirations with their staff. The process should not stop until you have a full commitment from each of the senior managers.

## 2. Express Your Aspirations

Once you are comfortable that you have created the right set of company aspirations, it's time to communicate them to the entire organization. Companies have different norms for internal communication, but some of the approaches that we have seen include:

- Presentation by the CEO at a quarterly employee meeting
- Email from the CEO to the staff
- Posters, lucites, mouse pads, and other items that are publicly displayed
- Staff meeting presentations from each of the senior managers
- Posting the aspirations on the company Intranet
- Posting the aspirations on the company website and/or in recruiting or corporate communications material
- Presentation by the CEO to the company's board of directors

Your communication will not be complete without communicating to each person in three or more different ways. You cannot over-communicate aspirations, but you can easily under-communicate them, so spend the time to over-communicate!

## 3. Live and Reinforce Your Aspirations

If you have identified and expressed your aspirations, you're off to a good start. However, at this point, your aspirations are just words on a page. If you don't *live* and *reinforce* your aspirations, they will never move beyond words to become second nature to your staff.

**You have several hurdles to overcome during this phase:**

- Most employees won't remember your aspirations even after you communicate them three or more times, perhaps more!
- Many employees won't really understand what your aspirations mean in general
- Many employees won't know how their work relates to your aspirations and probably won't raise their hands and ask questions

- Everyone is busy and unless the senior management constantly puts aspirations onto the table and into the conversation, everyone will revert back to their day-to-day work.

**Some vehicles for reinforcing aspirations include:**

- Have some smaller team dinners to discuss your aspirations, what they mean, and how each person can live them
- While you are making decisions, bring up the aspirations as the criteria for making the decision (e.g., when making a decision to work on a particular initiative or hire a particular person)
- Communicate that you are taking certain actions because they are aligned with your aspirations
- Communicate that you are not doing something because it is not aligned with your aspirations
- Give ongoing feedback by praising people who do things that align with your aspirations; conversely, give helpful feedback on different ways of doing things to people who take actions that conflict with your aspirations
- Reinforce all or part of your aspirations at your regular staff meetings
- Discuss how well the group is living the aspirations at your retrospective meetings
- Publicly give praise or a reward to someone who is particularly good at living your aspirations

As you move forward, it will be helpful to have objective measures in place to show how well your company is living the aspirations, and to uncover any areas where you need to make adjustments to your reinforcement activities. Some ideas for objective measures include:

- Periodically ask your staff to write down the aspirations during company meetings. The first few times, ask them to self-assess their ability to recall the aspirations. Then, have them submit their work so you can look for opportunities to improve.
- Set up a “hall test” — periodically ask people in the hall how they describe your aspirations with people outside of the company. Again, this should reveal some opportunities to improve.
- Send a simple electronic survey to your staff every six months or so. This is a particularly good tool to understand how employees perceive your aspirations. Send out the survey after you first communicate your aspirations in order to get a benchmark for later surveys. Ask your employees:
  - *How well they understand your aspirations*
  - *How well they are currently living each of the aspirations*
  - *How well others in the organization are currently living each of the aspirations*
  - *For their recommendations on ways to improve*

Living and reinforcing your aspirations is a phase that goes on endlessly, so be prepared to commit to your aspirations for the long haul.

# ROLES AND METRICS FOR COMPANY ASPIRATIONS

---

**THERE ARE** three primary roles in a company aspirations practice (this eBook contains checklists to help each of the people involved with the roles to initiate the practice):

- 1. The CEO and executive team**, who are responsible for 1) defining the mission, vision, values, and priorities, 2) expressing the aspirations, 3) ensuring that all employees understand the aspirations and are aligned, 4) living and reinforcing the aspirations, 5) reviewing the results from the aspirations work and identifying the next set of actions on a quarterly basis, and 6) changing the aspirations when necessary.
- 2. The facilitator** of the initial workshop, who is responsible for guiding the CEO and executive team during a one-day, off-site meeting to develop the company aspirations and for facilitating the quarterly retrospective meetings.
- 3. The administrator**, who is responsible for initiating and maintaining the program, monitoring progress, measuring results, and suggesting changes to the CEO and executive team. The administrator could be an executive assistant, someone in marketing, someone in human resources, or anyone else who has an interest and the skills necessary to fulfill the role.

## Metrics for Reviewing Progress

Metrics are extremely helpful for tracking performance and gaining insights that will help you improve your company aspiration practice efforts.

**The metrics for company aspirations fall under two broad categories:**

1. **Company aspirations implementation metrics**, which measure whether your employees and other stakeholders understand and are living the aspirations, such as:
  - » The percentage of your employees who accurately communicate your aspirations
  - » The rating that your employees give *themselves* for living out each of the company's aspirations
  - » The rating that your employees give *others* for living out each of the company's aspirations
  - » The percentage of your employees who give feedback ideas for improving the company's approach to aspirations (this is a measure of how engaged your employees are with the practice)
  - » The number of good ideas coming from employees that the company ultimately implements to help make progress.
  
2. **Company aspirations result metrics**, which measure whether the aspirations practice is leading to meaningful improvements to your customer perception, employee perception, and/or business, such as:
  - » Higher employee satisfaction scores (note: this may fall before it ultimately rises as you actively engage in your aspirations practice and separate people out who aren't a good fit with the company)
  - » Improved customer satisfaction scores
  - » Measures that indicate you are closer to achieving your vision



# COMPANY ASPIRATIONS

---

## CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

**“THE CHALLENGE** for most expansion stage CEOs involves finding the right balance between managing controlled chaos and providing operational structure. Company aspirations provide us with a framework to 1) create a compelling mission and vision that we all believe in, 2) flush out the core attributes/values of our senior leadership, and 3) put into place annual and quarterly milestones that keep us on track. The effect this has had on our organization is amazing to watch and experience. The senior leadership team is consistent in its decision making process, and we’ve become much better at hiring top talent. I highly recommend this framework for any CEO that is trying to engineer a truly ‘great’ company.”

**MICHAEL SHARMA**  
CEO, [Exinda Networks](#)



### CHALLENGE #1:

**Most companies don't do a very good job developing their aspirations, if they do it at all.** Make aspirations a top priority. Arrange to spend one day off-site to develop them, and appoint a facilitator to keep your team on track.

### CHALLENGE #2:

**You are confusing company aspirations with other aspirations.** You can have aspirations for any area of your company – products, business units, marketing, customer satisfaction, etc. However, the most important aspirations will be the *company* aspirations because they will serve as the overarching force aligning all other aspirations.

### CHALLENGE #3:

**You already have a mission statement.** A mission statement is an important part of the company aspirations practice, but it is only one component. To be as successful as possible, your aspirations must also include a vision statement, a values statement, and possibly a priorities statement. All of the statements must work in harmony with each other.

### CHALLENGE #4:

**You've already developed your company aspirations; however, it seems that most people in the organization don't understand them, or that it's taking a long time for the employees to model the behaviors.** Proper and effective communication is key. Strategize a plan of action for communicating the aspirations and then survey your employees on a consistent basis to assess their understanding. If you've communicated the aspirations and are living out the company's values yourself, be patient. Get into the habit of pointing out when employees' actions are in-line and out-of-line with the company's aspirations and encourage others to do the same. It takes time for the behaviors to become second nature.

#### CHALLENGE #5:

**You've done a good job communicating the aspirations, but there are some employees who just can't seem to get on board.** Take an honest look at your own behavior — as the company's leaders, are you living out the aspirations and serving as role models? If so, you may have a human resources issue. Employees who don't base their behaviors, activities, and decisions on your company aspirations — even though they know what those aspirations are — are not a good fit for your organization. Strive to ensure that all future hiring decisions take the aspirations into account. All potential employees should be evaluated for whether or not they can reasonably be expected to respect and live out the company aspirations.

#### CHALLENGE #6:

**You have one or more A-caliber individuals who are not living your aspirations.** This is where the rubber meets the road. If you can't get these people to live out your aspirations, you're going to have to weed them out; if you don't, you'll be sending a message to everyone else that you are not serious about the aspirations.

#### CHALLENGE #7:

**You don't have a formal plan in place for revisiting the aspirations.** Hold a retrospective meeting each quarter to review the results of your aspirations practice. Come out of the meeting with a clear action plan.

# GETTING STARTED WITH COMPANY ASPIRATIONS

---

**YOU CAN GET** to the point of expressing your aspirations in one week if you get started today. This eBook contains a number of documents that will help the people in each role perform their activities relatively quickly.

## **FOR THE CEO/EXECUTIVE TEAM**

- Checklist for the CEO/Executive Team (page 28)
- [Developing Your Company Aspirations Workbook](#) – for use during a one-day, off-site meeting/workshop

## **FOR FACILITATORS**

- Checklist for the Facilitator (page 29)
- [Developing Your Company Aspirations: A Facilitator's Guide](#) – for the one-day, off-site meeting/workshop

## **FOR THE ADMINISTRATOR**

- Checklist for the Administrator (page 29)

### *Further Reading:*

[The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive: A Leadership Fable](#),  
by Patrick Lencioni

# COMPANY ASPIRATIONS CHECKLIST FOR THE CEO AND EXECUTIVE TEAM

**Use this checklist to ensure that this effort will have the greatest probability of success.  
EACH AND EVERY MEMBER OF THE EXECUTIVE TEAM AGREES THAT:**

- We have all had a chance to weigh in on the company's aspirations during a full-day workshop and have had a thorough discussion.
- Each of us is committed to the company's aspirations.
- We have each had a chance to practice communicating the aspirations and are comfortable doing so.
- We understand how each of our people can contribute to the company's aspirations and are ready to have conversations with them.
- We are committed to living in a manner that is aligned with the company's aspirations.
- We have a good plan for communicating and reinforcing our aspirations and are committed to getting all of our employees up the learning curve.
- We are open to feedback from others that will help us get better aligned with the company's aspirations.
- We will review progress with respect to our aspirations every quarter, and we understand and support the objective measures that will be gathered to gauge progress.
- Each of us knows what to do to live and reinforce the company's aspirations.
- We have assigned and trained an administrator to ensure that this practice stays front and center and is accurately monitored.
- We are ready to go.

## COMPANY ASPIRATIONS CHECKLIST FOR THE FACILITATOR

- The room, flipcharts, pens, post-it notes, index cards, and other resources are all set for a productive day.
- I understand the material and know what we are trying to accomplish during the day.
- The team has had a thorough conversation and has clear ideas about their aspirations.
- Each of the members of the team is fully committed and aligned with the CEO/executive team checklist.

## COMPANY ASPIRATIONS CHECKLIST FOR THE ADMINISTRATOR

- The CEO and executive team have completed their checklist.
- The management team has a solid communication plan to get all the employees up the learning curve and I will ensure that it is well executed.
- I have a clear idea of the measures and measurement frequency that I will be responsible for gathering.
- I understand my responsibilities for keeping this practice and its results front and center with the CEO and executive team.

# ABOUT THIS EBOOK

---

**This eBook was created by OpenView Labs to help companies develop their company aspirations and strategies. It includes checklists and guides for the key roles involved to help your organization get started with the aspirations process.**

## **About OpenView Labs**

OpenView Labs is the strategic and operational consulting arm of [OpenView Venture Partners](#), a global Venture Capital fund that invests in expansion stage technology companies.

## **More Information**

Visit the [OpenView Labs website](#) for more ideas and inspiration for senior managers of technology companies.

To learn more about OpenView Labs or OpenView Venture Partners contact us directly at:

- (617) 478-7500

- [info@openviewpartners.com](mailto:info@openviewpartners.com)

**Feel free to republish excerpts from this eBook, as long as you link back to us for attribution. Also, it's OK to share the entire eBook with anyone you think would be interested. We'd be thrilled if you did.**

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

To view a copy of this license, visit [click here](#) or send a letter to:

Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.