

## STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF ORGANIZATIONAL VISION

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**Chief executives in one national and three regional samples participated in a study of the content and structure of their organizational visions. Executives clustered in three groups distinguished by differing orientations to derived factors. Cluster membership was found to be related to the rapidity of firm change, the amount of control the executives exercised over firms, and other variables. Vision showed a multifaceted structure, with factors for vision formulation, implementation, and innovative realism being most prominent. No differences in vision were found with respect to region or firm size, but the responses of executives differed from those obtained in an earlier study of business school deans.**

For the past several years, there has been growing interest in the concept of organizational vision. An inclusive discussion of the interest expressed in the concept might include the following: vision was the theme of a recent Academy of Management meeting; press analyses of presidential candidates' visions have become prominent; Nevada's license plate declares the state as distinguished by "125 years of vision"; and over a thousand articles and books on the topic have appeared in the academic press. Yet vision technically remains a "hypothetical construct" (Stone, 1978: 24)—one that is not directly observable and that seemingly carries meaning beyond any single or simple description (cf. Child, 1987; Kriger, 1990). Perhaps it is this combination of qualities that triggered Jonathan Swift's comment that "vision is the art of seeing things invisible."

Researchers have seen vision as important to leadership, strategy implementation, and change (cf. Doz & Prahalad, 1987; Hunt, 1991: 199-203; Kotter, 1990; Robbins & Duncan, 1988; Sashkin, 1988). Despite its seeming importance, vision is still not defined in a generally agreed upon

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manner, and statistically based empirical research on the phenomenon may be held back by the various ways in which vision has been treated. Some authors have suggested that vision is a form of leadership (Hunt, 1991; Sashkin, 1988) in which a "visionary leader" alters an organizational culture to bring others to understand, accept, and carry forward his or her plans for the organization. Others have viewed vision as one of the critical tasks top organizational leaders perform (Pearson, 1989; Phillips & Hunt, 1992) and as a demonstration of leadership competencies (Sashkin, 1992). Vision may also represent a pattern of organizational values that underlies a unique visionary pattern for an organization's future (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988, 1993; Hinings & Greenwood, 1988; Kouzes & Posner, 1987: 85).

One distinction found in the literature is that between vision itself—its process and content (Nanus, 1992; Robbins & Duncan, 1988; Sashkin, 1988; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989)—and the role that vision plays in transformational or visionary leadership (Conger, 1989; House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991; Tichy & Devanna, 1986). Research on visions themselves has generally focused on process aspects: development, articulation, communication, and implementation (Nanus, 1992; Quigley, 1993; Robbins & Duncan, 1988; Sashkin, 1992; Wall, Solum, & Sobol, 1992; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989). Researchers have, with a few exceptions, largely ignored the actual content of vision statements (Conger, 1992; Sashkin, 1988; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989). The distinction between vision content and process and visionary leadership is useful for purposes of analysis; however, it is clear that the two aspects are related in complex ways. In a number of case studies, vision process and content are embedded in accounts of visionary leadership (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989). The present study focused on vision content, or the elements of the visions executives articulate, and the relationships between a vision's content and its organizational and individual context.

The study reported in this article addressed the lack of research on the content of strategic visions by using a body of data suitable for multivariate analysis. Most prior research has used a case study approach (cf. Doz & Prahalad, 1987; Kotter, 1990; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989) that, although highly valuable and suggestive for further research, does not readily lend itself to statistical inferences. The reported study employed a self-evaluation instrument to examine the manner in which top executives themselves defined vision. Subsequently, we examined a series of issues. First, how do top executives appraise their visions: is there one general meaning to vision or do different groups of executives view vision content differently? With this information in place, the analysis moves to research questions concerning whether the self-evaluated structure of vision content is homogeneous, both over the sample of executives examined here and between this study and another that employed the same instrument to examine the content of the visions of business school deans. Finally, the study examines propositions concerning the relationship of vision to organizational characteristics, such as size and type, and with personal

characteristics, including vision horizon, perceived change in firm and industry, tenure in position, and desire for control.

The study provides a more complete understanding of the content of the visions of top executives, the existence of patterns of vision, and the relationship of those patterns to organizational and individual characteristics. This research is the first large-scale study that examines the content of top executives' visions. To our knowledge, this is the only body of data on executive vision large enough to allow use of multivariate analysis to test predictions. The study provides an empirical base for future studies' building of a model of the relationship between vision content and vision process and the effect of context on both content and process. The results offer implications for the future development of theory and practice.

## RESEARCH ISSUES

### **Ability of Executives to Articulate a Vision**

Substantial bodies of both popular (cf. Kotter, 1990; Labich, 1988; Nussbaum, Moskowitz, & Beam, 1985) and academic work (Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Sashkin, 1987; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989) support the notion that top strategic leaders can—or should be able to—clearly state their visions for their organizations. Although exceptionally basic, the issue of whether an executive can articulate a vision is an important one. By asking a sample of executives to articulate their visions in this study, we begin developing a database of visions typical of the executives and firms of interest to management researchers. These data provide a frame of reference for both present and future work. Since there are a variety of scholarly definitions of vision, and since those definitions are necessarily abstracted from the details that describe a single firm, it was useful to ask the executives to evaluate their own visions against the scholarly definitions. Doing so achieved three important advantages: (1) we could apply a research scale to actual visions, (2) we could then calibrate the scale on the basis of executives' preference for some definitions over others, and (3) we could avoid freezing the definition of vision prematurely along the lines of a single theory in order to do further research.

The vision evaluation instrument used in the present study was developed to allow self-assessments of vision statements. The instrument was derived in our previous effort to provide an extensive, rather than an intensive examination of vision (Larwood, Kriger, & Falbe, 1993).<sup>1</sup> Thus, the list of statements in this instrument contains a large number of dimensions that executives might or might not find applicable. The items included illustrate the broad range of thinking among researchers as to what constitutes vision. For example, items include "strategic" and "well-communicated" (Conger, 1989: 27), "long-term" and "focused" (Jacobs & Jaques,

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the authors cited, Paul Miesing was a member of the Vision Research Group, which developed this instrument.

1990; Kouzes & Posner, 1987: 87–89), “inspirational,” “widely accepted,” and “integrated with the visions of others” (Sashkin, 1988; Sims & Lorenzi, 1992: 118), and “understood” and “directs effort” (Nanus, 1992: 29). Some items were controversial. For example, Forward, Beach, Gray, and Quick (1991) and Hitt and Tyler (1991) saw risk propensity as important, but the latter were unable to demonstrate its importance in their study of executive decisions. A more complete discussion of the development of the items appears in the Methods section.

### **Patterns and Clusters of Vision Evaluations**

A second set of issues centers on the patterns of vision evaluations. Individual evaluations of vision statements for different firms can be expected to differ from one another. An interesting question was whether the executives studied would describe visions that clustered into regular patterns. Greenwood and Hinings (1988), following Miles and Snow (1978), McKelvey (1980), and Miller and Friesen (1980), argued that organizations are driven toward “design archetypes,” a typology that influences how an organization is viewed and that presumably influences both its future and the vision of those directing it. In this view, just two regular patterns can produce a number of unstable intermediate states in which interpretations of the organization are inconsistent with (“excursions from”) its objective situation. Several works support this conjecture, although there is little agreement as to what the patterns might be. Daft and Weick (1984) offered a view of organizations as “interpretation systems” looking at and reacting to their environments. In their two-dimensional view, an environment is either analyzable or not, and an organization is either active or passive in its reaction to its environment. Lawrence and Dyer (1983) and Miles and Snow (1978) also stated that strategic processes intended to cope with environmental uncertainty, such as organizational vision, may be limited in dimensions. Taken together, this previous work suggests that we might find four clusters of executives located in a two-dimensional space.

### **The Relation of Vision to Organizational Characteristics**

Related to the question of vision clustering are two parallel issues. First, how homogeneous is vision evaluation among firm types? If samples are drawn from predominantly small private firms in different regions, or from larger, predominantly public national firms, will they cluster in the same manner? Will differences be observed according to the regional area or the business sector in which a firm operates? Are there likely to be differences between the visions observed in business firms and those observed in other types of organizations? Greenwood, Hinings, and Brown (1990) argued that the nature of an organization influences its strategic processes and that professional partnerships in particular operate differently from corporate entities. In their work with accounting firms, they found that consensus building was more important to partnerships (which they dubbed “P<sup>2</sup>-form” organizations, to denote both professional and partnership characteristics) than it would likely be in a same-sized cor-

poration, and strategic rational analysis was less important. The present study allowed investigation of vision differences by business sector, thus providing a mechanism for determining whether the findings of Greenwood and colleagues carry over to vision. At the same time, we were able to compare the findings of this study with our previous work (Larwood et al., 1993) on the visions of deans of colleges of business administration. The deans studied, who had often been business practitioners, needed to interpret issues and mediate between their faculties and the business community, and the faculties themselves were attempting to provide knowledge to their students that would be useful in business. We therefore suggest that the results for the deans will be similar to those for the business executives. The present study allowed us to follow up the previous work and test the opposing predictions that might be made on the basis of the research of Greenwood, Larwood, and their colleagues.

A second issue relates to the effect of organization size on executive vision. There has been speculation to the effect that the chief executives of major firms have fundamentally different visions from those of the executives of smaller firms, entrepreneurial ventures, and nonprofit organizations (Sashkin, 1990, personal communication). Greenwood and Hinings (1988) suggested that there are two basic patterns of vision. Far-flung corporate entities with large, loosely coupled structures will more closely match one pattern, and small, entrepreneurial organizations with more organic central management groups will conform to a second pattern. Other observers have noted that modest unit size is more conducive to executive communication and interaction (Kouzes & Posner, 1987: 154–155) and that vision must be suited to the situation of a given organization (Nanus, 1992: 29).

Although these observations would suggest that the size of an organization plays an important role in explaining the clustering of vision evaluations, there is a counter view, typified by Senge's (1990: 231–232) suggestion that "systems thinking"—the perception that one cannot change or influence a system—is destructive to the implementation and spread of vision. Although large organizations might otherwise have large and diffuse systems to overcome, they may have been forced to counter the difficulties Senge highlighted by breaking their businesses into units that are perceived as individually small. In contrast, there is often less need for dividing a small organization, and the narrow control structure may be perceived as very difficult to affect because its size allows it to operate tightly. In this view, actual size is less important than the manner in which it is perceived, and organizations of different sizes, or with other differing characteristics, may have developed systems to compensate for difficulties they might otherwise have faced.

The issues of organization type and size give rise to the following research questions: Are the vision descriptions of different groups of executives distinguishable? Are clusters of executives distinguishable from one another by the patterns of their visions? Are the vision descriptions of business executives and other executives distinguishable?

## The Relation of Vision to Personal Characteristics

The works of Jaques (1977, 1986) and Das (1987) suggest that executives who are older and at senior organizational levels tend to be more cognitively advanced than younger executives and to view their work as extending over longer time periods; hence, senior executives attempt to set organizational directions that allow for broad trends. Since most of the respondents in our study were at the top level of their organizations, we examined other individual variables likely to be associated with differences in the content of visions. Although the present study was limited in scope by the effective maximum length of the survey instrument, it was possible to examine the relationship between vision and four types of individual and perceptual characteristics: vision horizon, perception of the speed of change in an organization and its industry, tenure in a firm and a present position, and perception of present level of control and preference for more or less control. Together, these variables provided both contrast and connection to the organization-level variables of interest.

Kotter asserted that a successful visionary leader produces change and that visions generally extend 3 to 20 years into the future (1990: 39). We expected an association between time horizon and elements of vision since change itself reduces executives' ability to plan with certainty for longer periods. Perceptions of rapid change in a firm and an industry are likely to be associated with visions that are action-oriented, innovative, and responsive to competition (Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992; Daft & Weick, 1984; Kouzes & Posner, 1987). Furthermore, perceived rapid change in a firm is more salient to executives than perceived change in an industry and is likely to have a stronger association with vision content.

An extensive body of research exists on the effects of demographic characteristics on elements of leadership (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Pfeffer, 1983). Related studies have indicated that long tenure is associated with resistance to change and a narrowing of perspective (Pfeffer, 1983; Staw & Ross, 1980). Long tenure in a position is likely to be linked to such elements of vision as conservatism and focus rather than to openness to change.

Several investigators have posited that one of the hallmarks of vision is the ability to share control and to create the feeling of self-control in subordinates (Kouzes & Posner, 1987: 168; Sims & Lorenzi, 1992: 296-297). Westley and Mintzberg (1989: 66, 77) saw a visionary leader as both empowering and empowered by the public. Again, this idea has a paradoxical quality to it, since top executives have *de jure* control of their organizations. Also, the more successful an executive is in inducing others to embrace his or her vision and move it rapidly forward, the greater the individual's tendency to want to reassert and maintain control in the rapidly changing circumstances that may result, particularly if the changes are not entirely felicitous (cf. Greene, 1975).

These relationships are investigated through tests of the following predictions.

*Hypothesis 1: Differences in executives' vision content, as measured by cluster membership, are related to length of vision horizon.*

*Hypothesis 2: Differences in vision content are associated with perceived change in a firm and an industry; the greater the perceived change, the more likely the vision will be evaluated as action-oriented, innovative, and responsive to competition.*

*Hypothesis 3: Differences in vision content are associated with tenure in a present position and firm; the longer the tenure of an executive, the more likely his or her vision will be evaluated as conservative and not changing.*

*Hypothesis 4: Differences in vision content are associated with executives' perceptions of their control and their need for control.*

Two points should be reemphasized in respect to these predictions. First, despite a large number of discursive articles, there are few empirical studies in this field. Thus, we formulate explicit propositions with caution at this point. Second, we used a broad primary instrument, intentionally reflecting the lack of agreement and definition among vision researchers. Rather than fix prematurely on and investigate a single construct, we designed this study to allow executives to tell us how they defined vision and to outline in broad strokes the manner in which it functions.

This study is potentially important in that it may offer empirical evidence as to how one can simplify and dimensionalize the structure of vision. This evidence would allow researchers to continue probing the manner in which alternative visions might be effectively put in place and how their effects can be traced with appropriate instrumentation. Evidence regarding the limitations of the applicability of particular notions of vision or the relationship between vision and personal characteristics would further expand understanding of vision and perhaps suggest how potential executives might be educated.

## METHODS

### Samples

Four samples of participating firms were obtained for the study, three of which were regional. To ensure broad representation, we decided to ex-

amine firms based in a medium-sized northeastern U.S. city and in two large metropolitan areas, one in the Southeast and one on the West Coast. The executives of approximately 250 firms in each location were asked to participate, subject to the following constraints: (1) firms had to be locally headquartered and (2) not listed on a major stock exchange, and they had have (3) at least ten employees and (4) sales or revenues over \$1 million but under \$100 million; (5) we also ensured that not more than ten firms in a sample could be from any single business sector, such as retail or construction. Within those constraints, selection was alphabetic. A business directory purchased from the publisher of a regional business newspaper provided firm contact lists for each regional sample. In most cases, the chief executives were listed in the directories, and we addressed them directly.

We constructed a fourth, national sample in conjunction with a mailing list research firm. The resulting sample consisted of independent firms across the United States with annual sales over \$100 million but under \$1 billion. Taken together, the four samples provided us with a mix of respondents running firms differing by both region and size. To ensure that the survey was completed by each firm's top executive, we asked that a business card and information concerning the respondent's position be returned.

Contacts were asked to participate in a study of insight helpful in assisting future management and were promised anonymity. We obtained the participation of 98 of 226 individuals in the Northeast, 90 of 243 on the West Coast, 87 of 251 in the Southeast, and 56 of 248 nationally. The total number of respondents was 331, representing a 34 percent response rate for the four groups combined. Information on the respondents and their organizations appears in Table 1. To the extent permitted by the data available, we compared respondents and nonrespondents within samples and found no significant differences. The comparison is limited to published data, so there may be other differences that could not be discerned. We made only an approximate check on each respondent's position; chief operating and chief executive officers both sometimes stated that they were one level from the top, presumably indicating that a CEO or board chairperson, respectively, occupied the top position. Over 93 percent of the respondents stated they were at the top of an organization, and another 5.5 percent stated they were in the number two position.

Among the samples, it might be noted that the national firms were 10 to 20 times larger than the regional firms and had larger management teams; the national firms were also substantially older and more likely to be publicly held. Executives responding in the national sample were less likely to be founders or to have financial control and had spent less time in their present positions.

### **Vision Instrument**

The present study adapted the vision survey procedure developed by the Vision Research Group (Larwood et al., 1993) and used to examine the

TABLE 1  
Characteristics of Samples<sup>a</sup>

Variables <sup>b</sup>	Northeast <sup>c</sup>		West Coast		Southeast		National	
	Means	s.d.	Means	s.d.	Means	s.d.	Means	s.d.
Number of levels below CEO	.39 <sup>d,e</sup>	.94	.13 <sup>e</sup>	.43	.23 <sup>e</sup>	.86	.55 <sup>d</sup>	.87
Firm tenure	174.5	119.0	173.1	119.9	145.6	101.9	176.9	129.4
Position tenure	109.8 <sup>d</sup>	88.4	113.5 <sup>d</sup>	87.8	104.9 <sup>d</sup>	75.7	43.4 <sup>e</sup>	47.0
Total annual sales	\$38.7 <sup>e</sup>	81.6	\$38.1 <sup>e</sup>	110.4	\$20.9 <sup>e</sup>	37.6	\$461.7 <sup>d</sup>	283.6
Number of employees	137.9 <sup>e</sup>	442.4	153.7 <sup>e</sup>	373.4	106.6 <sup>e</sup>	181.9	2,275.9 <sup>d</sup>	2,776.6
Firm age			35.04 <sup>e</sup>	42.20	20.96 <sup>e</sup>	19.74	58.52 <sup>d</sup>	42.23
Size of top management team			5.01 <sup>e</sup>	2.70	4.63 <sup>e</sup>	2.32	9.48 <sup>d</sup>	7.34
Founder			1.41 <sup>e</sup>	0.50	1.44 <sup>e</sup>	0.50	1.93 <sup>d</sup>	0.26
Controlling interest			1.45 <sup>e</sup>	0.50	1.52 <sup>e</sup>	0.50	1.96 <sup>d</sup>	0.19
Firm publicly owned			1.92 <sup>d</sup>	0.28	1.85 <sup>d</sup>	0.36	1.38 <sup>e</sup>	0.49
N		98		90		87		56

<sup>a</sup> In any row, means not having the same superscript (d,e) differ from one another at  $p < .05$  or better by a Duncan Multiple Range test for unequal sample sizes. The test was conducted after analysis of variance and corrected for the number of comparisons.

<sup>b</sup> Tenure was given in months. Annual sales was in millions of dollars. Firm age was in years. The last three variables were coded yes = 1, no = 2.

<sup>c</sup> This group received fewer questions.

vision content of business school deans. In the earlier study, each respondent described his or her vision for an organization in a single sentence. Thereafter, respondents used a 26-item list to evaluate their own vision statements. The items on the self-evaluation list were representative of the many definitions and descriptions of vision available in the literature; the study intentionally avoided focusing on or selecting any one theoretical perspective. As a result, the instrument included items from a variety of dimensions; some of those items were likely to be construed as opposite to one another. We kept the instrument as brief as possible in order to increase responses from top-level executives.

Similarly, in the present study we asked corporate chief executives to write a brief, one-sentence statement of their visions for their firms. In order to directly evaluate the content of their statements, we also asked them to analyze the statements by applying 26 items from a list we provided. Items included risky, action-oriented, inspirational, and bottom-line-oriented; Table 2 gives the complete list. Each item was accompanied by a five-point scale anchored by "very little" (1) and "very much" (5).

### **Organizational Variables**

The present study also asked each respondent about the role of his or her vision in the organization ("To what extent do others at the top of your firm share this vision?" "How important is organizational vision in your corporation?"), and about the organization's situation as he or she perceived it ("How rapidly are changes occurring in your firm?" "How rapidly are changes occurring in the industry?" "In what industries is your firm?"). Additional questions were added to the questionnaire in the national, West Coast, and Southeast samples regarding firm age, top management team size, whether ownership was public or private, and whether the executive was a founder or had a controlling interest in the firm.

### **Individual Variables**

Chief executives were also asked to provide personal background information that might be of use in understanding their vision, including tenure in their position, tenure in the firm, and functional background. In addition, we asked how much control they exercised in their organizations, how much control they would like to exercise, and how far into the future their visions for their firms extended.

All scaled questions used five-point bidirectional scales, a compromise between the need for detailed responses and the short periods of time for which the executives' attention could be captured.

## **RESULTS**

All but three respondents provided a written vision statement. The responses indicate that these executives felt they knew what a vision was and that theirs could stand up to analysis. Examples are "Be the single source software provider to the financial services industry" and "Double

in size within five years." There is no way to determine whether some of those who chose not to respond to the survey made that choice because they did not have visions or felt they did not understand the term. Nevertheless, the results provide strong support for the assumption that a good proportion of top executives feel comfortable with the concept of vision. The Appendix gives further examples of the vision statements.

Respondents were asked to complete an evaluation of their own vision statements using the 26-item self-evaluation list. Each item was rated from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much); Table 2 gives mean ratings. Among items receiving the most affirmative responses were action-oriented, responsive to competition, long-term, and purposeful. Risky, conservative, and difficult to describe received lower evaluations. Some of the items may be subject to a social desirability bias; however, the items were taken from the literature and reflect a positive characterization of vision in theoretical and applied discussions.

Factor analysis provides a mechanism for simplification by identifying statistical commonality across a list of items. The analysis of the 26 vision self-evaluation items with subsequent varimax rotation yielded seven factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 accounting for 58 percent of total item variance. The results of a scree test indicated that the number of factors was appropriate for the analysis. As defined by the items loading most highly on them, the factors carrying the largest eigenvalues might be described as follows: vision formulation (factor 1) included items indicating a strategic emphasis; implementation (factor 2) indicated successful communication of a vision; and innovative realism (factor 3) showed tactical responsiveness to both internal and external events. Factors with fewer items loading on them were general (factor 4) indicating the items general and difficult to describe; detailed (factor 5); risk taking (factor 6), including both risky and rejection of conservative; and profit-oriented (factor 7), including bottom-line-oriented. Table 3 gives factor analysis results, and Table 4 gives correlations between the factors and the variables.

Respondents who were high on factor 1, vision formulation, reported that vision was important in their organizations, as the correlation of the factor with the importance of vision shows (Pearson's  $r_{266} = .37, p < .01$ , two-tailed test). Executives high on factor 2, implementation, were more likely than others to assert that changes were rapidly occurring in their firms ( $r_{270} = .14, p < .05$ ), that their senior executives strongly accepted their visions ( $r_{244} = .36, p < .01$ ), that they exercised a high degree of control over the businesses ( $r_{269} = .24, p < .01$ ), and that their visions extended far into the future ( $r_{265} = .15, p < .05$ ). Executives high on factor 3, innovative realism, were likely to respond that changes were rapidly occurring in their firms ( $r_{270} = .23, p < .01$ ), that great importance was attached to their visions in their organizations ( $r_{266} = .23, p < .01$ ), and that their senior executives strongly accepted their visions ( $r_{244} = .23, p < .01$ ). Those high on factor 4, general, were less likely to assert that

**TABLE 2**  
**Self-Evaluation Items<sup>a</sup>**

Vision Descriptors	Means	s.d.	t
Action-oriented	4.43	0.85	24.53***
Responsive to competition	4.24	0.84	26.94***
Long-term	4.23	0.91	24.52***
Purposeful	4.16	0.79	26.30***
Bottom-line-oriented	4.15	0.85	24.53***
Product of leadership	4.15	0.84	24.51***
Focused	4.05	0.88	21.41***
Strategic	4.02	0.83	22.13***
Flexible	4.01	0.86	21.40***
Planned	3.98	0.87	20.52***
Changing	3.90	1.02	16.11***
Directs effort	3.89	0.84	18.85***
Describes what is taking place	3.88	0.99	15.70***
Innovative	3.82	0.98	15.00***
Integrated with visions of others	3.79	0.96	14.89***
Widely accepted	3.72	0.91	14.40***
Inspirational	3.69	1.00	12.29***
Well-communicated	3.66	0.91	13.12***
Understood	3.65	0.89	13.24***
Tactical	3.52	0.94	10.04***
Detailed	3.32	1.09	5.16***
Formalized	3.18	1.08	3.08**
General	2.98	1.03	-0.33
Risky	2.86	1.20	-2.06*
Conservative	2.74	1.13	-4.16***
Difficult to describe	2.38	1.12	-9.89***

<sup>a</sup> Degrees of freedom = 313-327. A test against the scale midpoint implies that evaluations of a truly neutral term will be normally distributed about the midpoint. As this cannot be established here, findings are interpretable relative to one another rather individually. Thus, for example, risky is rejected relative to items above the scale midpoint, but executives may merely have given it a low evaluation to contrast it with preferred items.

\* $p < .05$ , two-tailed test

\*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed test

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed test

changes were rapidly occurring in their firms ( $r_{270} = -.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and somewhat less likely to see importance attached to their visions in their organizations ( $r_{266} = -.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Individuals high on factor 5, detailed, more often had controlling interests in their firms ( $r_{187} = -.23$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Factor 6, risk taking, correlated negatively with firm age ( $r = -.21$ ) but positively with private ownership ( $r_{187} = .19$ ) and with the assertion that changes were rapidly occurring in a firm ( $r_{270} = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The executives who were higher than others on factor 6 also had worked for shorter times at their firms, but they were more likely to have controlling financial interests ( $r_{270} = -.17$ ,  $r_{187} = -.26$ , respectively;  $p < .01$ ). Factor 7 executives (profit-oriented) were more likely to be working for publicly

TABLE 3  
Factor Loadings of Vision Descriptors<sup>a</sup>

Descriptors	Factor 1: Vision Formulation	Factor 2: Implemen- tation	Factor 3: Innovative Realism	Factor 4: General	Factor 5: Detailed	Factor 6: Risk Taking	Factor 7: Profit- Oriented
Action-oriented	.16	.22	<b>.48</b>	-.16	-.03	.35	.08
Responsive to competition	.05	.20	<b>.52</b>	-.01	-.04	.05	.32
Long-term	<b>.77</b>	.14	.05	.01	-.04	.03	-.16
Purposeful	<b>.50</b>	.19	<b>.52</b>	-.14	-.07	-.05	.18
Bottom-line-oriented	.08	.09	.12	.03	.08	.08	<b>.78</b>
Product of leadership	<b>.61</b>	.27	.33	-.04	.04	.04	.02
Focused	.38	.19	.30	-.38	.32	-.15	-.04
Strategic	<b>.51</b>	.08	<b>.41</b>	-.31	.04	.14	.18
Flexible	-.01	.02	<b>.60</b>	.21	-.06	-.09	.01
Planned	<b>.79</b>	.26	.12	-.13	.07	-.04	.07
Changing	.09	-.15	<b>.43</b>	-.09	.06	.11	-.02
Directs effort	.23	.27	<b>.45</b>	-.01	.28	-.09	.09
Describes what is taking place	.25	.36	.28	.07	.25	-.09	-.24
Innovative	.09	.03	<b>.53</b>	-.06	.16	<b>.48</b>	-.20
Integrated with visions of others	.34	.40	<b>.44</b>	.04	.08	.15	-.21
Widely accepted	.16	<b>.84</b>	.01	-.01	-.04	-.00	.06
Inspirational	.32	.22	<b>.43</b>	-.11	.11	.36	-.32
Well-communicated	.23	<b>.80</b>	.12	-.09	.15	.02	.07
Understood	.30	<b>.78</b>	.07	-.00	.12	.04	.11
Tactical	-.03	.14	<b>.44</b>	-.35	.35	.08	.27
Detailed	.12	.08	.04	-.04	<b>.84</b>	.16	.03
Formalized	<b>.62</b>	.16	-.14	-.03	<b>.40</b>	.07	.18
General	.09	.10	.07	<b>.78</b>	-.09	-.06	-.02
Risky	-.10	-.05	.04	.12	.14	<b>.75</b>	.14
Conservative	-.22	.00	-.00	.42	<b>.43</b>	-.53	-.02
Difficult to describe	-.03	-.44	-.09	<b>.59</b>	.16	.18	.18
Variance on factor	25.5%	7.8%	6.1%	5.3%	4.9%	4.3%	4.3%

<sup>a</sup> Loadings stronger than ±.4 have been highlighted.

**TABLE 4**  
**Correlations Between Factors and Other Variables**

Variables	Factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Firm age	.06	.10	-.06	.03	-.00	-.21**	-.08
Annual sales	.04	-.10	.07	.04	-.06	-.06	.03
Number of employees	.06	.01	.04	.02	-.11	-.06	-.02
Speed of industry change	-.04	-.08	.09	.09	.02	.10	.01
Speed of firm change	.08	.14*	.23**	-.15*	-.06	.34**	.04
Senior executives agree with vision	.11	.36**	.23**	.04	.12	-.07	-.05
Importance of vision	.37**	.10	.23**	-.15*	.09	.10	-.01
Firm publicly owned	-.10	.03	.12	.04	.04	.19**	-.17*
Controlling interest	.03	.00	-.12	.00	-.23**	-.26**	.04
Amount of control	.10	.24**	.10	-.06	.06	.07	.13*
Amount of control desired	.02	.10	-.06	.05	.11	-.00	.17**
Firm tenure	.02	-.01	-.06	.12	.04	-.17**	-.07
Vision horizon <sup>a</sup>	.10	.15*	.04	.06	.05	.02	.02

<sup>a</sup> Expressed in months.

\*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed test

\*\*  $p < .01$ , two-tailed test

held firms ( $r_{266} = -.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and they asserted that they exercised strong control over their businesses ( $r_{269} = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and would like more control ( $r_{266} = .17$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Overall, these responses appear to confirm that the executives were able to articulate and to evaluate their visions.<sup>2</sup> Although it is tempting to conclude as well from the results shown in Tables 2 and 3 that particular aspects of vision are universally important (such as action-oriented) and that others are not (such as risky), such a conclusion is premature. It may be that one or more groups of executives disagree with the need to express an action orientation in a vision and that others consider riskiness as important. That possibility is examined in the section below.

<sup>2</sup> It is of interest that the factors derived from the 26-item instrument are related to the content of the brief written vision statements. We content-analyzed those statements independently of the factors using the same process described in Larwood and colleagues (1993). For the sake of convenience, we then placed content items in one of four overall groups: focus level (for example, national, international), knowledge ("apply a unique technology"), growth ("double in size within five years"), and vigor ("prosper," "be the strongest"). Both positive (growth) and negative (decline) items could appear in the same category, making the content analysis an indirect tool at best. Nonetheless, mentioning growth in a vision statement correlated positively with factor 2, implementation ( $r_{268} = .12$ ,  $p = .048$ , two-tailed test), and factor 7, profit-oriented ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and negatively with factor 6, risk taking ( $r = -.14$ ,  $p = .025$ ). Vigor correlated positively with factor 3, innovative realism ( $r = .18$ ,  $p = .004$ ), but negatively with factor 5, detailed ( $r = -.20$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Focus level correlated positively with innovative realism ( $r = .12$ ,  $p = .046$ ).

## Homogeneity of Description

The research questions asked whether executives generally describe vision in the same manner. In particular, are their responses distinguishable by sample membership, do the self-evaluations differ by cluster, and are the responses of the executives studied here distinguishable from those of the business school deans studied earlier (Larwood et al., 1993)? To answer these questions, we subjected the self-evaluations of the vision statements to a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) in which the 26 items served as repeated within-subject measures and sample was an independent variable. We found that neither sample ( $F_{3,268} = .08$ ) nor the interaction of sample with self-evaluation ( $F_{75,6700} = 1.28, p > .05$ ) was significant. On this basis, the answer to the first research question appears to be that the vision evaluations do not differ with sample. Thus, it seemed statistically acceptable to combine the respondent samples for subsequent analyses.

The second, related question concerns clustering: Can the executives be classified into two or more readily identifiable groups, or do they form a single group? To begin answering this question, we subjected the 26 vision self-description items to a cluster analysis using the SPSSPC+ "quick cluster" routine (Norusis, 1988a). The analysis sought the smallest number of clusters in which each of the 26 items generally provoked different answers from individuals in the different clusters. A four-cluster solution proved to be the simplest structure approaching this goal; all items except one (risky) distinguished between the resulting clusters by an analysis of variance of the individual items ( $p < .05$  or better; see Table 5).

Table 5 provides the item means for the first three clusters. Members of cluster 1, with 22 executives, appear to take a more conservative stance than members of the other two clusters, evaluating their visions as more difficult to describe and conservative and strongly rejecting a description of their visions as formalized. They were generally less likely to accept most of the remaining descriptors. The 97 members of cluster 2 most often expressed ideas contrary to those of the members of cluster 1. They rejected the notion that their visions were difficult to describe or conservative, and they embraced descriptors like action-oriented, product of leadership, responsive to competition, and purposeful, seemingly seeing their visions in strong terms. Cluster 3, with 210 executives, generally fell between the other two clusters. Members of this cluster considered their visions as highest on action-oriented and long-term and lowest on difficult to describe. However, for each of these descriptors the means of this moderate group fell between those of the members of clusters 1 and 2. Finally, it should be noted that a fourth cluster, containing a single member, was dropped from this analysis as uninterpretable.

To determine the meaning of the clusters, we examined potential correlations between indexes of cluster membership and the factor scores resulting from the earlier factor analysis. For the indexes, three dummy vari-

**TABLE 5**  
**Three-Cluster Solution**

Descriptors	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Means	Group Means <sup>a</sup>
Action-oriented	3.50 <sup>d</sup>	4.78 <sup>b</sup>	4.36 <sup>c</sup>	4.43	4.21
Responsive to competition	3.77 <sup>c</sup>	4.72 <sup>b</sup>	4.07 <sup>c</sup>	4.24	4.19
Long-term	3.00 <sup>d</sup>	4.73 <sup>b</sup>	4.12 <sup>c</sup>	4.22	3.95
Bottom-line-oriented	3.77 <sup>c</sup>	4.38 <sup>b</sup>	4.10 <sup>c</sup>	4.16	4.08
Product of leadership	2.77 <sup>d</sup>	4.77 <sup>b</sup>	4.01 <sup>c</sup>	4.15	3.85
Purposeful	2.86 <sup>d</sup>	4.68 <sup>b</sup>	4.05 <sup>c</sup>	4.15	3.86
Focused	2.77 <sup>d</sup>	4.68 <sup>b</sup>	3.91 <sup>c</sup>	4.06	3.79
Strategic	2.55 <sup>d</sup>	4.53 <sup>b</sup>	3.93 <sup>c</sup>	4.02	3.67
Flexible	3.73 <sup>c</sup>	4.30 <sup>b</sup>	3.92 <sup>c</sup>	4.02	3.98
Planned	2.27 <sup>d</sup>	4.56 <sup>b</sup>	3.89 <sup>c</sup>	3.98	3.57
Directs effort	2.71 <sup>d</sup>	4.47 <sup>b</sup>	3.76 <sup>c</sup>	3.90	3.65
Changing	3.23 <sup>c</sup>	4.13 <sup>b</sup>	3.88 <sup>b</sup>	3.90	3.75
Describes what is taking place	2.75 <sup>d</sup>	4.43 <sup>b</sup>	3.74 <sup>c</sup>	3.88	3.64
Innovative	2.64 <sup>d</sup>	4.27 <sup>b</sup>	3.75 <sup>c</sup>	3.82	3.55
Integrated with visions of others	2.32 <sup>d</sup>	4.47 <sup>b</sup>	3.63 <sup>c</sup>	3.79	3.47
Widely accepted	2.68 <sup>d</sup>	4.25 <sup>b</sup>	3.58 <sup>c</sup>	3.72	3.50
Inspirational	2.27 <sup>d</sup>	4.40 <sup>b</sup>	3.50 <sup>c</sup>	3.68	3.39
Understood	2.36 <sup>d</sup>	4.30 <sup>b</sup>	3.49 <sup>c</sup>	3.65	3.38
Well-communicated	2.41 <sup>d</sup>	4.39 <sup>b</sup>	3.45 <sup>c</sup>	3.65	3.42
Tactical	2.68 <sup>d</sup>	4.05 <sup>b</sup>	3.36 <sup>c</sup>	3.52	3.36
Detailed	2.82 <sup>c</sup>	3.92 <sup>b</sup>	3.11 <sup>c</sup>	3.32	3.28
Formalized	1.77 <sup>d</sup>	3.83 <sup>b</sup>	3.04 <sup>c</sup>	3.19	2.88
General	3.45 <sup>b</sup>	2.83 <sup>b</sup>	3.01 <sup>b</sup>	2.99	3.10
Risky	2.82 <sup>b</sup>	2.99 <sup>b</sup>	2.81 <sup>b</sup>	2.86	2.87
Conservative	3.33 <sup>b</sup>	2.57 <sup>c</sup>	2.75 <sup>bc</sup>	2.74	2.88
Difficult to describe	3.14 <sup>b</sup>	1.87 <sup>d</sup>	2.52 <sup>c</sup>	2.38	2.51
Overall N	22	97	210		

<sup>a</sup> Each cluster as weighted equally.

<sup>b,c,d</sup> Within any row, means with different superscripts differ at  $p < .01$  or better by a two-tailed Duncan Multiple Range test for unequal sample sizes (Norusis, 1988b: B-159). The test was performed subsequent to analysis of variance and corrected for the number of comparisons made.

ables were constructed, each coded 1 for membership in a particular cluster or 0 for membership in all others. Because the indexes are not independent, the new variables were negatively related to one another, and we describe only cluster-by-factor correlations better than  $p < .001$  below. As Table 6 indicates, members of cluster 1 were primarily distinguished by being low on the factors vision formulation, implementation, and innovative realism. Members of cluster 2 were generally high on those same factors and were also high on the factor detailed. Executives in cluster 3 were low on implementation but were not as greatly distinguished from the other clusters by the remaining factors. Overall, on this basis, it seems ap-

TABLE 6  
Correlations of Clusters with Factors

Clusters <sup>a</sup>	Factor 1:	Factor 2:	Factor 3:	Factor 4:	Factor 5:	Factor 6:	Factor 7:
	Vision Formulation	Implementation	Innovative Realism	General	Detailed	Risk Taking	Profit-Oriented
1	-.48***	-.26***	-.29***	.14*	-.11	-.10	.00
2	.34***	.40***	.35***	-.20*	.28***	.11	.02
3	-.07	-.24***	-.16*	.12*	-.18*	-.06	-.02

<sup>a</sup> All values are two-tailed Pearson's correlations between factor scores and indexes of cluster membership (1 = member of the cluster indicated, 0 = member of any other cluster). Because of the indexes, rows are not independent of one another.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

appropriate to interpret the visions of the members of cluster 1 as less systematic than others' and as representing closely held, cautious, individual thinking. Cluster 2 visions appear to be more dynamic, systematic, and widely accepted. The visions of the members of cluster 3 are more difficult to distinguish statistically, but they appear to be less widely accepted despite being otherwise unremarkable. Together, these results provide an affirmative answer to the question of whether there are distinguishable groups of executives.

As noted, an analysis of variance of the self-evaluation responses prompted by the first research question found no differences attributable to sample. However, we can now revisit the first question, whether cluster membership varies with sample. A nonparametric examination showed that the distributions of the samples into the clusters were approximately similar ( $\chi^2_9 = 5.35$ , n.s.). Follow-up analyses revealed that more direct indicators of size (number of employees and firm budget) were likewise not statistically related to cluster membership. Finally, it is of interest to note that the industry in which a business operated (broken into nine major dummy-coded categories, including finance/banking, accounting, manufacturing, and service) similarly played no significant role in cluster membership.

Given the finding that the sample membership of the executives does not relate to their vision self-evaluations, it was of interest to compare the current results with those obtained in our previous study of business school deans (Larwood et al., 1993). We compared the present results and those of the earlier study using both a MANOVA and a cluster analysis. We used the self-evaluation data from the earlier study as a fifth sample, providing a total of 383 comparable cases. The results of a MANOVA for the five samples indicated that, as with the executives alone, the main effect for sample was nonsignificant ( $F_{4,378} = .40$ ), and the main effect for the 26 items was highly reliable ( $F_{25,9450} = 135.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast to the findings within the four business samples alone, however, the interaction of sample with the 26 items now proved significant as well ( $F_{100,9450} = 2.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A further examination, directly comparing the combined business samples as one group with the deans as a second group, yielded a similar result. In this second analysis, the magnitude of the interaction effect climbed substantially ( $F_{25,9525} = 5.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ). It would seem reasonable to conclude in response to the third research question that the information the deans provided using the same format used in the present study cannot be considered homogeneous with the data from the business executives.

To determine further the extent to which the cluster analysis of self-evaluation items for executives fit the data for deans, we performed an analysis in which the cluster means (first three columns of Table 5) for the executives were used as the initial classification cluster centers for the deans. The results of an analysis of variance for each item showed that five items were no longer capable of distinguishing between the clusters ( $p >$

.05). Put another way, the cluster pattern for the executives was similar to but did not fit that for the business school deans.

On visual inspection (see Figure 1), the results of the two groups show an apparently very close fit with one another, providing a pattern that might be readily identified as "vision." We used two-tailed *t*-tests to compare the means of the executives for each of the items with those of the deans in order to examine the specific items contributing to the differences. Despite the seemingly obvious similarity, 14 of the 26 items were significantly different for the two groups. These items loaded on six of the seven factors described by Table 3.

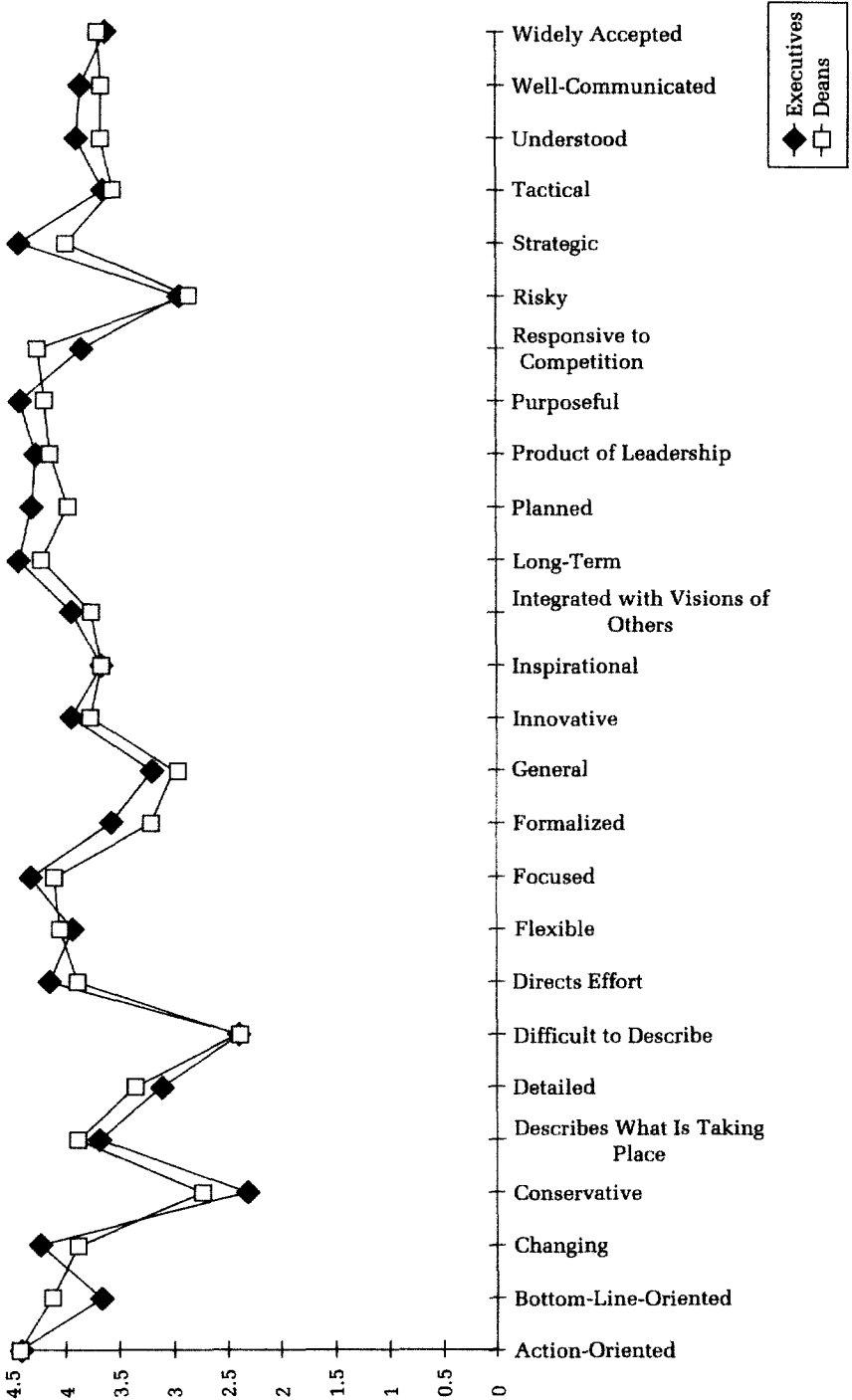
Overall, these results lead to two conclusions: (1) there are identifiable clusters among the self-evaluations of organizational leaders' visions and (2) the nature of the clusters does not differ among the business executive samples studied here. However, the results suggest the need to use caution before developing any universal concept of vision. We found substantial, if subtle, differences in regard to both the individual items and their patterns when we compared the business executives in this study and the business school deans studied earlier.

### **Influence of Individual Characteristics**

Our hypotheses concern relationships between the content of visions as measured by cluster membership, and individual variables. The first predicts that the time horizon of visions will be related to cluster membership. Executives stated that their visions extended over five years, with a range of 6 months to more than 20 years ( $\bar{x} = 64.14$  months, *s.d.* = 63.76 months), approximately matching the prediction of Kotter (1990). Executives further stated that their firms had held to their current visions for over 6 years, with a range of from 3 months to 20 years ( $\bar{x} = 74.28$  months, *s.d.* = 79.47 months). These two measures were correlated with one another ( $r_{312} = .19$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Executives who were looking further than others were more likely to be members of cluster 2 ( $r_{318} = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ , two-tailed test). Since cluster 2 was identified in the previous section as associated with the vision formulation factor (as well as with implementation, innovative realism, and detailed), this pattern appears consistent with Hypothesis 1.

The second hypothesis concerns a relationship between perceived speed of change and cluster membership. Respondents separately evaluated speed of change within their firms and their industries using five-point scales. Overall, the speed of change within a firm was evaluated as rapid ( $\bar{x} = 3.91$ , *s.d.* = .92,  $t_{329} = 17.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in a test of the difference between the mean and the scale midpoint. Industry changes were likewise seen as occurring rapidly ( $\bar{x} = 3.83$ , *s.d.* = .98,  $t_{323} = 15.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These two measures of change were correlated with one another ( $r_{322} = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Members of cluster 1 (previously identified as being low on the factors for vision formulation, implementation, and innovative realism) viewed change as slower in both their firms and their industries ( $r_{327}$

FIGURE 1  
Relationship Between Executives' and Deans' Views on 26-Item Set



=  $-.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r_{321} = -.13$ ,  $p < .05$ , respectively). The difference between these two statistics was significant ( $Z = 2.74$ ,  $p < .01$ , two-tailed test), showing that cluster 1 executives felt that internal change was proceeding more slowly than external change. Cluster 2 executives, who were high on the three factors, felt that change was coming more rapidly to their firms ( $r_{321} = .18$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Taken together, these results partially support Hypothesis 2. Although the correlation between cluster 2 membership and the perceived speed of external change was not itself reliable ( $r_{327} = .02$ ), the difference between the two statistics was significant ( $Z = 2.05$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that this group of executives felt that internal change was moving more rapidly than external change. No other relationships between cluster membership and change measures reached significance. These findings appear to indicate that executives who are closely identified with planning, communication, and flexibility also see themselves identified with change. Finally, it was of interest that executives with longer planning horizons also saw changes as occurring more slowly in their industries ( $r_{316} = -.11$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and those in firms that had maintained their visions for longer periods saw changes in their firms as occurring more slowly ( $r_{317} = -.13$ ,  $p < .05$ , two-tailed test). Table 7 shows differences among cluster memberships related to the change measures. Results are significant for perceived firm change.

The third hypothesis predicts a relationship between vision and executives' position and firm tenures. This relationship received no support since the results of analyses were not significant.

The fourth hypothesis predicts that an executive's desire for increased control will be related to vision content. Again, we used two measures of control. The respondents agreed both that they had a great deal of control

**TABLE 7**  
**Selected Differences in Cluster Membership**

Variables <sup>a</sup>	Means for Cluster <sup>a</sup>			F	df	p
	1	2	3			
Number of employees	595.64	467.63	505.48	0.07	2,318	.93
Annual sales	101.91	86.60	121.70	0.78	2,300	.46
Importance of vision	3.32 <sup>a</sup>	4.56 <sup>c</sup>	3.91 <sup>b</sup>	27.65	2,321	.00
Firm publicly owned	1.76	1.79	1.75	0.18	2,224	.84
Controlling interest	1.65	1.53	1.64	1.18	2,224	.31
Vision horizon	55.14	75.59	60.04	2.12	2,316	.12
Speed of industry change	3.36 <sup>a</sup>	3.86 <sup>b</sup>	3.86 <sup>b</sup>	2.64	2,319	.07
Speed of firm change	2.77 <sup>c</sup>	4.16 <sup>a</sup>	3.90 <sup>b</sup>	23.40	2,325	.00
Firm tenure	157.18	148.86	174.66	1.69	2,325	.18
Position tenure	101.73	91.44	100.45	0.40	2,321	.67
Amount of control	3.77 <sup>c</sup>	4.52 <sup>a</sup>	4.24 <sup>b</sup>	9.28	2,324	.00
Amount of control desired	4.05 <sup>ab</sup>	4.24 <sup>a</sup>	3.89 <sup>b</sup>	3.87	2,318	.02

<sup>a</sup> Within any row, means with different superscripts differ at  $p < .01$  or better by a two-tailed Duncan Multiple Range test for unequal sample sizes (Norusis, 1988b: B-159).

( $\bar{x} = 4.29$ , s.d. = .80,  $t_{327} = 29.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ), in a test of the difference between the mean and the scale midpoint, and that they would like to exercise a great deal ( $\bar{x} = 4.01$ , s.d. = 1.00,  $t_{321} = 17.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The difference between the two means was itself significant ( $t_{648} = 4.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Again, the measures were related: Executives who felt they had high control also indicated that they would like to exercise more control ( $r_{320} = .49$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Members of cluster 1 (low on vision formulation, implementation, and innovative realism) were less likely to state that they currently had a high level of control ( $r_{326} = -.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In contrast, members of cluster 2 (higher on those factors and on detailed) felt both that they had high levels of control and that they would like higher levels ( $r_{326} = .18$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r_{320} = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively). Executives in cluster 3 (low on implementation) were less interested in exercising control ( $r_{320} = -.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The extent to which executives perceived that they currently had control was also related with the perceived speed of change in their organizations ( $r_{327} = .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ); other relationships between control and speed of change were not significant. Differences in cluster membership are significant for both measures of change. Table 7 shows results.

Finally, some additional findings help identify members of the three clusters. Members of cluster 2 were more likely than members of other clusters to feel that others at the tops of their organizations shared their visions (Pearson's  $r_{293} = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ , versus  $-.27$ ,  $p < .001$ , and  $-.15$ ,  $p < .01$ , for clusters 1 and 3, respectively, two-tailed tests). Cluster 2 members felt that vision was more important to their corporations ( $r_{324} = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and those in clusters 1 and 3 were less likely to consider it important ( $r_{324} = -.22$  for both,  $p < .001$ ).

Members of the national sample were asked a few additional questions. For this group, members of cluster 2 were more likely to feel that a step-by-step set of planned actions was important for implementing a vision, that it was important to a vision's success for it to be explained and communicated, and that a vision should be extended throughout an organization if it is to succeed ( $r_{54} = .27$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r_{54} = .28$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r_{54} = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively). Cluster 3 members were less likely than the members of clusters 1 and 2 to agree that a successful vision should be explained, communicated, and extended throughout an organization ( $r_{54} = -.27$  and  $-.31$ , respectively,  $p < .05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of the visions of top business executives. Members of four samples—one national and three regional—were asked to describe their visions for their organizations and to evaluate those visions. Over 99 percent of those responding provided brief (single-sentence) vision statements. However, it is worth pointing out that the open-ended question represented a demand condition inviting the formulation of a vision and suggesting its social desirability to in-

dividuals who may have not previously explicitly considered the idea. Further, self-selection may have played a part in the results: An executive who did not have a vision or who could not articulate one might have been less likely than others to complete a survey concerning it. Still, the strong rate of response to the mail survey (34%) suggests that forced fabrications and lack of a considered vision were not major difficulties.

In order to examine the underlying thrust of the individual vision statements, we asked the executives to evaluate their own statements using an exploratory self-evaluative instrument developed in another study to broadly represent the different concepts of vision available in the literature. We did not collect data on vision process, the formulation or implementation of visions. Means on the self-evaluation instrument showed that executives considered all but four of the self-evaluation items applicable and rejected three: risky, conservative, and difficult to describe (Table 3). Just one item, general, was considered neutral.

Factor analysis of the self-evaluations showed seven factors, tentatively named vision formulation, implementation, innovative realism, general, detailed, risk taking, and profit-oriented. Like the instrument on which they are based, these results should be seen as preliminary; more research is needed to assure that there are no additional factors underlying these visions and to determine the importance of each factor identified. Nonetheless, the relationships between the factors and other survey questions suggest that these factors are both statistically and conceptually helpful.

One purpose of the study was to determine how executives define vision. Toward that end, it is important to understand the relationship of the factors derived here with the implications of previous relevant research. The factor results provide good support for several schools of thought concerning vision. Most important, the notions of vision as involving far-reaching strategic planning (factor 1) and the ability and willingness to share and communicate with others (factor 2) appear secure (cf. Conger, 1989: 27; Senge, 1990). In comparison, factor 3, which strikes important but somewhat different notes, such as flexible, integrated with the visions of others, and tactical, appears to combine a group of near-term operational maxims and styles. The collection includes items considered important to the concepts of visionary and charismatic leadership (cf. Sashkin, 1988; Sims & Lorenzi, 1992: 118), but it may also be taken more broadly as a validation of Westley and Mintzberg's (1989) notion of vision as jointly involving strategic and leadership aspects of style, interpersonal dynamics and process, and timing.

Other factors played a less certain, but still important, role in defining vision. Some respondents rejected such factor 4 items as general and difficult to describe as the antithesis of vision. Although these items would seem to be opposite to focused, a vision component suggested by researchers such as Jacobs and Jacques (1990) and Kouzes and Posner (1987: 87-89), the latter failed to load on any significant factor. Factor 6

also provided an interesting result. Although some research has suggested that vision is related to risk taking (Forward et al., 1991), the executives studied here were more closely aligned with the opposing findings of Hitt and Tyler (1991). They generally rejected both risky and conservative as descriptions of their visions, suggesting that the high-roller "bet-your-life" image of a Ted Turner or Donald Trump is not widely respected as a model. This finding is consistent with those of studies on achievement motivation and entrepreneurship, which have indicated that entrepreneurial executives take appropriate mid-range risks and are sufficiently careful that they did not see these risks as truly risky (Brockhaus, 1980; McClelland, 1961; McClelland & Burnham, 1976). Detailed (factor 5) and bottom-line-oriented (factor 7) rounded out the results.

The cluster analysis of the self-evaluations established several points of interest. The concept of organizational design archetypes (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988), or regular patterns, is far too complex for the present study to fully test. Nonetheless, the results supported the ideas of several observers who have said that the patterns of the visions executives adopt are limited in number. Three clusters emerged here as shown in Table 5. These varied most prominently in respect to their relationships with the first three factors. The first two factors, vision formulation and implementation, approximately match the models Lawrence and Dyer (1983) and Miles and Snow (1978) offered to conceptualize executives' strategic thinking in the face of uncertainty. As noted earlier, the third factor, innovative realism, may broadly represent style. This finding fits with earlier thinking concerning two-dimensional patterns but may provide a mechanism to extend the concept in the direction of encompassing additional dimensions of organizational vision.

The samples were found to be evenly distributed across cluster categories. In addition, no differences in distribution occurred in separate analyses examining the firms by industry or size. The findings give weight to the possibility that firms dynamically compensate for disadvantages resulting from size or business sector, although the possibility was not directly tested here. As a whole, the results give some reason for seeing the clusters as relatively stable, independent of business organizations. Both a combined cluster analysis and analyses of individual items in the self-evaluative response set showed, by contrast, that the results for business school deans obtained in our earlier work (Larwood et al., 1993) are not entirely comparable. As was noted, deans may be chosen from the business community, and they are charged with mediating between the business community, an institution's faculty, and other constituencies. Thus, the comparison of the data on corporate executives with that on deans supports Greenwood, Hinings, and Brown's (1990) proposition that different forms of organization may entail different strategic processes. Deans, of course, tend to be in charge of highly participative organizations, much like the partnerships Greenwood and colleagues described. We found ourselves surprised by how closely the patterns of executives and deans re-

sembled one another but were nonetheless quite different (Figure 1). In evaluating these findings, however, one should keep in mind that the deans in the earlier study were not speaking from a hierarchical level comparable to that of the chief executive of an independent organization. The influence of level on the evaluation of vision remains to be resolved by later research. Better comparisons might be made between university presidents and chief executives or between corporate division heads and deans.

The four hypotheses examined in this study concerned personal characteristics and perceptions. Findings were consistent with those of Kotter (1990): the visions of these executives projected for six months to 20 years into the future, and members of cluster 2, who were high on vision formulation, among other characteristics, had longer-term visions. Since all but 2 or 3 percent of the respondents were at the top or one level from the top of an organization, we were unable to test the relationship of time horizon and executive level as Jacobs and Jaques (1990) suggested. Further, the firms in the regional samples examined here were a tenth the size of those in the national sample, and Jacobs and Jaques's findings deal with levels in large organizations.

One line of thinking is that those who empower others are more visionary and likely to be more successful at moving their firms along. Initially, this notion would suggest that those practicing participative management have less control themselves—in the present context, that members of cluster 2 have less control than other executives. However, Westley and Mintzberg linked empowering others with being empowered. We found that members of cluster 2 thought both that they had high levels of control and that they would like to have higher levels. The currently perceived level of control was significantly, positively related with the perceived speed of internal change.

Hypothesis 2 predicts a relationship between perceived speed of change and vision cluster membership. In fact, members of cluster 2, who most firmly embraced the notion that an executive's vision should be widely accepted throughout an organization (factor 2), felt that change was occurring most rapidly in their firms. In comparison, cluster 1 executives, who were less likely to agree with the need for vision acceptance, felt that changes were coming more slowly. These findings are consistent with the view that subordinates should be empowered. However, cluster 1 membership was also negatively correlated with two additional factors, and cluster 2 was positively correlated with the same factors. Thus, the results are also consistent with the notion that long-term planning (factor 1) and appropriate style (factor 3) are important (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989), and it remains to be determined whether one characteristic is pre-eminent. Finally, although those perceiving rapid internal change (cluster 2) were in the group that agreed that planning and strategy were important descriptors (factor 1), cluster 2 members were also likely to have held to their visions for shorter periods of time. We would expect this to occur if either the rapidity of change forced frequent reconsideration of

strategy and vision, or if strategic visions have a "half-life," during which they are the most potent in inducing change, that begins shortly after they are put in place.

### IMPLICATIONS

Three immediate implications seem most obvious and salient. First, it appears viable to empirically test many of the concepts that have been developed concerning vision directly with the executives who are presumed to create and execute visions in some manner. Second, we were encouraged by the substantial congruence between many of the findings of this study and previous thinking concerning vision. In the absence of statistical support, much of the earlier work in this area has proceeded largely on the basis of observational and case analyses. The present study demonstrates convergent support for that work and its validity. Third, the findings seem to justify the tentative conclusion that cluster 2 executives, with their triple emphases on long-term strategy, wide communication and acceptance of their visions, and operational realism or style, are most likely to be successful in creating change within their organizations, particularly since this group scored the highest on perceived firm change.

A good deal remains for future research and theory building. Despite the significance of the relationships tested, the interpretations are in need of further empirical support. For example, the limitations of the present study did not allow us to determine whether cluster 1 or cluster 3 executives are actually less instrumental to the success of their firms than cluster 2 members. Similarly, some of the relationships found may stem from common method variance—it remains to be discovered, for example, whether cluster 2 executives merely perceive that they empower others and that their visions concern communication or whether this is an actual difference between them and the members of other clusters. The finding that there are three clusters and a limited number of patterns should likewise be subjected to future investigation. We may have overlooked potential clusters by emphasizing corporate entities, by setting low bounds on the size of the organizations sampled, or by examining visions at the firms' corporate rather than divisional levels. Again, it should be emphasized that this is an exploratory study that has, we hope, raised as many questions as it has answered.

Suggestions for practice are also thus tentative. Nonetheless, the visions listed in the Appendix provide a guide in two ways: they expand understanding of what executives mean by organizational vision and highlight such aspects of visions as simplicity and practicality. Although we suggested above that cluster 2 members appear to have the potential to produce organizational change, it would be premature to offer cluster membership as a prescription for change. First, if we assume that the change cluster 2 members perceived does in fact occur, other executives would then need to be encouraged to evaluate their own situations to determine

the appropriateness of the present findings. Relevant questions for those executives are, Is change desirable? What are their explicit goals?

Vision research is still at an early stage. We were able to show that the 26-item instrument we used is related to the executives' brief vision statements. However, a series of other questions might be raised concerning validity. For example, how unique is the phenomenon of vision—is it a proactive view of the future produced by a highly perceptive group of executives in a particular situation, or is it merely an answer produced reactively to the presently popular question, Do you have a vision?

On a different note, this information may be of assistance to executive trainers and recruiters. It may be possible to "diagnose" a potential candidate and help him or her to evoke the vision that has been determined to be most helpful for carrying out the particular tasks ahead. Necessarily, this study should be viewed as a link in this process, not as a set of conclusions that can be implemented.

From the perspective of theory development, we are cautiously optimistic. Although some researchers have seen vision as a component of leadership, we did not place the present work in the context of leadership theory. Instead, we focused on the content and context of visions. We take the view that vision is what those charged with having a vision think it is. In that sense, the present work is still definitional. Clearly, the concept of vision extends well beyond a single research stream and includes leadership theory, organizational strategy, and motivation as well as the emerging areas of empowerment, cognitive complexity, and self-transforming organizations. Perhaps the study of vision will help integrate these areas. Findings from this study may provide a basis for future studies on vision content and process and for the development of a model of visionary leadership.

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## APPENDIX

### Examples of Vision Statements

- Lead in bringing interactive entertainment to a mass market.
- Grow technically and geographically into a worldwide, world-renowned organization.
- Be a survivor and prosper in a heavily and unfairly regulated industry.
- Maintain a manageable number of clients whereby top management is involved in all—continued but controlled growth.
- Create an environment in which satisfied customers, quality products, and bottom line profits go hand-in-hand.
- Be a major force in high performance banking in the community bank arena.
- Lead in providing applications to the construction industry throughout the world.
- Be the single source software provider to the financial services industry.
- Be the leading African American owned promotional and public relations firm in the USA.
- Be a technical services firm, with blue chip utility clients, that has a “Mercedes” image, Boy Scout principles, and is fun.
- Transform our American flag ocean bulk shipping fleet to foreign flag operations by 1996, while increasing market share to become the largest, best managed carrier on the Great Lakes.
- Become the most customer responsive producer of automobile interior trim in North America.
- Be the recognized world leader in national security space system architecture and engineering.
- Continue our role and responsibility as the industry initiator and market leader for 70 years of bringing useful products to the marketplace while continually rewarding our customers and employees.
- Double in size within five years.
- Enhance our established leadership position and make more money while doing so.

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