

# Step into the future

Do you have a vision  
of where your company  
will be in three years?

In five? 10?

Here's a sure-fire way to  
get clear about the  
future you want

BY ARI WEINZWEIG  
PHOTOGRAPH BY HUGH KRETSCHMER

Hardly a day passes without someone asking me for business advice. It might be a student or a struggling entrepreneur or an up-and-comer at a larger company. I'm sure most successful entrepreneurs experience the same thing. As often as not, people want that "one top tip," that single piece of advice that can put a person on the path to success. Lo, if only things were so simple. On the other hand, there is one thing I wish I had understood more clearly from the get-go: **the power of visioning.**

**When we opened** Zingerman's Delicatessen in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1982, I had never even heard the term *visioning*. Thirty years later, that deli has expanded into Zingerman's Community of Businesses—eight different businesses (including a mail order company and a business consultancy), with 17 managing partners, 500 employees, and revenue of \$37 million a year. It's safe to say that we wouldn't be where we are without visioning.

What is a *vision*? It's not as mystical or out there as it sounds. A vision, quite simply, is a picture of what success will be at a particular time in the future. It encompasses answers to an array of questions: What does our organization look like? How big is it? What are we famous for? Why does anyone care about what we do? How do people who work here feel about their jobs? How do I, as the founder, feel about the business? What's my role in it? Complete the visioning process, and you'll have a clearly articulated end for your organization—something that won't change every time the market or your mood shifts.

A great vision is inspiring. It gets you and everyone in the organization excited to come to work; it's the cathedral everyone is coming to work every day to construct. This is not mere wish-

ful thinking. A vision must also be strategically sound. You have to have a reasonable shot at getting there.

At Zingerman's, we use visioning nearly every time we start a project. For the organization overall, we have our vision for 2020 (e-mail me at [ari@zingermans.com](mailto:ari@zingermans.com), and I'll send you a copy). We also have visions for each of our business units—and for most of the projects those groups undertake, whether it's a \$6 million renovation at the original deli or a new hot-chocolate recipe we're developing at Zingerman's Roadhouse, our sit-down restaurant. Visioning is so much a part of what we do that almost everyone who works here reads at least 20 visions in the first year on the job.

To be clear, a vision is not a strategic plan. The vision articulates where we are going; the plan tells us how we're actually going to get there. We start that planning work only after we've agreed on the vision. Creating a plan without a vision... Well, I just can't quite figure how one does it. Imagine asking MapQuest to give you directions but not plugging in your desired destination.

Just to give you a small but meaningful example of a vision, here's the one we wrote for the Thursday-evening farmers' market we host in the parking lot of

Zingerman's Roadhouse, on the West Side of Ann Arbor. It was written in 2005 and was designed to express our vision for the market three years later.

*It's the longest day of the year; the sun is at its pinnacle of warmth and light. Throngs of people are milling around the Roadhouse parking lot, amazed and excited at the abundance of locally produced goods, ranging from several gorgeous varieties of tomatoes to handmade soap and artisan crafts, to herbs and plants, plus a very strong synergy of Zingerman's items—cheese from the Creamery, breads from the Bakehouse, and the ever-energetic Roadshow crew caffeinating all the vendors and customers. Every vendor is selling the best of what there is to offer, growing or producing themselves what they sell. There's a tangible truth patrons have come to trust—that all these products have a story and none of them traveled very far to get here. Tents and awnings cover the stalls, creating a colorful and festive mood. There are 15–20 vendors at the Market, so it's accessible and maintains variety but remains magnetic and welcoming.*

*The West Side Farmer's Market continues to provide our customers with the best products available and serves as a catalyst for community development by offering an educational component and a local music scene. We have space reserved for weekly scheduled acts, including local musicians, demonstrations, and educational activities. Several people recognize the Roadhouse chefs selecting vegetables from the Market's vendors for the weekend's menus at the Roadhouse. The market is a family event, where parents bring their children after school and shop for fresh produce. After shopping, families enjoy a snack at our picnic tables. Guests are thrilled with the produce, the chance to visit with neighbors, and best of all, to connect with the farmers who actually grow their food.*

*This year, the WSFM planning committee is helping to generate interest and support for the market throughout the area business community. Local businesses hang posters or hand out fliers about the market and participate in promotions that*

*encourage their customers to visit. These companies recognize the potential for the market to draw additional patrons to the area and increase business throughout the West Side. These developing relationships with area businesses and the neighborhood at large are enabling the WSFM to become a more self-sustaining entity. While Zingerman's remains an active and essential supporter of the Market, the WSFM is a self-sustaining entity.*

**Remember, this was** written before the market even existed. Actually launching the market required long struggles with the city, landlord issues, persuading growers to join us, and probably a hundred other challenges. But read our vision to anyone who comes to the market, and that person will tell you that what's described above is almost exactly what happens every Thursday evening. In fact, I checked with the market manager to see how many vendors we had at the start of the 2008 season. The answer? Twenty.

This probably sounds silly and New-Agey to people who aren't into hearing it. It did to me when I first started learning about it. But there's just no way around it—the power that comes out of this visioning stuff is huge. When we do effective visioning, we're moving toward the future we want, not just reacting to a present-day reality we don't like. If we do our job well in this regard, I believe that we keep our competitors reacting to what we're doing, instead of the other way around.

A vision also makes it much easier to handle the strategic opportunities that present themselves every day. In my experience, most organizations, and most people, pick and choose from opportunities when they arise. The calls come in every day. And then we agonize over what to do. Having a vision makes decisions much easier: The only opportunities even worth considering are those that are going to help us attain our vision.

This has enormous organizational benefits. It means that when opportunities emerge that are out of the bounds

of our vision (and they do all the time), we can veto them quickly—saving extraordinary amounts of time and energy. Life is short, and time spent agonizing over opportunities that seem too good to pass up but aren't going to help us get where we really want to go is, in my opinion, time wasted. I'd prefer to spend my time working toward the future I've chosen to create. Trust me—I've worked both ways, and using visioning as I've described here is about 1,500 times more rewarding.

The good news is that crafting a vision is a lot easier and less time-consuming than you might think. As I outline in the steps below, getting started should take no more than 30 minutes.

I can already see the eyes rolling. A half-hour to write a future for my entire organization? What about gathering the appropriate data, consulting with experts, assessing the big trends and the leading economic indicators? Good questions, but to get going, you don't need any of that. Why? Though we spend most of our work lives responding to problems and opportunities as the world presents them to us, visioning comes from the inside out. It's about what you believe, what gets you excited, what you truly want to accomplish.

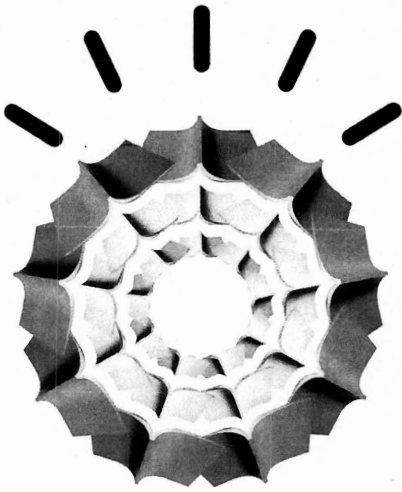
## EIGHT STEPS TO A VISION OF GREATNESS

### STEP 1

**PICK YOUR TOPIC** Because visioning can be used for just about anything, it's important to start by being clear about what you're working on. Is it a vision for your organization overall? Or just for a particular piece? For today's shift? Or your retirement? We do visions for all of the above and everything in between.

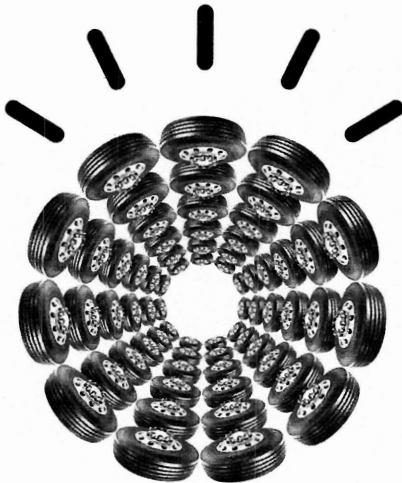
### STEP 2

**PICK YOUR TIME FRAME** How far out should you look? There's no right answer, but as a general principle,



### Gramo A/S is rewriting the book on energy solutions.

By implementing an intelligent energy management system, this midsize bookbindery in Denmark created its own virtual power plant that controls consumption and cut costs by 10%.



### Rosenau is steering its fleet toward happier customers.

This midsize transport company in Canada implemented onboard tracking technology to help optimize delivery routes and provide clients with up-to-the-minute shipping alerts.



## THE POWER OF VISIONING

visioning works best if you go far out enough to get beyond present-day problems but not so far out that you have no sense at all of actually getting there. We have a long-term organizational vision that's set in 2020. Most organizational visions will probably be set somewhere from two to 10 years out—but five is a typical place to start.

#### STEP 3

##### PUT TOGETHER A LIST OF "PROUDS"

Think about the work you're embarking on, and throw down a list of past positive achievements that seem at least somewhat relevant. You might include specific contributions that you or your colleagues have made to past successes, or skills, techniques, and resources that could be assets in achieving your vision.

At Zingerman's, it might sound like this: "I feel good about the past three projects we've successfully implemented: (1) the team really came together; (2) we've improved cheese quality a lot in the past two years; and (3) we've brought our staff turnover rate down 20 percent since 2007." Anything good that comes to mind is fine. And don't stress out about it—just do it. It shouldn't take more than 10 minutes. The idea is just to create a base of positive energy and high-quality experiences on which you can build for future success. The more people focus on the positives, not on the present-day problems, the more likely you are to attain the greatness you envision.

#### STEP 4

**WRITE THE FIRST DRAFT** Writing a vision is hugely important, but don't let its perceived weightiness work against you. The amount of time you spend drafting it is, in my experience, generally unrelated to the quality of the vision. I would actually argue that the two are inversely related—those who just dive in and get something down on paper almost always are the ones

who emerge from this process with the most creative and inspiring visions.

You can compose your vision in any style you like—prose or bullet points, by hand or on the computer. I've seen people draw it and then talk through what they've illustrated while someone else takes notes. Just make sure you put the word *DRAFT* on your document. We've found that by simply writing the word at the top of the page, we get a lot more input; whereas without it, people tend to assume the vision is final and there's no point providing any real feedback.

Before you start writing, let me provide a few technical tips. If you follow them, the work will be way better:

**Go for something great.** The work here is about writing a vision of greatness—so put something wild out there. I think about John Kennedy's call to go to the moon, winning the NBA championship... things that are big but also specific, scary but also exciting. Get past the 59 reasons why it won't work. If the early draft isn't kind of scaring you a bit, then you probably haven't pushed yourself hard enough.

**Write from the heart.** Go with your gut and put down what pours out, not what you think other people want to see. Often that means including what you've always wanted to do but have been told so many times by others that you couldn't, a notion that you've long since filed away under "impossible."

**Step into the future.** Having gone through this process a few thousand times, I can tell you that it works way better when you write as if you're already sitting in the future you're envisioning. This seems strange, but it really is critical. Don't write as if your vision going to happen; write as if it already has happened.

**Go quickly.** The visions I've been involved with turned out much better when we didn't drag out the process. Just sit down in a reasonably comfortable spot at a reasonably comfortable time and get to writing. Once you

start, keep writing for 15 to 30 minutes, regardless of how silly you sound. Don't start self-editing. The most interesting and insightful elements of my visions are the ones that I initially wanted to leave out but forced myself to put down anyway.

**Get personal.** In our visioning work, we blend the personal and professional so we arrive at a single vision, or at least two compatible and mutually supportive ones. If you're the one running the business, it makes sense that you build your passions into what you write. If you want to teach, put that in the vision. If you

want to work less, say it. If you've "retired" into an advisory-only role in the company, talk about how the person who took your position feels about his or her role and how you relate to that person. In other words, don't write a vision that you aren't a part of.

Now, with all these rules in mind, take no more than 30 minutes and put down a vision draft. Then put the draft aside for a few days. Go back to all the other stuff you do every day.

#### STEP 5

**REVIEW AND REDRAFT** When you're ready to revise, read your draft through from start to finish. Don't erase anything. If you're on the computer, start the second round by copying your first file so you can edit what you wrote without losing the original version. In my experience, at least 80 percent of what is in that first scary rendition is pretty right on. In any case, you'll have plenty of opportunity to edit the content and the language. As you read through, keep in the back of your mind: Does this sound inspiring? Do I get excited when I'm reading it? Note that in this context, *excited* does not preclude anxiety about the

challenges of implementation.

How specific should you get? More detail is better than less—it helps make the vision more real. Stay away from vague statements like "We're busier than ever"; instead, use real sales numbers that mean something.

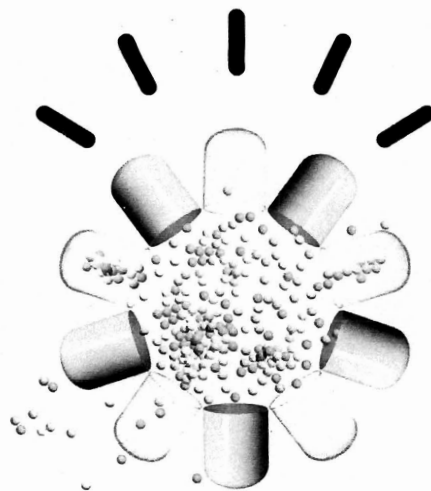
Remember, it's your vision, and you're not obligated to change anything. Don't let people beat the passion out of you.

Without definition, you will have no details on what success actually looks like. "I want to be wealthy" is well and good, but one person's view of what makes you rich is another's only-slightly-better-than-poor. So spell it out. What are the key financial numbers that define success for you? Sales levels? Salary? Savings? Status?

Along the same lines, a personal vision might say, "I spend a lot of time with my kids." That's great, but I think you'll get a lot further with something like, "I'm spending two to three weeks a year traveling the country with my kids. It's amazing how much fun we're having." Or, "One night a week I go out to dinner with just my entire family."

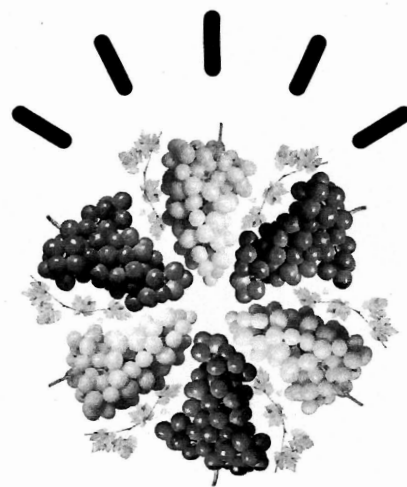
#### STEPS 6A, 6B, AND 6C

**MORE REDRAFTS** If you want, you can take this second draft and make additional adjustments. But at some point, you had better get your butt in gear and move on to Step 7. Note that there is no 6D. If there were, the *D* would stand for *Done*. More than four drafts, and I think you're headed down the long and unrewarding road of "I've been working on a vision for the past few years, but I still don't have it finished." I've done it, and



### GSMS is protecting products and patients.

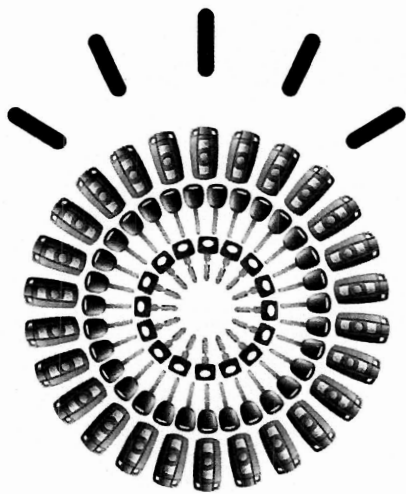
Using track-and-trace technology, this midsize pharmaceutical manufacturer and specialty packaging company in California is helping keep counterfeits out of its supply chain.



### Sun World is harvesting new insights.

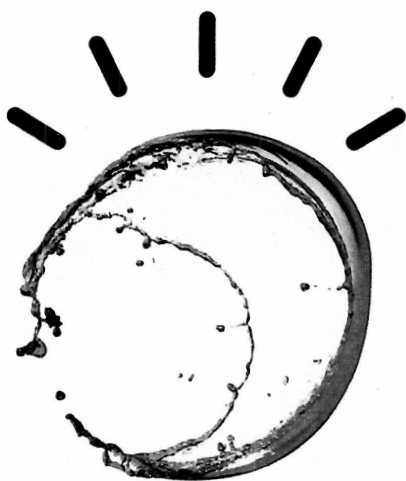
Specializing in the growing, packing and shipping of fresh produce, this midsize business in California is using IBM Cognos business analytics solutions to analyze operations data and improve harvesting efficiency.





**Gruppo Intergea is accelerating its data security.**

This Italian midsize business has been able to improve infrastructure security in car dealerships, showrooms and repair shops by identifying new threats and staying ahead of them.



**Wine Warehouse is improving the flow of information.**

Trying to keep ahead of growth, this midsize wholesale distribution company integrated its finance, order-entry and pricing systems—improving inventory efficiency and order accuracy while maximizing profits.



**THE POWER OF VISIONING**

believe me, it really doesn't help you—or anyone else.

**STEP 7**

**SOLICIT INPUT** This is where you let the cat out of the bag and get input from people you trust and respect. But remember that it's your vision, and you're not obligated to change anything.

Whom should you show it to? Folks who have experience, insight, and expertise relevant to your vision. They might be your business partners, colleagues, peers in the community, mentors, family members, close friends. Again, don't obsess. You can always get more input later if you think of other people you would like to hear from.

When I am at this early stage, I generally ask folks to let me know what they think (sometimes, I'll explain the concept of visioning, if they aren't familiar with the idea). That's all. Keeping it loose gives people more room to tell me which parts excite them, which ones worry them, and the like.

Inevitably, some of these advisers will shift away from talking about the vision into a discussion of all the action steps that will have to be in a strategic plan. Don't worry. Just listen carefully, and take notes—some of those ideas might come in handy later, when you begin formulating a plan to bring your vision to life.

How do you know what to add and what to set aside? I wish I had an easy answer. Practice helps. As does learning whom you can rely on to give supportive, helpful input and to have values and views aligned with your own. I like the advice I heard from John Williams, co-founder of Frog's Leap Winery in Rutherford, California, who said, "Don't let people beat the passion out of you!"

**STEP 8**

**SHARE THE VISION** Finally, it's time to share the vision with everyone who will be involved in implementing it. When you roll out your vision to

the bigger group, it's inevitable that people will ask questions about how you intend to achieve the vision. They're asking you about the *how*. The vision, however, is the *what*. It's totally fine if you don't know how you're going to get there. Later, you will figure out the *how*.

**WHEN PEOPLE DISAGREE WITH YOUR VISION**

Some folks who write visions are sole operators who have enough authority to put a vision in place unilaterally. But most of us work with partners, family members, or key managers who are prominent or equal players, and we need to get in alignment with them. Leaders pursuing different visions for the same project will almost always create enormous problems in an organization.

At Zingerman's, we begin the alignment process by having each of the partners in the group draft their own vision. We're careful to be sure that everyone is clear on both the time frame and the topic we've chosen. Once each person has put together his or her vision, we compare drafts, listening carefully to what each person has to say and capturing themes on a whiteboard as we go.

We then give everyone a chance to weigh in on the strength of their feelings about each theme. If there are 10 themes up on the board, we might give each participant four votes, or something along those lines. The votes help the group get clear on the top-priority items. Remembering that there aren't any right or wrong visions, we then work to identify common themes and come to agreement on a single vision that we can all work toward.

I don't want to make it seem like visioning work is always bliss and harmony. We often wind up with

## NOTHING BUT BLUE SKIES

Imagine that it's three or five or 10 years from now, and answer these questions about your company. This list is far from complete, but it will help get you started crafting a vision.

1. How big is your business?
2. Assess the factors by which you will measure your success (be as specific as possible).
  - a. Relative rank in your industry
  - b. Financial success for the organization
  - c. Personal financial success
  - d. Product or service quality
  - e. Contribution to the community
3. What are your most important product lines or services?
4. What products or services do you refuse to offer?
5. Describe how the shopping experience at your business takes place. What makes that experience unique?
6. Who are your customers? How do you find them?
7. If your customers were asked to list three noteworthy things about your business, what would they be?
8. How would you describe your management style? (Participative? Top down? Family style?)
9. What kind of people do you hire as managers?
10. What is your relationship with your employees? What do they say about their jobs?
11. What do you do every day? How much do you work?
12. How does your community view your business?
13. What do your suppliers say about you?
14. What do industry experts say about you?

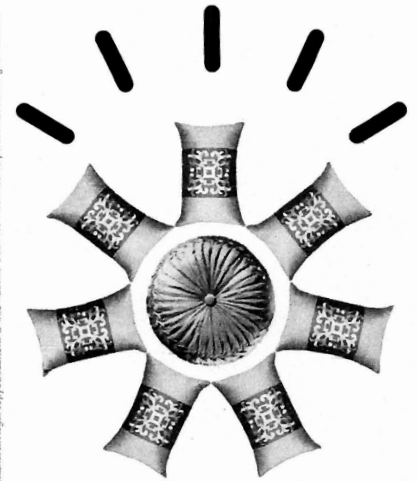
themes that seem totally incompatible. And though there are often ways to achieve compromise, other times there just aren't. All you can really do at that point is work toward consensus. Something has to give, or we have to come up with a different way to go forward.

On occasion, what we reach consensus on is the challenging realization that we actually have incompatible visions, and that we might need to go our separate ways. If our ideas are not compatible, then our larger vision needs to shift. It might become a positive picture of a future in which we're no longer working together, or at least not working together in the way we are now. It

could mean splitting a company in two or living in different cities. It's painful but far more productive than having people passively go along toward a vision of the future that they don't really buy into. When that happens, you wind up with two things: tension and trouble. Agreeing, openly and supportively, to pursue different but positive visions allows people to go in the direction they want to go. And ultimately that's a good thing. **◉**

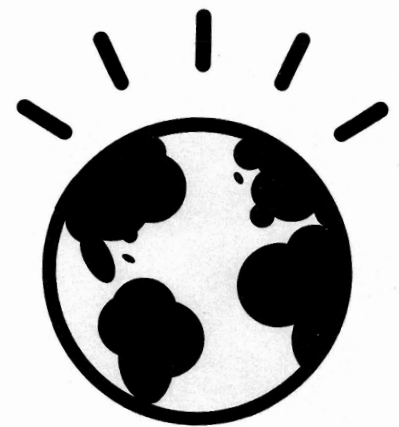
*Ari Weinzwieg is co-founder and CEO of Zingerman's Community of Businesses in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This article is adapted from his recent book, Zingerman's Guide to Good Leading, Part 1: A Lapsed Anarchist's Approach to Building a Great Business.*

IBM, the IBM logo, iBusiness, Smarter Planet, and the planet icon are trademarks of International Business Machines Corporation. © International Business Machines Corporation 2011. All rights reserved.



### Dragon Hotel is providing a legendary guest experience.

At the heart of this Chinese hotel is a dynamic IT infrastructure that uses RFID-equipped smart cards for fast check-ins and custom room preferences so guests feel right at home.



### Let's build a smarter planet.

To learn more about the insights and solutions behind these success stories, or to find an IBM Business Partner that's right for you, visit [ibm.com/engines](http://ibm.com/engines)

