

By Hillary Carey  
and Mia Blume

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present state and a potential future.**



# Communicating Visions for Design: the STOVE Framework



**AM SUPPOSED TO PRESENT MY VISION TO** the exec team next week, but I don't know where to start," says the head of design at a growing tech company in San Francisco during a coaching session one morning. Design leaders have creative perspectives to contribute to organizational leadership, yet they sometimes struggle to communicate visions in business settings. I offer my tried-and-true response: "Tell me what success would look like." She answers, "Well, we would prioritize voice chat projects." I nod and ask, "And what would that enable?" She responds, "Then we could build out the smart chat features as the primary interface." I probed further, repeating, "And what would that enable?"

"And then," she realizes, "we can match people who come to the site with products that feel super-personalized, based on their preferences—and we could surprise them with things they didn't know were possible!" Voila. Designers do not lack for vision. It is natural for designers to imagine ways to build better, more innovative, more engaging experiences. But sharing these visions in a business setting feels different, less certain.

Visioning is fundamental for both organizational leadership and design practice. What makes visions of new possibilities powerful is creating tension between the present state and a potential future. Designers are well equipped to describe these tensions vividly. We have modified a popular business tool known as the Minto Pyramid Principle to support more effective communication of visions. The new STOVE framework leverages the creative ways that designers envision. In emphasizing

storytelling through tension and vignette, we orient the framework toward the future, supporting the change-making purpose of visions.

Whether it is a request to grow their teams, holding their ground when engineering pushes back on technical changes, or offering a design perspective on strategic growth conversations, visioning can show up in many ways in design. Having a solid framework to communicate a vision has proven very helpful in our coaching practice, but visioning is not often reported on in design scholarship. In this article, we share our tool for design leaders that is a modification of a business framework but leverages creative perspectives to present new opportunities. It also helps design leaders communicate in a way that fits business expectations while highlighting storytelling to bring ideas to life.

To encourage designers to be more expressive in their visions, we modify a reliable tool for crafting business proposals: the Minto Principle (Situation, Complication, Question, Answer). Because visions are ambitious calls for change, we introduce storytelling in the form of tension and vignette to make this framework more compelling. The powerful aspect of bringing ideas to life through a vignette is that it enhances the tension between the current and possible future. And that tension is what motivates people to embrace a change. Fortunately, designers have the skills to emphasize the distance between the current state and a better future. It represents an everyday experience in that future vision so that stakeholders will be motivated to make it happen.

Bringing tension, outcome, and vignette into the Minto framework supports sharing visions

Notes

1. H. Ibarra and O. Obodaru, "Women and the vision thing," *Harvard Business Review* 87(1) (2009): 62–70.
2. R. Banfield, *Design Leadership: How Top Design Leaders Build and Grow Successful Organizations* (Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2015).
3. R. van der Helm, "The vision phenomenon: Towards a theoretical underpinning of visions of the future and the process of envisioning," *Futures* 41(2)(2009): 96–104, doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2008.07.036.
4. R. Shipley and J. L. Michela, "Can vision motivate planning action?" *Planning, Practice and Research* 21(2)(2006): 223–244, doi.org/10.1080/02697450600944715.
5. Van der Helm, 2009.
6. R. Rumelt, *Good Strategy/ Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why it Matters* (New York: Crown Business, 2011).
7. L. M Pereira et al., "Using futures methods to create transformative spaces: Visions of a good anthropocene in Southern Africa," *Ecology and Society* 23(1)(2018), doi.org/10.5751/ES-09907-230119.

strategically. Our STOVE model offers leaders a structured way to describe the business context, point of view about direction, and reasoning behind any request or proposal they make. This format helps to clarify thinking when developing the proposal and then connects listeners to the argument when sharing it. By framing proposals to meet business communication expectations, stakeholders can focus on the designer's contribution.

**Vision, strategy, roadmap**

*If leadership is essentially about realizing change, then crafting and articulating a vision of a better future is a leadership prerequisite. No vision, no leadership.*<sup>1</sup>

Vision is only the first step in creating change, but it is powerful. Motivating change is the important work that visions can do. In Richard Banfield's book on design leadership he states: "Big ideas create motivation and excitement for the team trying to reach them. Big ideas are worth getting out of bed and going to work for."<sup>2</sup> Futures Studies researcher Ruud van der Helm, after a survey of the literature, defines visions as claims about the future that describe something that is not yet here.<sup>3</sup> His definition aligns with researchers Shipley and Michela's description that "a vision in planning is a statement of a desired or even idealized future state and/or the image or picture of that goal."<sup>4</sup> In Harvard Business Review, Ibarra & Obodaru describe "being visionary" as a requirement for leadership. They explain three core attributes of being a visionary leader: keeping an eye out for opportunities in the competitive landscape, translating those opportunities into strategies for the organizations, and communicating new possibilities in a way that inspires those around you. Visionary leadership requires a combination of attention to business landscape and creative thinking.

It is that excitement about what is possible in the future that has the power to motivate people toward change. Van der Helm identifies that a good vision highlights "the contrast between 'what is' and 'what could be'" in a way that is "perceived as

relevant and authoritative."<sup>5</sup> Emotional resonance is noteworthy when proposing significant change. Sustainability researchers Wiek and Iwaniec describe how visions help to pull people toward new possibilities. They write that people are more motivated into sustainable behaviors when they are pulled toward new possibilities through inspiration, rather than pushed toward change by being advised through what they should be doing.

Visions are the beginning of a strategic plan. They describe why change is needed and why effort is worthwhile. But they do not outline the steps. Visions serve as North Stars or guideposts that help shape and evaluate plans to achieve the goal.

Strategy then begins to fill in that pathway by identifying the broad actions needed to get to the goal. And roadmaps deliver the step-by-step details that make up the pathway. Strategy takes a good hard look at the challenges. In *Good Strategy Bad Strategy*, Richard Rumelt emphasizes the importance of understanding the circumstances to inform robust strategy. He writes, "A good strategy does more than urge us forward toward a goal or vision. A good strategy honestly acknowledges the challenges being faced and provides an approach to overcoming them." He further details that "The kernel of a strategy contains three elements: a diagnosis, a guiding policy, and coherent action."<sup>6</sup> So, we can see that a vision sets a goal, yet an investigation into challenges, opportunities, and movements is needed to turn objectives into reliable strategy.

In this article, we address vision on its own because we believe that it deserves more attention. We prioritize how to communicate a proposal for change by leveraging imagination, empathy, and materialization skills in a way that compels people to invest in the work necessary to develop the strategy. Compelling visions are a powerful tool to help align people toward something very new, like these resilience researchers describe here regarding sustainability efforts: "Envisioning positive futures is a first step in creating a shared understanding and commitment that enables radical transformations toward sustainability in a world defined by complexity, diversity, and uncertainty."<sup>7</sup>

8. Joseph Boyett and Jimmie Boyett, "Seven Tips for Managing Organizational Change," Boyett & Associates, 2004.

Designers may have more ways to create emotional resonance than other business leaders, and we should leverage our creativity skills to persuade. Designers who artfully balance creative thinking with clear, concise stories and evidence can drive change and open new possibilities.

### Communicating visions: modifying Minto

It can be powerful for designers to use a clear picture of success when asking for change. "You cannot lead people to change if you do not have a strong personal vision of where you want to go."<sup>8</sup> Designers are expert visioners; we constantly imagine better solutions to whatever is ahead of us. The STOVE framework helps designers make ideas about business success material and specific. Leveraging these skills in business strategy can give creative leaders a valuable additional perspective in strategic conversations.

Unfortunately, designers typically learn to express their recommendations in the studio through critique (defense-based explanations) and user insights (other voices). While critique helps designers pitch ideas and user voices help build empathy and ground new ideas in real user needs, these approaches fall short of solid arguments for business contexts. These design habits teach us to use personal assertion and external conviction rather than evidence-based debate. The Minto framework is beneficial because it advises that business audiences need a logical structure to follow along with proposals that help people approach new ideas. Those ideas should be delivered as answers to a shared question, followed by structured evidence.

Barbara Minto's strategic approach to communication revolutionized business writing when she introduced it in the 1980s based on her time as a consultant at McKinsey & Company and her firm, Minto International. Product leader Ameet Ranadive describes its continued use at McKinsey today and summarizes the Minto Pyramid strategy as putting the answer up front, logically categorizing and ordering key pieces of

evidence that answer the questions listeners will have and support the proposal. We especially appreciate Minto's framework for setting the stage for presenting the answer up front: SCQA (Situation, Complication, Question, Answer). Good proposals begin by creating a shared agreement about the business context: the Situation and the current challenge or Complication. This setup should raise an obvious Question in the listener's mind that you propose an Answer to, which you then support with several pieces of evidence that reinforce your conclusion.

When we introduce the SCQA framework to design leaders, they can move from making requests such as, "Can we hire five more designers?" to well-crafted proposals for growth. This technique helps designers bring clarity into requests and recommendations to diverse stakeholders. This simple structure sets a strong foundation of information so that everyone is standing in the same place before proposing your suggestion.

### The STOVE framework

We have developed a framework for communicating visions for change through advising design leaders to have more confidence and impact in cross-functional discussions. We are design leadership coaches who guide creative leads at many levels, from individual contributors to executives. We educate design leaders to see their creative skills as essential for crafting teams, cultures, and structures. And we have found that the Minto Principle is a robust frame for business arguments in workshops and coaching sessions. But it is not viewed as a design tool. We saw an opportunity for something that resonated more with design language and skills.

Our STOVE framework uses the Minto structure to orient audiences to the context and opportunity for change, and then creates a compelling image of what's possible before answering concerns through evidence. The vision is a way to answer—why is this important? Where does it get us? What do we really want? This modification transforms the Answer element into an opportunity to inspire more significant change. We center STOVE on Tension, Outcome, and Vignette to

## Notes

9. D. Hora, "Researchers Should Lead the Product Development Process," *DScout People Nerds*, January 27, 2022, [dscout.com/people-nerds/research-product-development](https://dscout.com/people-nerds/research-product-development).

create a tool for setting proposals for change within logical arguments for business. Product visioning and futures studies literature serve as the basis for this model and our applied approaches in design leadership workshops and coaching.

STOVE (Situation, Tension, Outcome, Vignette, Evidence) combines business communication structures with design visioning techniques to help designers bring clarity and inspiration into proposals for new action. The strength of structuring proposals on visions of success is to immediately answer the *why* question that naturally arises when people face change. A vision provides a reason for undergoing change.

The STOVE framework is an approach that develops and communicates long- and short-term visions for future strategy in a way that connects to business goals. It establishes a current situation, proposes a need for change, describes a potential future, illustrates a vivid example, and then delivers evidence systematically.

- *Situation*: the context and the challenge your vision addresses, from the audience's perspective
- *Tension*: the need or challenge
- *Outcome*: what will be better in the future
- *Vignette*: a user story of experiencing the better future
- *Evidence*: groups of supporting data that explain the logic of the vision

Many different contexts can lead to opportunities to propose change. This framework can help you clarify what success looks like for you, your team, your product or service, and your ideas for where the entire organization might thrive. Examples include organization strategies, product visions, advocating for a feature on the roadmap, building a perspective with your cross-functional team, request for headcount, suggestions for a new team process, a personal growth plan for the next year or next advancement, or clarifying your vision as a design leader at this organization or in a larger community.

### FIRST, CLARIFY YOUR THINKING

Designers can use the framework to clarify their thinking and then communicate a vision outward to stakeholders. Barbara Minto is exhaustive in

her recommendation that to persuade well, one must first discover what they want to say and then structure the message. In this way, we recommend that designers approach this technique in two phases: first, use it to clarify your thinking, and second, use it to express your ideas to others.

It is difficult, but essential, for design leaders to secure time for heads-down thinking. Pull from other people is strong, but if we are always in meetings or taking care of other people, we cannot show up fully with our visions for where things should be headed. Creating some deep-thinking time to work through this framework will help you show up with conviction and confidence in meetings. Writing and sketching help us to discover the depths of problems and solutions and contribute new perspectives. The STOVE framework can help structure your exploration.

**Situation:** This should be a simple description of the context of the vision and challenge you are facing that everyone would agree on. Design researcher Dave Hora proposes describing the context in this way: "There is (i) a specific organization with an actual product [idea] in a larger ecosystem; (ii) a defined set of people in a real-world context and community that the product is for; and (iii) a very real, human, and specific team who are working on the thing."<sup>9</sup> At times you might realize that the argument will be stronger if you combine multiple challenges in the description. For example, "Everyone agrees we have a low budget. The real complication is that we cannot stay on time without hiring more designers." What is the scope and significance of the situation you are working within? What is the setting of this challenge? What do your stakeholders believe is the most critical aspect to address? Is this about the marketplace you are working within or your design team's contribution to growth metrics? Limit this to what your stakeholders believe—inserting too much of your own perspective here can put them on the defensive.

10. G. Moore, *Crossing the Chasm: Marketing and Selling High-Tech Products to Mainstream Customers* (New York: Harper Business, 1991).

11. J. Hopson, "Earning a Seat at the Table: My Leadership Journey," *dmi:review* (32(3))(2021): 16-22.

**Tension:** Here, you will succinctly articulate what is not good enough about the present state. It could be the business needs or user needs, new threats, or opportunities to address. This description is essentially the gap in the landscape that creates space for your proposal. Emphasize the tension between what is not yet working and what could be to set your vision up to cause other to desire a better future.

**Outcome:** This is your description of success. It would be best if you took the time to creatively explore possibilities and imagine the impact you want to have. What does your solution look like when you have achieved it? Describe what you hope to create by describing what it will accomplish. In *Crossing the Chasm*, Geoffrey Moore recommends this structure for product visions: "For (target customer) who (statement of need or opportunity), the (product name) is a (product category) that (key benefit, reason to buy). Unlike (primary competitive alternative), our product (statement of primary differentiation)."<sup>10</sup> Here is a space to be creative; you can frame the outcome as a pithy, catchy statement, an illustration, a technical solution, or anything else that will grab your audience's attention.

**Vignette:** Use a concise story to help people understand the benefits of your proposed future change by describing a tangible, specific experience. This description could be a quick user experience or a way that teams work together better. Design researchers Jill Lawrence and Brendon Clark observed that storytelling is critical in business settings. Stories help organizations hold onto ideas, debate and reflect, and motivate groups toward a common outcome. Vignettes that vividly describe the result can take the form of an illustration, a prototype, a story, or something else. Present a moment when a customer has a first glimpse of newer, better ways of doing things.

**Evidence:** Anticipate the questions your audience will ask, based on your proposal, and seek out evidence to address them proactively. We suggest answering these questions: Why this? Why us? Why now? Design strategist Jordan Hopson emphasizes the value of designers bringing evidence to support their recommendations and provides examples: "Evidence can include primary and secondary research, design principles, competitors and exemplars, development efforts, and financial impacts."<sup>11</sup> Starting with that type of data and information could help you understand the opportunity. Then make a plan to find it—or find comparable sources.

### EXPRESS YOUR VISION TO OTHERS

While the first exercise is to clarify your thinking for yourself, the next stage is to use the framework to communicate your proposal logically to others. This structure delivers information in a predictable way so that listeners can follow along with your reasoning and conclusions.

- **Situation:** This brief contextual setting for your audience gets everyone to start agreeing. Have you been asked to contribute to an organizational strategy as the company grows? You can say that. Is this a vision for a design team that is currently under-resourced? Say that. Minto recommends that the first two stages reflect a shared understanding. This statement should not be controversial. So, if "under-resourced" isn't how your stakeholders view your team, begin with what they agree on and then provide evidence that you don't have enough people. Stick to the shared and known facts to get heads nodding in agreement as you begin your story. What do your stakeholders agree is causing a difficulty? Explain the challenge at hand to resonate with how your audience understands it so that you have a shared understanding.
- **Tension:** Articulate the gap between the current experience and what would be better. This is the gap that your solution can fill.
- **Outcome:** Describe what successful implementation will accomplish.

**Notes**

- 12. J. Lawrence and B. Clark, "Building Alignment and Sparking Momentum with Tangible Future Scenarios," *dmi:review* (29(2))(2018): 20-25.
- 13. B. Minto, *The Pyramid Principle: logic in writing and thinking* (Pearson Education, 2009).
- 14. S. Zillner, "Planning Innovations: A Question of Design?" in *Creating Desired Futures: How Design Thinking Innovates Business*, M. Shamiyeh ed. (Basel: De Gruyter, 2010).

- **Vignette:** Bring your vision to life by describing a moment of experiencing that success. "In business strategy, stories are used as part of a 'scenario planning' process to help stakeholders envision possible futures."<sup>12</sup> What will customers engage with, or what will it be like to work with your newly expanded design organization?
- **Evidence:** Here you prepare for the questions you expect to receive. This information might be built into the story—or form an appendix that you can jump to as questions arise. Anticipate the data your audience will want to see to understand the problem and the proposed solution. Continue to explain *why* something is a good investment, rather than moving too quickly toward solutions for *how* to build it. Barbara Minto explains this well in her book, so turn to *The Pyramid Principle* for further reading in this area if you have more questions.<sup>13</sup>

**STOVE in practice**

**EXAMPLE 1**

Here is an example of how a design leader working on a real estate app used STOVE to propose a new direction for apartment listings.

- **Situation:** We aren't attracting enough younger renters. Gen Z rent apartments differently than previous generations.
- **Tension:** In research studies, we've learned that younger renters can't assess the qualities that matter to them on traditional rental apps, so they turn to social media and networking sites instead. But this has made renting apartments more informal and unpredictable than these young renters would like.
- **Outcome:** We could become the destination for Gen Z renters by appealing to their sense of restlessness and adventure. We would emphasize location and experiences over logistical data, which will differentiate our offering and appeal to experience seekers.
- **Vignette:** New college graduate, Marla, has been browsing our app for months, well before her job offer came through, because she likes daydreaming about what it might be like to live in different cities. She has been checking our app every time

she applies for a new job because she enjoys learning about the neighborhoods she might move to. She browses happily through available apartments, checking out the new restaurants, new vibes, potential new friends, and new access to recreation that might be on her doorstep.

- **Evidence:** Market research confirms that Gen Z-ers are looking for experiences; they think about money as a support for experiences. So rent costs often depend on what they get—not a fixed budget. They have a budget in mind, but research shows they are more willing to flex to live in a desirable neighborhood or have access to outdoor recreation or public transportation. National data show that Gen Z are remaining renters later in life than previous generations. Wages haven't increased proportionally to home purchasing costs. And so on... You'll continue to answer the questions that business partners might have for each piece of evidence until you feel you've provided a sufficient explanation of each area.

**EXAMPLE 2**

Sonja Zillner wrote about a strategic visioning method called "Pictures of the Future" for Siemens MEDICO. Here we use STOVE to communicate the vision for the innovation described.

- **Situation:** Due to vast progress of medical image devices, clinicians today deeply rely on images for screening, diagnosis, treatment planning, and follow up. However, these medical images are still indexed by keywords and cannot be searched and retrieved for their content.
- **Tension:** Clinicians are missing out on valuable diagnosis and treatment information because it is locked in the metadata of images and is not easily accessible.
- **Outcome:** "A universal search engine for medical images that supports individualized diagnoses and therapy plans"<sup>14</sup>
- **Vignette:** We will teach computer and medical devices to interpret images, catalogue them, find them in databases and detect similarities so that clinicians will be able to learn about the disease progress and effectiveness of treatments. They should be able to automatically provide relevant



**Hillary Carey** is a designer, researcher, and facilitator who has dedicated her work to the importance of creativity, listening, and justice. A PhD student in Carnegie Mellon's Transition Design program, Hillary studies design visions for social good. At Design Dept., she guides design leaders in educational workshops and one-on-one coaching.



**Mia Blume** is a former design leader at Pinterest, Square, and IDEO. Mia founded Design Dept. in 2015 to help transform the way creative leaders work. She believes that when a designer's authentic leadership style is unlocked, it impacts not only individuals and teams but also the products, services, and organizations that shape our world.

context and patient-related information for the clinician such as medical literature relevant to the patient's symptoms, statistical reports summarizing the success and risk rate of a particular treatment, or a list of recommended treatments.

• **Evidence:**

- Technological feasibility
- Clinician desirability
- Financial viability
- Relevant past projects internally (within a particular medical facility?)
- Analogous projects at other organizations

**Discussion**

In our practice as design leadership coaches and educators, we see confidence falter when creative thinkers participate in strategic discussions. Yet we know that business discussions benefit from design perspectives. We advocate for designers to practice setting their visions within business and user contexts to bring stakeholders through a transparent and well-thought-out narrative. Clarifying this story for ourselves and then

carefully structuring it for others before entering executive conversations helps designers balance their creative and strategic contributions.

The adaptation of the Minto framework that we suggest here explores how proposals might achieve a creative and strategic balance. We offer STOVE to share our thinking about one way to build designers' capacity to contribute to business strategy. We offer it as a prototype. Please experiment with it, test it out, and adapt it to your needs and context. Leaders might use it as a brainstorming tool or try restructuring a previous presentation within this framework to discover how it changes the argument. We will continue to share it with design leaders in our practices. We hope that design and business scholars might take up further research to study and evaluate how designers can best harness vision in business contexts. There appears to be very little research on this so far. We hope to spark a continuing conversation about visioning and proposing change. ■

