

**THE VISION INTEGRATION PROCESS:
LEADERSHIP, COMMUNICATION, AND A
RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF VISION**

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the problem of how to align employee behavior and decisions with the strategic direction and goals developed by organizations. Specifically, this study aims to develop and test a theory concerning the leadership and communication processes involved in linking organizational vision with the actual work behaviors and decisions of employees in order to strategically align behavioral activity toward organizational ends. This 'vision integration process' was assessed with organizational commitment as the dependent variable. The hypothesized research model, which was developed from the academic disciplines of communication and leadership, is offered to initially test the basic linear relationships involved in the vision integration process. A sample of 1,481 employees from a large northeastern supermarket chain completed surveys, and structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the results. Results supported all four hypothesized relationships of the basic model. A more complex theoretical model was then analyzed, comparing measures of vision-related leadership and communication, with various goodness of fit indices being found significant. A reconceptualization of vision for research and practice is offered, as well as future enhancements for this line of research.

INTRODUCTION

The use of vision by leaders within organizations reflects the strategic direction and values of those organizations. But once an organizational vision is developed, its implementation does not just automatically happen. Instead, the communication and implementation of vision are a means to strategically align organizational activity. More specifically, however, vision implementation may be improved by not only the *communication* of vision, but its *integration* into actual employee work behaviors and decisions. Thus, integrating vision into employee work behaviors and decisions is a process to align organizational behavior toward the accomplishment of that vision. While there have been many theoretical discussions and only some empirical support (e.g., Westley & Mintzberg, 1989; Baum, 1995) concerning the impact of vision on organizational effectiveness, research on the *process* through which this occurs has been neglected. It may be true that higher levels of vision communication and integration will be associated with higher levels of organizational commitment on the part of employees working in the organizations of today. The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, this study aims to examine this process by using a basic hypothesized research model of the communication and integration of organizational vision, where vision is seen as an innovation to be used by managers and employees throughout organizations. Second, this study attempts to compare a more intense *communication-oriented type of leadership* against the high standards of three well-known and published measures of leadership dealing with vision and its articulation.

The first section of this paper will address the theoretical background concerning the use of vision in leadership and how vision can be viewed as an innovation itself. The

next section will highlight the importance of vision as an innovation to be used within organizations. The hypothesized research model, using a diffusion of innovations framework, that is being tested against more well-established transformational and charismatic leadership measures dealing with vision will then be described in the third section with the study's hypotheses. The paper will then follow the traditional format describing methodology, results, and theoretical contributions of this study.

LEADERSHIP LITERATURE

Vision, defined as a representation of shared values reflecting an ideal future state (House, 1977), has been a key component in many leadership theories (e.g., House, 1977; Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Kouzes & Posner, 1987, 1995; Nanus, 1992; Locke, Kirkpatrick, Wheeler, Schneider, Niles, Goldstein, Welsh, & Chah, 1991) because it can serve as an aligning function for organizational activity. These theories also extend beyond simply espousing a vision, including leadership actions that are intended to further the impact of vision on followers. Locke, Kirkpatrick, and colleagues call these *vision implementation behaviors* (Locke et al., 1991; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). For example, vision implementation behaviors include serving as a role model (e.g., Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House, 1977; Locke et al., 1991), providing intellectual stimulation (e.g. Bass, 1985; Kouzes & Posner, 1987), giving individualized support (e.g., Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1987), recognizing accomplishments (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Locke et al., 1991), and managing information through task cues (e.g., Yukl, 1989; Locke et al., 1991).

In addition, these theories often advocate the communication of the vision to the

extent that it is shared, intelligible and even relevant to the leader's followers (e.g., Bennis & Nanus, 1985). These theoretical explanations, however, stop short of extending to leader communication strategies and training methods that seek to specifically integrate the vision into behavior and decisions at all levels of the organization. In other words, when it comes to 'implementing' the vision, these well-established theories explain the behavior of the heroic founders, CEO's, and top executives much better than they do the behavior of leaders and followers present at every level of organizations whose responsibility it is to enact the vision in daily organizational life. Furthermore, previous conceptualizations of vision often reflect a 'romance of leadership,' whereby positive organizational outcomes are mistakenly attributed to the visions of these top executives (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). Thus, future research needs to improve the generalizability of theory to a greater number of contexts and levels within organizations. After all, organizational vision is not just a torch meant to illuminate the future and guide action for top executives alone; rather, it needs to show the desired path for every organizational member who must also make the journey.

While much work has been done to support leadership theories that incorporate the use of vision, the full impact of organizational vision as an aligning function within organizations has yet to be realized in theory or practice. Unfortunately, leadership research and practice have thus far missed three critical steps in using vision to align employee behaviors and decisions toward organizational-level goals: Employees should 1) know and understand the vision of their organizations; 2) perceive that vision as something that is compatible and applicable with the specific work they do; and subsequently, 3) use the vision as a guiding framework in their particular jobs. These

three critical steps are the result of a communication process that leaders should focus on in order to use the organization's vision to its full potential, rather than having employees think that the vision is just meaningless management/corporate jargon. Thus, it is through such a dialogue between leader and subordinate that Eisenberg (1984) believes that leaders have the potential to positively construct organizational reality through communication. Attaining the goal of diffusing vision is a substantial responsibility for leaders in today's complex organizations, and its realization can only be accomplished by understanding employee *perceptions* of their organization's vision (Goldhaber, 1993). An organization's vision should be seen by all employees as what guides organizational activity, and thus should be integrated into their work. This seems especially relevant when organizations are becoming increasingly horizontal and less reliant on constant supervision and more reliant on empowered and self-managing individuals and teams. The point, then, is not just to have a 'well developed and implemented vision.' Rather, the vision needs to actually be *integrated* into work behaviors and decisions *at all levels* of the organization. As Meindl (1998: 21) argues, "Modern leadership is about empowering others, and discretion, authority, and responsibility that is pushed down and throughout the organization...Sound chaotic? Sure it does if you believe that there are no substitutes for hierarchical control." Thus, when organizational vision is behaviorally integrated into employee work roles, there may be less of a need for such strict hierarchical control.

After reviewing the organizational literature on vision, Hickman & Silva (1984) come the closest to extending this far down the organizational hierarchy. They advocate leaders translate the vision into a reason for being for each employee by continually

relating the vision to their individual cares, concerns, and *work* (my emphasis). I argue that while leaders play an important role in the diffusion of vision, we should focus less on how leaders ‘implement vision,’ and more on how leaders help every employee integrate vision into their own work behaviors and decisions.

While previous theoretical extensions have neglected *the process* through which vision can be linked with work, this study seeks to extend the role of vision implementation behaviors (e.g., managing information through task cues, Yukl, 1989; Locke et al., 1991) with the use of a more *communication-oriented process* perspective. With this perspective, the communication of vision may lead to the integration of vision into the work behaviors and decisions of managers and employees throughout organizational hierarchies. It is important to note that there is much value in studying how this process occurs. Understanding this process may help prevent employee perceptions of vision as just rhetoric that no one believes or just words printed on organizational artifacts. These types of perceptions not only do a disservice to the organization, but limit the potential of the vision as “the primary guiding force of all organizational activity” (Locke et al., 1991: 61).

Vision, as a ‘primary guiding force,’ can also be seen as *an innovation* that can help align work behaviors and decisions within organizations. The more this innovation is adopted and used inside an organization by applying it to work behaviors and decisions, the more organizational activity may reflect the vision being implemented. To make the innovation under discussion more easily understood, a couple of examples should help explicate the meaning of this innovation. If an organization’s vision and strategy focus on excellent customer service, managers and employees alike need to

participate in communication that specifically serves to help them integrate excellent customer service into their work behaviors and decisions. If an organization's vision focuses on quality, all employees need to make sure quality embodies every work behavior and decision they initiate. While unfortunately this seems incredibly obvious, organizational vision is usually not used this way. Very few companies successfully use communication strategies and training to integrate vision directly into work behaviors and decisions. An example of an exception might be 3M's being in the 'business of innovation,' not just making products. Here, the vision *is* innovation and is actually embodied by the work behaviors and decisions of most 3M employees.

IMPORTANCE OF VISION AS AN INNOVATION

Innovations of products, services, *and organizational processes* are obviously important for strategic advantage, and ultimately, organizational survival. Barnett (1953) argues that innovation occurs when there is a linkage or fusion of two or more elements that have not previously been combined. In the case of vision, innovation occurs when an organization's guiding vision is linked to the specific work behaviors and decisions of employees. Understanding the need for such an innovation is the first step in the innovation-development process (Rogers, 1995). Furthermore, an innovation is a kind of social change that has the potential to alter the function of the social system (Barnett, 1988). Since the vision should be the guiding force for organizational activity, vision (as an innovation) is certainly capable of altering such functions within organizational systems.

The importance of this innovation is clearly being overlooked at the top levels of organizations, as evidenced by the results of a recent study of CEOs' attitudes about their

own organizations' visions (Larwood, Falbe, Kriger, & Miesing, 1995). Out of 26 descriptors of visions, CEOs ranked all three communication-oriented descriptors (i.e., 'widely accepted,' 'well-communicated,' and 'understood') toward the bottom of the list reflecting how well the descriptors applied to their own organizations' visions. This empirical study reflects the perceived lack of success in using communication-oriented processes to improve the utility of vision. Moreover, the next step beyond leaders communicating the vision is actually *integrating* the vision into work behaviors and decisions of employees. This topic is neglected not only in practice, but in research as well. Unfortunately, this continued devaluing of communication processes comes decades after the diffusion literature began. For example, Stein (1963) states that innovation occurs within the individual as a function of social transactions during which information is made available to the potential innovator. More specifically, it can be expected that increased communication between leaders and subordinates concerning vision may lead to that vision being used more to guide the work behaviors and decisions of those subordinates. Such a result can be considered an innovation in *work processes* within organizations.

Even research that has successfully examined the content of organizational visions with regard to communication factors has made some errant assumptions, reflecting a lack of appreciation for the communication (and especially the integration) aspects of vision. Although the valuable line of research conducted by Larwood, Falbe, and colleagues (e.g., Falbe & Larwood, 1996; Larwood, Falbe, Kriger, & Miesing, 1995) used vision descriptors from well-documented theories of leadership, these interesting studies on the structure of vision continue to ignore the importance of vision diffusion

throughout the organization by only examining the top levels methodologically. These studies include a measure of, “To what extent do others at the top of your firm share this vision?” (e.g., Larwood et al., 1995; Falbe & Larwood, 1996). A more comprehensive measure of vision would include: 1) “To what extent does every executive, manager, and employee within your firm share this vision?” and in addition, 2) “To what extent does every employee not only ‘share’ this vision, but actually integrate it into his or her actual work behaviors and decisions?” Also, these researchers write that a possible explanation of their results is that the communication-oriented descriptors (described above in Larwood, 1995) “are of less concern and possibly of less import” during the deployment of vision, as compared to profit orientation for example (Falbe & Larwood, 1996: 22). Thus, the importance of vision as an innovation becomes more apparent. The communication and integration of vision should be of the utmost importance when CEOs and top management teams deploy a vision; without these processes the potential of the vision to align organizational behavior will surely not be realized. In fact, getting the message through about the vision may even significantly affect organizational performance, as supported empirically by Baum (1995) and other more observational and case-based studies (e.g., Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989). Thus, the main purpose of this study is to empirically test these processes and their relationships with the organizational commitment of employees using a basic hypothesized research model. Secondly, this study attempts to examine these processes in a more complex theoretical model, whereby comparisons are made between vision communication and more well-known types of leadership behaviors dealing with vision and its articulation. These comparisons will be conducted in the context of the vision integration process

itself, and the resultant relationships with organizational commitment.

Diffusing the vision as an innovation is also an effective way to tap into the knowledge, skills, and creativity of employees at all levels of organizations (e.g., Robinson, 1997). Thus, only when communication concerning the innovation is two-way in direction between leaders and subordinates, following a convergence model of communication, will ideas about how best to integrate the vision emerge. Employees responsible for their own work behaviors and decisions will probably know the best possible ways this integration should occur (Meindl, 1998). Consequently, individuals *own* knowledge and it only becomes an organizational asset when it is shared (Handy, 1994). Similarly, those leaders encouraging the use of vision should try to develop the capacity of their subordinates to creatively integrate the vision into their own work behaviors and decisions. Thus, using vision can help innovate strategies and modes of working for potentially every employee capable of doing work differently than the status quo (e.g., Hamel & Prahalad, 1994). Furthermore, when employees integrate the vision into their work and begin to share the vision with others, organizational learning is facilitated (e.g., Senge, 1990). An indirect result of the adoption of this vision innovation might also be more empowered individuals and teams that feel they have the license and responsibility to base their behavior and decisions on the organization's vision, rather than always looking to their superiors for direction.

The alignment of people and systems within organizations, as well as the alignment of organizations with their outside environments, also supports the importance of vision integration. If the communication of a vision of quality, for example, is a primary way to get groups of individuals aligned behind the overarching goals of quality

in an organization (Darling, 1992), integrating vision into actual work behaviors and decisions through specific training methods should yield an even greater degree of alignment. Also, if employees integrate an organizational vision that reflects direction within the external environment, such interconnection may enhance innovativeness or adaptation at the firm level (e.g., Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). For example, one way organizations may adapt to the external environment and stay competitive is through the adoption of computer-related technologies. Thus, vision integration may be particularly influential, just as vision itself was found to be in the diffusion and adoption of such computer-related innovations (Willcocks & Mason, 1988).

The final reason why vision as an innovation itself is important is that organizations simply can not risk having their visions perceived as merely words on paper that do not direct organizational action (Coulson-Thomas, 1992). Lippitt (1997) reports that recently a national retailer failed to have its vision communicated clearly (let alone integrated), and the organization's employees were simply confused. The vision, including elements of empowerment and freedom *for customers*, was mistaken by employees as empowerment and freedom *for themselves*. Thus, once the vision is developed, its communication and integration into work behaviors and decisions do not just happen by themselves. And simply delegating such important processes to staff within public relations or human resources is insufficient because these functions have little to do with "translating vision statements into concrete operating plans or strategies" (Lippitt, 1997: 19). Thus, Lippitt (1997) argues that because employees often perceive vision as a vague statement, it is necessary to translate the message with greater levels of detail in order for them to understand the implications and benefits. This involves leaders

interacting with their subordinates to address their questions, concerns, and creative ideas about how vision should be integrated into their work behaviors and decisions. Without such detailed attention and learning, organizational vision may be seen as meaningless, and the potential of the vision to align organizational activity may never be realized.

In a very important article on the use of vision, Baum, Locke, and Kirkpatrick (1998) recently published the first study showing the significant impact of *vision communication* on organization-level (SBU) performance (i.e., venture growth). This study makes a valuable contribution in the area of vision research because it begins to focus on the communication aspects involved in the use of organizational vision. The vision communication construct in this study, however, is operationalized by only two dichotomous (yes/no) items: 1) “Does your company have a written vision?” and 2) “Has your CEO talked about a vision for the company?” Also, these items were answered by only one employee from each company who worked directly with the CEO. Consequently, while this study takes a critical first step toward assessing the impact of vision communication, there is still much research to be done on the communication and integration of vision at all levels of the organization (not just the top levels). Again, the study described in this current paper offers two research models to help explain the processes involved in vision communication and integration and their relationship to organizational commitment.

HYPOTHESIZED RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Variable descriptions and relationships can be seen in Figure 1. The hypothesized model for this study changes the focus of the model by Baum et al. (1998) in five fundamental ways. First, there is a more intense focus on the *communication* of vision

within a diffusion of innovations framework (Rogers, 1995). This, in part, is an attempt to address the fact that communication processes have been virtually ignored in the study of leadership and vision (Zorn, 1991). With the novel application of a diffusion of innovations framework to the study of organizational vision, vision can be viewed as an innovation that can be potentially adopted and integrated into work behaviors and decisions of employees. The long and rich history of literature on how innovations diffuse through social systems serves as a valuable resource for empirically testing vision communication and integration. While most of the leadership literature prescribes ‘successfully articulating a vision,’ no published research has viewed vision *as an innovation*. Using a diffusion of innovations framework provides significant insight into how to diffuse a vision innovation through social systems (e.g., organizations). The vision integration process from the hypothesized model parallels the innovation-decision process described by Rogers (1995) (See Figure 1). Potential adopters (employees at all levels) of the vision innovation may go through the process of gaining *knowledge* of the vision innovation, *evaluating* the vision innovation, and making a *decision* to adopt and *implement* the vision innovation by integrating it into their work behaviors and decisions.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

The vision implementation behaviors construct (i.e., task cues) from Kirkpatrick and Locke’s (1996) lab study has been altered to reflect a richer *two-way communication* focus rather than just one-way leader-to-follower communication. This first variable in the model, vision communication, includes top-down (leader-to-subordinate) communication involving task cues linking the vision with actual work behaviors and

decisions. However, this variable also includes bottom-up (subordinate-to-leader) communication whereby subordinate input is given regarding the application of vision to work behaviors and decisions (e.g., suggestions, questions, and concerns). It is expected that higher levels of vision communication will result in higher levels of vision knowledge on the part of subordinate employees.

An important dimension of this study is its inclusion of three other well-known leadership subscales dealing with vision and its articulation. There has been much research conducted using these measures, so they were included as a high standard by which to compare the aforementioned vision communication variable. It is my hope that the new vision communication measure will “measure up” to these well-documented leadership subscales that specifically describe leadership behaviors focusing on vision and its articulation. These measures were developed by Conger and Kanungo (1998), Bass and Avolio (1995), and Podsakoff et al. (1990). While these variables are not part of the hypothesized model (Figure 1), they are included in the study as an aggregate standard for leadership behavior concerning vision and its articulation. Thus, during the statistical analyses the relationships between the other described variables and this aggregate measure of vision-related leadership will be assessed.

The second variable, vision knowledge, adds the critical concept reflecting subordinates’ knowledge of the vision. This refers to the degree to which employees actually know and understand what the vision of their organization actually is. No previously published research has measured exactly how much employees at all organizational levels know and understand their organization’s vision. It is expected that higher levels of vision knowledge will be associated with more positive perceptions of

the innovation characteristics of the vision (e.g., higher compatibility).

In the third variable, the innovation characteristics of the vision *from the subordinates' perspective* (rather than the top executives' perspective) are measured using Rogers' (1995) innovation characteristics. These characteristics reflect how the vision innovation is perceived with regard to compatibility, complexity, advantage, observability, and trialability. Such perceptions should have a strong impact on whether or not the vision innovation is adopted and integrated into work behaviors and decisions. It is expected that these innovation characteristics of the vision play an important role in mediating the degree to which employees integrate and use the vision in their work behaviors and decisions.

The fourth variable in this model, vision integration/use, measures the critical concept reflecting subordinates' integration/use of the vision. Vision integration/use refers to the degree to which vision is integrated into work behaviors and decisions, as employees use the vision as a guiding framework for their particular jobs. Again, no previously published research has measured exactly how much employees use their organization's vision to guide their behavior and decisions. Thus, this study extends previous research because employees at all hierarchical levels are assessed on how much (if any) they actually use the vision to guide their work behaviors and decisions. Higher levels of vision integration into work behaviors and decisions mean that the vision is actually being used to guide, and thus align, organizational activity. It is expected that this vision integration process will be associated with higher levels of organizational commitment, as employees will not only be "tuned in" to the long-term ideal future goals of their organization, but actually choose to use the vision as a guide for their particular

jobs.

Finally, this hypothesized model extends the role and measurement of vision communication and integration to leaders and followers at all levels of the organization, not just leaders at the top levels. This improves the generalizability of the organizational vision concept by conceptualizing its use as being valid at a greater number of hierarchical levels within organizations. Since visions are meant to align organizational activity (Locke et al., 1991), they should be conceptualized and measured at all levels within organizations.

Hypotheses

Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized relationships, while the specific hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Vision communication, defined as two-way communication (top-down and bottom-up) inducing employee knowledge of the vision, will be significantly and positively associated with vision knowledge.

Hypothesis 2: Vision knowledge will be significantly and positively associated with innovation characteristics of the vision.

Hypothesis 3: Innovation characteristics of the vision will be significantly and positively associated with vision integration/use.

Hypothesis 4: Vision integration/use will be significantly and positively associated with the organizational commitment of employees.

METHODOLOGY

Pilot Test

A pilot test was conducted on a sample of 79 MBA students from two sections of an organizational behavior course at a large northeastern university. The primary reason for this pilot test was to test the coefficient alpha of reliability for each of the scales not previously used in published research, as well as for the innovation characteristics measure (Rogers, 1995) adapted for vision as the specific innovation under study. The coefficient alpha of reliability for each variable was as follows: Vision communication, .88; vision knowledge, .84; innovation characteristics of the vision, .78; and vision integration/use, .95. The secondary reason for this pilot test was to monitor the administration to see if any of the items were confusing or hard to understand. No respondents reported any difficulties in this area.

Sample and Procedure

In searching for an appropriate organization to conduct this study, two requirements were absolutely fundamental for the integrity of this research design: 1) The organization must have a formalized vision, and 2) the communication of this vision throughout the organization should be seen by top-management as an important process. Once an appropriate organization was found, a large multi-state grocery store chain in the northeast, research access was granted. At this point the researcher met with training and development personnel to ascertain the most beneficial and methodologically sound way to conduct the survey.

It was agreed upon that a focus group would be conducted in order to assess if a cross-section of employees would be able to understand and complete the survey. The

results of the focus group yielded no problems with understanding, or comprehension of, the survey or its subject matter. Furthermore, employees were very comfortable discussing the concepts of vision, leadership, and communication.

After the focus group, a stratified sampling technique was used to select 6,098 employees from all levels of the organization to complete the survey. All upper and middle management and salaried personnel were included in the sample. In addition, a random number generator was used to select lower-level non-salaried employees for the sample. To keep the respondents' answers and information confidential, the surveys were mailed directly to each respondent via the organization's internal mailing system. Management was instructed to allow respondents to complete the surveys on company time and outside the presence of their supervisors in order to increase the response rate for these busy employees. After the surveys were completed, respondents sealed the envelopes and had a choice of either mailing them back via the organization's internal mailing system or by regular U.S. Mail directly to the researcher.

Response Rate, Demographics, and Background Information

The response rate was 24 percent, with 1,481 valid surveys returned (six surveys were returned without being filled out and the surveys completed during the focus group were not used in the analyses). The gender composition was split almost exactly equally, with 50.2 percent female, and the average age was 34.6 years. Thirty percent of respondents had a high school education, 41.6 percent had some college education, 16.1 had bachelor's degrees, and 6.3 percent received education beyond the bachelor's degree. Average tenures were as follows: Organizational tenure, 5.3 years; job tenure, 3.7 years; and tenure under current immediate supervisor, 1.6 years. Twenty-eight percent of the

respondents were classified management, while 72 percent were classified non-management.

Measures

Two-way vision communication. Vision Communication was measured with a seven-item scale by asking employees about their own participation in the communication process, as well as the participation of their immediate supervisor. Specifically, *top-down vision communication* was measured on a seven-point Likert scale anchored with Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7), and was specifically geared toward the leaders' participation in the communication process. Items include: "My immediate supervisor initiates conversation with me about aligning my work behaviors & decisions with the company's vision" and "My immediate supervisor gives suggestions about how the company's vision can be used to guide my work behaviors and decisions."

Bottom-up vision communication was measured on a seven-point Likert scale anchored with Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7), and was specifically geared toward the subordinates' participation in the communication process. Items include: "I initiate conversation with my immediate supervisor about aligning my work behaviors and decisions with the company's vision" and "I suggest ideas to my immediate supervisor concerning how the company's vision can be used to guide my work behaviors and decisions."

Top-down and bottom-up vision communication, or convergence communication, was also measured for instances when neither the supervisor nor the subordinate seemed to initiate the communication. These items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale anchored with Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7), and were specifically geared

toward the participation of *both* the supervisor and the subordinate in the communication process. Items include: “My immediate supervisor and I discuss specific ways for ‘how’ my job can be done in order to be in alignment with the vision” and “My immediate supervisor and I discuss how my work behaviors and decisions should be in alignment with the vision.” The coefficient alpha of reliability for this two-way vision communication measure was .96.

Vision Knowledge. Vision knowledge was measured with a two-item scale using a seven-point Likert scale anchored with Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). These items targeted whether or not employees knew and understood their organization’s vision. Items include: “I understand what the vision means” and “This organization’s vision is easy to understand.” The coefficient alpha of reliability for the vision knowledge measure was .90.

Innovation characteristics of the vision. Innovation characteristics of the vision were measured with a five-item scale using a seven-point Likert scale anchored with Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). This scale asks respondents to rate each of the five innovation characteristics developed by Rogers (1995). Items include: “The vision is *compatible* with my work behaviors and decisions;” “It is *easy to understand how* the vision can be used to guide my work behaviors and decisions;” “There is a *clear advantage* to using the vision as a guide for my work behaviors and decisions;” “It is *easy to recognize* when someone is using the vision to guide his/her work behaviors and decisions;” and “It is *easy to try* to use the vision to guide my work behaviors and decisions.” The coefficient alpha of reliability for the innovation characteristics of the vision measure was .93.

Vision integration/use. Vision integration/use was measured with a seven-item scale using a seven-point Likert scale anchored with Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). Items include: “The vision serves as a ‘mental guideline’ for how to do my job” and “Knowing the vision affects what I think is important when doing my job.” The coefficient alpha of reliability for the vision integration/use measure was .95.

Organizational commitment. Organizational commitment was measured with a twelve-item scale developed by O’Reilly and Chatman (1986). This measure uses a seven-point Likert scale anchored with Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). Items include: “If the values of this organization were different, I would not be as attached to this organization,” “I am proud to tell others that I am a part of this organization,” and “How hard I work for the organization is directly linked to how much I am rewarded.” The coefficient alpha of reliability for the organizational commitment measure was .76.

Leadership with vision. Leadership with vision is a composite or latent variable constructed for this study from the three subscales developed by Conger and Kanungo (1998), Bass and Avolio (1995), and Podsakoff et al. (1990). These subscales specifically describe leadership behaviors that focus on vision and its articulation. All the items are measured on a seven-point Likert scale anchored with Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). Items from Conger and Kanungo’s (1998) Charismatic Leadership Subscale for Vision and Articulation include, “Inspirational; able to motivate by articulating effectively the importance of what organizational members are doing” and “Has vision; often brings up ideas about possibilities for the future.” The coefficient alpha of reliability for the Conger and Kanungo (1998) subscale was .95. Items from

Bass and Avolio's (1995) Transformational Leadership Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Form 5X) Subscale for Charisma/Inspiration include, "Articulates a compelling vision of the future" and "Emphasizes the importance of having a collective sense of mission." The coefficient alpha of reliability for the Bass and Avolio (1995) subscale was .97. Items from Podsakoff et al. (1990) Transformational Leadership Inventory Subscale for Identifying and Articulating a Vision include, "Inspires others with his/her plans for the future" and "Is able to get others committed to his/her dream." The coefficient alpha of reliability for the Podsakoff et al. (1990) subscale was .95. In addition, the coefficient alpha of reliability for the leadership with vision composite or latent measure was .98.

Demographic and background variables. These variables include gender, age, education, organizational tenure, job tenure, tenure under respondent's immediate supervisor, position/level, and store type/location.

Data Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used in the data analysis process using Amos software (Arbuckle, 1997). The paths in the basic hypothesized model, and ultimately in the theoretical model, were tested using this SEM software. It has been recommended that SEM be used to test path models because it accounts for measurement error, tests causality among variables, and yields the decomposition of correlations among variables (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993; Arbuckle, 1997). Medsker, Williams, and Holahan (1994) also recommend the use of SEM because models can be tested for their goodness of fit against the data, and more importantly, these goodness of fit indices are not dependent on sample size. SPSS was also used for data cleaning and preliminary

factor analysis.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the key variables in this study are presented in Table 1. The values on the diagonal represent the coefficient alphas of reliability for the key variables in this study. The intercorrelations among the key variables were all positive and statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level. All correlations were low enough, however, indicating no problems with multicollinearity, with the exception of two of the published leadership subscales. The subscales by Bass and Avolio (1995) and Podsakoff et al. (1990) did exceed the .90 level, but this is acceptable because these subscales are intended to measure the same construct (vision-related leadership). Similarly, the correlations between the composite or latent measure, leadership with vision, and the three published leadership subscales used to make the composite measure obviously exceeded the .90 level. Again, this is expected and completely acceptable, and does not violate any standards concerning multicollinearity.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Preliminary factor analysis was first performed to ensure that all of the items for each variable loaded on one factor, with each variable measuring one separate construct. This was the case for all of the key variables except for the organizational commitment measure developed by O'Reilly and Chatman (1996) which factored into two dimensions. This particular factor loading will be explored in the discussion section. When conducting a preliminary factor analysis on all four of the vision-related leadership/communication measures, including the vision communication variable and

those by Conger and Kanungo (1998), Bass and Avolio (1995), and Podsakoff et al. (1990), results indicated that all four loaded strongly on one factor. In addition, however, the vision communication variable also loaded strongly on a second factor. Consequently, beyond the testing of the hypothesized model (Figure 1) and the four hypotheses described earlier, vision communication was also tested against these vision-related leadership measures in a more complex, theoretical structural equation model.

Although there has been much debate surrounding the handling of missing data in the use of SEM (e.g., Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996; Arbuckle, 1996), it is quite difficult to conduct SEM (e.g., Amos) in the presence of missing data. Thus, after testing to make sure that there were no significant differences on the key variables between cases with missing data and cases without missing data, the more conservative and traditional approach to handling missing data was used. Hence, missing values were replaced with means for each variable (e.g., Schumacker & Lomax, 1996; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996; Little & Rubin, 1987; Brown, 1994; Kim & Curry, 1977; Roth, 1994).

The analysis yielded results that strongly supported each of the four hypotheses illustrated in the hypothesized research model (Figure 1). Hypothesis 1: Vision communication was strongly associated with vision knowledge (Maximum likelihood (ML) = 11.56, $p < .01$). Hypothesis 2: Vision knowledge was strongly associated with innovation characteristics of the vision (ML = 21.44, $p < .01$). Hypothesis 3: Innovation characteristics of the vision were strongly associated with vision integration/use (ML = 65.54, $p < .01$). Hypothesis 4: Vision integration/use was strongly associated with organizational commitment (ML = 27.23, $p < .01$).

While all four hypotheses were strongly supported, completing the first purpose

of this study, the next step was to look at how well the model fit the data. As expected, this simple linear and recursive model did not fit the data very well. To test whether the model does not significantly differ from the data it represents (the null hypothesis), the standard statistic to use is the χ^2 statistic. For the hypothesized linear model the χ^2 was equal to 661.02. This χ^2 value was very high and quite significant even at the $p < .01$ level. However, it is commonly known that large sample sizes such as the one in this study ($N = 1,481$) have a strong effect on the χ^2 statistic (Pedhazur, 1982; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996; Medsker, Williams, & Holahan, 1994; Thompson & Daniel, 1996; Thompson, 1996; Fan, Thompson, & Wang, 1999). Fan, Thompson, and Wang (1999: 57) explain it clearly when they wrote:

“...such an assessment of model fit is confounded with sample size: The power of the [χ^2] test increases with increases in sample size used in the analysis. As a result, model fit assessment becomes very stringent when sample size is large, and a minimal discrepancy between the original sample covariance matrix and the reproduced covariance matrix will be declared statistically significant, and consequently, rejected as having a poor fit with the empirical data.”

Thus, for this study a test of model fit was done with a variety of goodness of fit indices, as recommended by Schumacker and Lomax (1996) as well as Medsker, Williams, and Holahan (1994). As suggested by Maruyama (1998) and Hu and Bentler (1999), this study utilized: CFI (Bentler, 1990); NFI (Bentler & Bonett, 1980); RFI (Bollen, 1986); and TLI (Tucker & Lewis, 1973), as well as the Akaike information criteria (AIC) (Akaike, 1987).

The hypothesized model yielded goodness of fit indices as follows: CFI = .827; NFI = .826; RFI = .710; and TLI = .712, with an AIC of 679.024. Following the .95 ‘rule of thumb’ for these indices (Hu & Bentler, 1999), the hypothesized model did not come close to fitting the data even though all four hypotheses were strongly supported. As a

result, I referred back to the preliminary factor analysis that showed the vision communication measure loading strongly on the first factor with the other three well-known and published leadership measures. The vision communication measure, however, *also* loaded strongly on a second factor while the other three did not. This brings the analysis and results to the second reason for conducting this study: to compare the vision communication variable against a composite (or latent) variable consisting of the well-known vision-related subscales from Conger and Kanungo (1998), Bass and Avolio (1995), and Podsakoff et al. (1990), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 About Here

Figure 2 shows that the latent variable, leadership with vision, and the vision communication variable each have paths extending to the other key variables in this more complex theoretical model. The reason for this is to explore how the new *communication-oriented* leadership variable, vision communication, compares with the composite with regard to influencing the vision integration process (i.e., the other four variables including vision knowledge, innovation characteristics of the vision, vision integration, and organizational commitment). Leadership with vision and vision communication are covariates because they share quite a bit of variance, and loaded strongly on the first factor in the preliminary factor analysis described above. The vision communication variable was not constructed as an indicator on the latent variable (leadership with vision) because it also loaded strongly on the second factor. Hence, the covariate path between them was needed. One other minor point needs clarifying. There is no path between vision knowledge and organizational commitment because the

preliminary analysis described above yielded a positive, but far from significant relationship.

The reader can refer to Figure 2 for a detailed illustration of all of the paths and their relative strengths. However, the most significant relationships and comparisons will briefly be reported here. As shown in Figure 2, most paths were significant at the $p < .001$ or $p < .05$ level with the following exceptions. The $-.02$ coefficient between vision knowledge and vision integration was not significant. Also, the negative coefficient between leadership with vision and innovation characteristics of the vision was not significant. Finally, the positive coefficient between the vision communication variable and vision integration was also not significant. The $.76$ coefficient between leadership with vision and the vision communication variable indicates there is much shared variance but they are definitely separate constructs (as also shown by the factor analysis described previously). In contrast, the three vision-related leadership subscales used as indicators have very strong relationships with the latent variable, leadership with vision, as all of their coefficients are in the nineties. Leadership with vision and the vision communication variable have a similar direct impact on vision knowledge (both significant), while leadership with vision has a stronger direct impact on the dependent variable, organizational commitment. However, the vision communication variable has a much stronger direct impact on innovation characteristics of the vision, and a moderately stronger direct impact on vision integration, than does leadership with vision. In fact, the relationships between leadership with vision and both innovation characteristics of the vision and vision integration are actually negative in direction, with this latter relationship being significant at the $p < .05$ level. The vision communication variable has

a very strong *indirect* impact on vision integration and organizational commitment with the .52 coefficient leading to innovation characteristics of the vision, and the .91 coefficient subsequently leading to vision integration. Eighty-five percent of the variance in vision integration is accounted for by this model, and forty-seven percent of the variance in organizational commitment, the dependent variable, is accounted for.

As compared to the more basic and linear hypothesized model (Figure 1), this theoretical model (Figure 2) is much more complex with more causal paths and interesting comparisons. And of course, this second model fits the data much better than the original hypothesized model. In fact, the goodness of fit for this theoretical model is quite strong, with CFI, NFI, RFI, and TLI all yielding values exceeding the .95 ‘rule of thumb’ for goodness of fit indices. Finally, the χ^2 (1261.405) and AIC (1663.405) statistics are in range, especially considering this large sample size and the 465 degrees of freedom left over.

DISCUSSION

General Findings

Overall, this study demonstrates some very interesting findings surrounding the communication of vision, the manner in which it is perceived by employees, and how it is actually used by employees in their particular jobs, as well as how this process affects the organizational commitment of employees. All four of the hypotheses in the basic hypothesized model (Figure 1) were strongly supported. This is important because no previously published research has focused so intensely on the *communication process* involved in *diffusing* a vision throughout an organization with the result of behavioral integration/use of the vision. Rogers’ (1995) innovation-decision process (see Figure 1)

of first *knowing* the vision, then *evaluating* the vision, then *deciding* whether or not to *implement* the vision served as a valuable framework with which to view the communication of vision. Furthermore, the theoretical model (Figure 2) illustrates that the innovation characteristics of the vision, developed by Rogers (1995), serves as a fundamental variable determining whether employees actually integrate and use the vision in their work.

Another important aspect of this study is the reconceptualization of organizational vision. To the best of my knowledge, no previous research study has explored employee perceptions and use of vision at all hierarchical levels within an organization. This is in direct contrast to previous research not just methodologically, but in the way researchers and practitioners conceptualize vision. Thus, the use of vision as an aligning function within organizations should not just be for CEOs and top executives. Rather, it should be communicated *with* subordinates in a two-way fashion by managers and immediate supervisors at every level of the organization. Only then will vision be fully utilized as “the primary guiding force of all organizational activity” (Locke et al., 1991: 61).

The recent work by Conger and Kanungo (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1998) on one hand seems to bolster this view that vision aligns the attitudes and behaviors of employees at all levels toward strategic objectives. They write, “...a well-articulated vision provides organizational members at all levels with a simple memory tool to align their values, actions, and decisions with the organization’s strategic objectives” (Conger & Kanungo, 1998: 158). In line with the vision integration process described in this paper and tested in this study, these authors go on to say, “charismatic leaders employ a wide range of communications, which are like supporting scripts for the vision. These

may include descriptions of behaviors, values, activities, and immediate-term goals necessary to achieve the idealized, future goals” (Conger & Kanungo, 1998: 165).

On the other hand, Conger and Kanungo’s (1998) conceptualization of vision concerns its articulation and use by charismatic leaders with extraordinary character. These authors typically describe the behavior and articulation of vision by famous founders (e.g., Mary Kay Ash of Mary Kay Cosmetics), CEOs (e.g., Jack Welch of General Electric), and top executives. The point is, if vision is to be communicated and diffused throughout all levels of organizations in order to be integrated into employee behavior and decisions, it should be communicated by the ‘typical supervisor or manager’ who is probably not considered a ‘charismatic leader.’ Thus, it is my view that organizational vision has utility in aligning behavior and decisions outside of its ‘charismatic articulation’ by charismatic leaders who are usually (if at all) at the top of organizations. The same can be said of the high potential and utility of vision outside of its use by ‘transformational leaders,’ who are most effective in large-scale major organizational changes (e.g., Bass, 1995). In other words, because the sample in this study consists of employees from all hierarchical levels, the results of this study support a reconceptualization of vision. This reconceptualization centers around the fact that vision can be communicated by ‘everyday or average supervisors and managers’ to ‘everyday or average employees’ to help these subordinates understand that the vision actually has something to do with their jobs and that they can use the vision as a guiding framework for their work. Furthermore, this process may have an impact on other important dependent organizational variables, such as objective performance levels and perceived satisfaction levels. This study supports this sort of democratization and enhanced

generalizability for the conceptualization of organizational vision.

Specific Findings

Obviously, however, the basic hypothesized model (Figure 1) does not tell the entire story, nor does it adequately fit the data collected. The preliminary factor analysis yielding two separate constructs for the vision-related leadership/communication measures was the impetus for the theoretical structural equation model illustrated in Figure 2. The comparisons between leadership with vision and the vision communication variable are quite interesting. The well-known vision-related leadership behaviors (represented by the leadership with vision latent variable) had a stronger direct impact on how much employees feel committed to their organization. Meanwhile, two-way communication between immediate supervisors and subordinates had a much stronger direct impact on how much the employees felt that the vision was applicable to their job, and how much they actually integrated/used the vision in their work.

The most powerful and one of the most interesting relationships in this theoretical model, however, is the *indirect* effect that two-way vision communication has on how much employees integrate/use the vision in their work, and subsequently, on organizational commitment. This indirect path is very powerful as it strongly affects the way employees perceive the vision as applicable to their job (coefficient = .52), and more importantly, how this significantly impacts how much employees are integrating/using the vision in their work (coefficient = .91). This path, along with two weak and non-significant paths (from vision knowledge and the vision communication variable) and a significant *negative* path from leadership with vision, accounts for eighty-five percent of the variance in how much employees integrate/use the vision to guide and align their

work within the organization. Subsequently, this integration/use of vision has a strong and significant relationship to how committed employees are to their organization. This path, along with the three direct paths (from leadership with vision, vision communication, and innovation characteristics of the vision) account for forty-seven percent of the variance in employees' organizational commitment.

Another very interesting finding from this study is that just because employees have been educated as to what the vision is (vision knowledge) does not mean that they directly integrate/use the vision in their jobs (coefficient = $-.02$, non-significant). The theoretical model (Figure 2) clearly shows that what is important is immediate supervisors educating and communicating with employees about how the vision is compatible with, and can be applied to, their particular jobs (coefficient = $.52$). Only at this point, when employees perceive the vision as applicable (e.g., compatible) with their jobs, do they take the next step and integrate/use the vision as a guide for their work (coefficient = $.91$).

Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations and future directions of this study are discussed together because I view them as a 'double-edged sword.' In other words, because I plan to continue this line of research, the limitations of this current study represent opportunities for further improvement, refinement, and richness of this interesting research. First, qualitative data could be analyzed and paired with the quantitative data for each respondent. Specifically, qualitative data concerning the employees' actual free-recall of the organization's vision could be content analyzed. This would test whether or not the employees actually know the formalized vision, and would provide a much richer context in which to assess the

vision knowledge variable within the vision integration process.

Second, the data (both quantitative and qualitative) could be analyzed by groups, demographics, and background information. For example, hypotheses could be developed and tested concerning differences between hierarchical levels with regard to the variables and the vision integration *process* itself. For example, it may very well be possible that only those at the top and middle levels of the organization actually know the vision; this is a testable hypothesis. This was not done in the current study, as establishing the relationships between the key variables was the focus.

Third, as described earlier, the organizational commitment measure from O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) only factored into two separate dimensions, a merged internalization/identification dimension and a compliance dimension, instead of three as the authors purport. This supports Sutton and Harris's (1993) findings as well. Thus, future research with the organizational commitment construct will either have to modify the current measure or replace it with a more psychometrically sound measure of organizational commitment. Fourth, the length of time since the vision was formulated and communicated (vision age) and organizational tenure could also be controlled for because both of these variables could be related to vision knowledge and the vision integration process. And fifth, the use of other dependent organizational variables should be explored, such as performance levels, job satisfaction, and satisfaction with immediate supervisors.

Sixth (to save the most interesting and important improvement for last), future research in this area should be conducted in a cross-national/cross-cultural context. This is especially vital considering that today's global business environment necessitates

understanding national/cultural differences in aligning strategic functions and behavior. An interesting and fairly recent study by Selvarajah et al. (1995) showed significant differences in the way vision was conceptualized by ASEAN managers. Specifically, vision was seen as an important aspect for top management leadership and for organizational quality, but was *not* seen as an important aspect for *managerial* behavior. This is an interesting finding as vision is seen as top management's responsibility and as a beneficial organizational characteristic, but it is not seen as a leadership issue for middle management. Thus, in conclusion, future research involving the communication and use of vision within organizations would be enhanced with a cross-national/cross-cultural focus and methodological design.

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TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
N = 1481											
1. Vision Communication	4.19	1.67	.96								
2. Conger & Kanungo (1998)	4.41	1.55	.70**	.95							
3. Bass & Avolio (1995)	4.72	1.54	.68**	.89**	.97						
4. Podsakoff et al. (1990)	4.48	1.63	.68**	.88**	.92**	.95					
5. Leadership with Vision (Composite)	4.58	1.53	.71**	.95**	.98**	.96**	.98				
6. Vision Knowledge	5.41	1.54	.29**	.27**	.28**	.29**	.29**	.90			
7. Innovation Characteristics	4.80	1.45	.57**	.41**	.40**	.42**	.42**	.49**	.93		
8. Vision Integration/Use	4.80	1.47	.59**	.40**	.40**	.41**	.41**	.46**	.86**	.95	
9. Organizational Commitment	4.07	.95	.51**	.44**	.41**	.43**	.44**	.29**	.55**	.58**	.76

**p < .01

FIGURE 1

Hypothesized Research Model for the Vision Integration Process

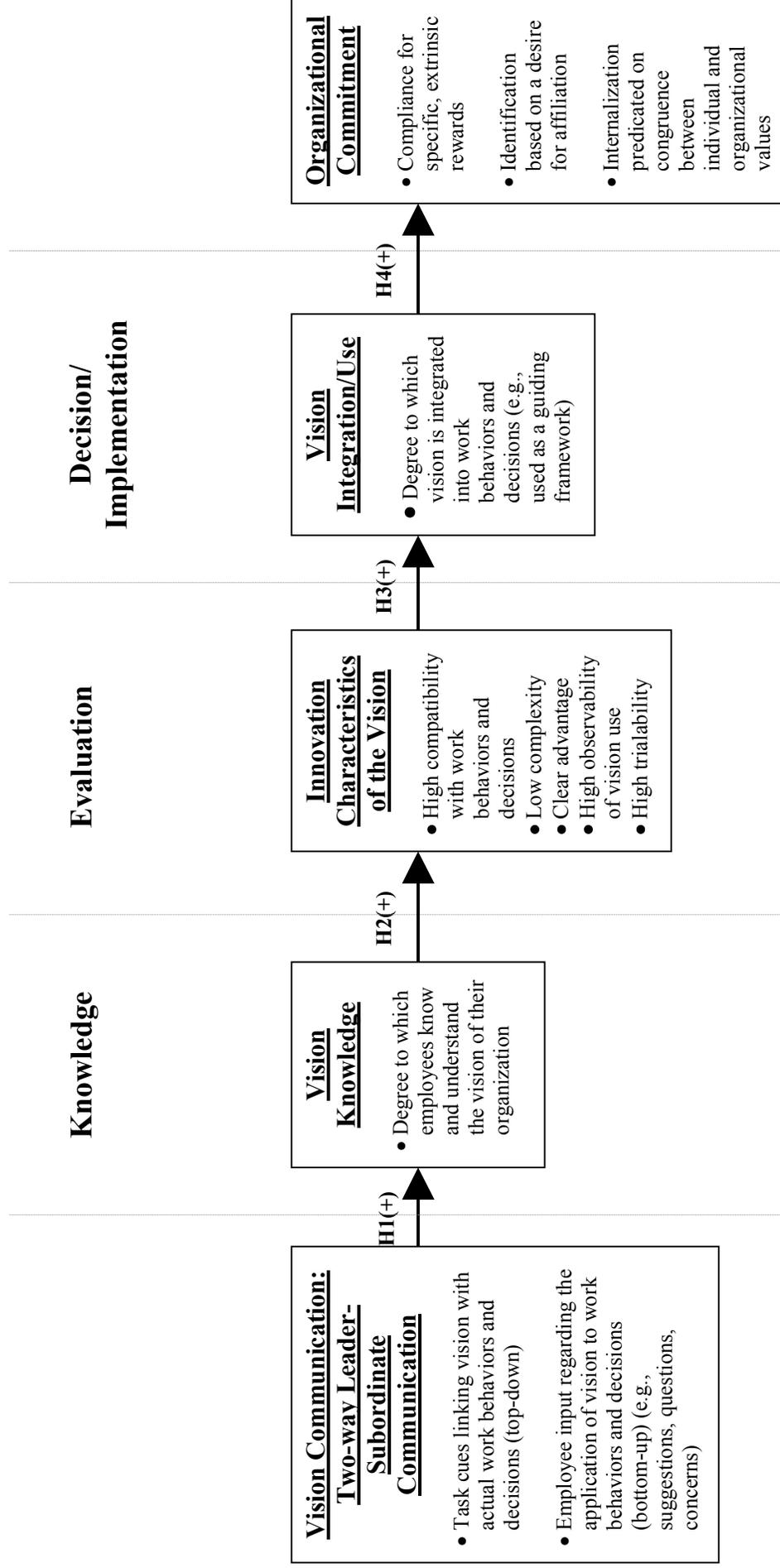


FIGURE 2
Theoretical Structural Model for the Vision Integration Process
(Including Comparisons of ‘Leadership with Vision’ and ‘Vision Communication’)

