

The Venture Must Become More Than a Calculation: Using Imagination to Build a Team and Shape a Future

A venture becomes durable not when it calculates the next useful move, but when it gives people a shared image of a better possibility-and the imaginative force to recognize, believe in, and build it.

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Decision

We should treat imaginative vision as an operating capability of the venture, not as decoration around the strategy.

The immediate problem is not a lack of intelligence, analysis, or effort. A newly formed team can possess all three and still fail to think or act as one. People may understand the plan in fragments while holding no common picture of what the venture is making possible. They may execute assigned work without sharing a sense of why the work matters, whom it serves, or what kind of future it is intended to create.

The recommendation of this memo is therefore straightforward: build the venture around a vivid, shared account of the human and institutional change it seeks to make, and use that account to connect strategy, decisions, language, relationships, and daily execution. This does not mean substituting poetry for analysis. It means recognizing that analysis and imagination perform different but interdependent kinds of work.

Reason identifies relations among known thoughts, enumerates quantities, and emphasizes differences. Imagination acts upon thoughts, unifies them, and creates new thoughts with internal integrity. Reason can tell a team what is different, measurable, feasible, or efficient. Imagination allows the team to perceive what its separate facts have in common, what future those facts might compose, and why that future deserves commitment.

For a venture under pressure to turn ambition into practical results, this distinction matters. The team does not need less rigor. It needs a form of rigor

that can convert knowledge into shared perception and shared action. The central question is not whether imagination is useful. It is what happens when a venture attempts to operate without it.

Context: The Gap Between Knowing and Acting

The source essay uses "poetry" in a broad sense: the expression and operation of imagination. That definition is important because it removes poetry from the narrow category of verse and places it in the wider domain of human creation. Language, gesture, art, social forms, laws, and institutions all begin as ways of representing and organizing experience. In this sense, the poetic faculty is not an optional cultural accessory. It is one of the ways human beings make a world intelligible and inhabitable.

That claim can initially sound too abstract for a venture. A team has customers, constraints, decisions, deadlines, and trade-offs. Yet the essay directly addresses the objection that practical reason and "mechanists" should receive the civic crown while poetry remains merely delightful. Its answer is that utility must be understood in a higher sense. What strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the imagination, and adds spirit to sense is useful because it increases the capacity for durable, universal pleasure and humane action.

This is a useful challenge to a narrow operating definition of value. Immediate utility is not the only utility that matters. A decision can be efficient while weakening trust, narrowing perception, or making the team less able to understand the people affected by its work. Conversely, an activity that appears less directly productive—finding better language, imagining another person's experience, articulating an ideal, or creating a coherent story—can improve the quality of later decisions because it changes what the team is capable of seeing.

The essay identifies the modern version of this problem with unusual precision: society may possess more moral, political, scientific, and economic knowledge than it can translate into practice because it lacks "the creative faculty to imagine that which we know" and "the generous impulse to act that which we imagine." Knowledge is therefore not self-executing. The distance between knowing and acting is partly an imaginative distance. People must be able to picture the significance of a fact, feel some relation to those affected by it, and see themselves as participants in a possible response.

A new venture faces this gap in concentrated form. It may know the opportunity, understand the strategy, and possess a list of priorities. But unless those elements become a shared imaginative structure, they remain separate observations. The team can then fragment into local optimizers: each person makes a reasonable decision from a partial view, while the venture as a whole loses coherence.

The risk is not only inefficiency. It is the gradual exhaustion of language. When no one renews the associations through which a group understands its work, language becomes conventional and eventually dead for the nobler purposes of human intercourse. Words such as "customer," "impact," "innovation," "mission," and "culture" can continue to circulate while losing their power to move thought or conduct. The venture may still communicate, but it no longer creates shared meaning.

The Mechanism: From Imagination to Coordinated Action

The proposed mechanism has four linked parts.

First, imagination creates a unifying picture. It perceives similarities and relationships among things that analysis presents separately. A team's research, product choices, operational constraints, and social consequences can otherwise appear as unrelated categories. A strong imaginative account joins them into an intelligible whole: this is the kind of human situation we are trying to change; this is what a better condition would feel and look like; this is why our particular work belongs to that change.

Second, language preserves and transmits the picture. The essay describes poetic language as "vitally metaphorical" because it discovers relations not previously apprehended and keeps them available until they become conventional. This is the practical value of memorable language. It does not merely make a strategy sound attractive. It allows a group to carry a complex orientation across situations in which the full explanation is unavailable.

A team cannot revisit every strategic premise before every decision. It needs a compact vocabulary that recalls the larger purpose while leaving room for judgment. The language must be strong enough to guide behavior but not so rigid that it becomes a slogan detached from experience. Its task is to make the venture's intended future easier to perceive in the present.

Third, imagination enlarges sympathy. The essay's account of moral action begins with the ability to leave one's own perspective and identify with what is beautiful or suffering in others. A person cannot be "greatly good," it argues, without imagining intensely and comprehensively. Poetry strengthens this faculty as exercise strengthens a limb.

For a venture, this means that empathy is not merely a pleasant interpersonal quality. It is a condition of sound judgment. A team that cannot imagine the lives, fears, aspirations, or constraints of others will make decisions from an artificially narrow world. It may still calculate correctly within that world, but the calculation will not be humane or complete. Shared imaginative work helps the

team understand customers, colleagues, partners, and affected communities as more than abstract categories.

Fourth, imagination organizes knowledge according to beauty and goodness. The essay describes the poetic faculty as having two functions: it creates new materials of knowledge, power, and pleasure, and it orders those materials into relations according to beauty and goodness. Applied to the venture, this means imagination is both generative and selective. It helps the team see new possibilities, but it also asks which possibilities belong together and which should be refused because they would make the whole less worthy of commitment.

This is why the recommendation is not to produce inspirational language after the strategy is complete. The imaginative account should participate in strategy formation. It should help determine what the venture notices, what it treats as a meaningful problem, what trade-offs it accepts, and what kinds of growth would contradict its intended contribution.

Why This Matters for a Newly Formed Team

A newly formed team does not yet possess a common history. It cannot rely on accumulated trust, shared shorthand, or a settled interpretation of difficult events. Under those conditions, the venture's language and symbols carry unusual weight. They become the initial environment in which people decide what counts as important and how their individual work relates to everyone else's.

The essay's example of Homer illustrates the mechanism. Characters embodying the ideals of early Greece awakened admiration; from admiration came imitation, and from imitation identification with friendship, patriotism, and devotion. The point is not that a team should turn its leaders into heroes or manipulate people through theatrical storytelling. The point is that people are shaped by what they are invited to admire. A group's ideals become operative when they are represented vividly enough to enter conduct.

This also explains why explicit moral instruction is insufficient. The essay argues that poetry improves the mind not by presenting ethical doctrines directly but by enlarging the imagination. Direct exhortation can tell people what to value. Imaginative representation lets them encounter the meaning, tension, and consequences of values in a form they can recognize and remember.

For the venture, a list of principles is therefore a weak substitute for a lived picture of how those principles affect decisions. "Empathy," "excellence," or "responsibility" have little force if the team cannot see them operating in a difficult choice. The stronger approach is to describe the kinds of situations in which the venture must remain recognizable to itself: what it protects when speed is

rewarded, what it refuses when growth is available, and how it treats people who possess less power than the organization.

The goal is not to eliminate ambiguity. The essay repeatedly treats imagination as a capacity for holding together contradictory experiences: beauty and deformity, grief and pleasure, eternity and change. A venture will also encounter contradiction. It will have to pursue practical results while preserving long-term trust; move quickly while remaining attentive; simplify decisions without simplifying people. A shared imaginative vision should not conceal these tensions. It should provide a larger frame in which the tensions can be understood rather than denied.

Evidence from the Essay's Account of Cultural Change

The strongest support for this approach comes from the essay's historical claims about how collective life changes.

Poetry is presented as originating language, music, dance, architecture, visual art, laws, civil society, practical arts, and religious teaching. Whether or not one accepts every part of this maximal claim, its operating insight is clear: institutions do not begin as mechanisms alone. They begin as conceptions of how people might live together. Before a law can organize conduct, someone must imagine a relation worth formalizing. Before an institution can become durable, a group must develop language and ideals that make the institution intelligible and legitimate.

The essay treats Athenian drama as a model of integrated culture because it joined language, action, music, painting, dance, religion, and idealized passion into a common effect. This is a useful model for a venture's internal coherence. A company's strategy, product, language, rituals, incentives, and treatment of people are not isolated media. They collectively represent what the venture believes about the world. If they contradict one another, the team receives a fragmented message no mission statement can repair.

The essay also argues that great drama enlarges sympathy by representing suffering and passion, teaching self-knowledge and self-respect rather than merely supplying material for censure or hatred. This suggests a standard for the venture's own narratives and reviews. The purpose of confronting failure, conflict, or harm should not be to produce villains. It should be to increase understanding and improve the quality of future action. A culture that can examine difficult events without reducing them to blame is more capable of learning.

The essay's account of Dante offers another relevant pattern. Dante is described as a bridge between ancient and modern worlds, renewing language and awakening Europe. The metaphor of the bridge captures what a founding team must often do: connect inherited knowledge with an unformed future. The venture should not ask people to

abandon everything that came before. It should help them see which old meanings must be renewed, which assumptions have become dead language, and how the venture's work can connect different communities or ways of thinking.

Finally, the essay concludes that poets precede, accompany, or herald major beneficial changes in a people's opinions and institutions. Poets express forces larger than their conscious intentions and act as mirrors of possibilities the future casts upon the present. The claim is not that every creator predicts the future or that every venture is a historical movement. The more disciplined inference is that imaginative work can make emerging possibilities visible before they are fully organized as strategy or policy.

A venture that can articulate such a possibility may attract commitment that a feature list cannot. It gives people a reason to interpret obstacles as part of meaningful work rather than as evidence that the work lacks meaning.

Objections and Trade-offs

The first objection is practical: imagination cannot pay for execution. That objection is correct if the recommendation is interpreted as replacing operational discipline with inspiration. It is not correct if imagination is understood as the faculty that gives execution a coherent object.

Reason remains essential. It enumerates known quantities, distinguishes alternatives, tests assumptions, and exposes constraints. The essay itself describes reason as an instrument. The error is not calculation; it is the "unmitigated exercise" of calculation without imaginative principles. Calculation detached from humane ideals can produce inequality, luxury alongside want, anarchy, or despotism. In venture terms, it can optimize local performance while damaging the relationships and sensibilities on which durable value depends.

The second objection is that visionary language can become manipulative. This risk is real. A compelling story can conceal weak evidence, excuse poor execution, or demand emotional commitment that the venture has not earned. The answer is not to abandon strong language but to bind it to observable conduct. The venture's vision must make claims about the world that decisions can test. If the team says it is enlarging human possibility, its choices should reveal whose possibility is being enlarged and what costs are being accepted. If it says it is building trust, its operating behavior must make trust more reasonable.

The third objection is that imagination is involuntary and cannot be manufactured at will. The essay says a person cannot simply decide, "I will compose poetry." Inspiration is transitory; conscious labor can preserve and connect inspired moments but cannot summon them mechanically. This places a limit on the recommendation.

Leadership cannot command authentic conviction into existence through a workshop or slogan.

What leadership can do is create conditions in which imaginative insight can be noticed, expressed, tested, and shared. It can protect time for synthesis, invite language that reveals rather than merely labels, and distinguish living ideas from exhausted abstractions. Craft remains necessary even when inspiration is not controllable.

The fourth objection concerns the source's grandest claims. To call poets the founders of civil society or "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" is rhetorically powerful, but it should not be converted into a literal theory that artists alone create institutions. The more defensible proposition is narrower: the values, images, stories, and metaphors through which people understand themselves can influence conduct and institutions even when their creators hold no formal authority.

That narrower claim is sufficient for the venture. The team need not believe that imagination controls history. It needs to recognize that every organization is already shaping perception through its language, examples, product, and treatment of people. The choice is not whether to influence meaning. The choice is whether to do so deliberately and responsibly.

Operating Implications

The venture should make its promise concrete in three connected forms: a shared image of the future, a living language for decisions, and repeated experiences that allow the team to identify with the promise.

The shared image should describe more than what the venture will deliver. It should show what becomes possible for people and relationships if the venture succeeds. It should be ambitious enough to inspire, specific enough to distinguish the venture from any generic claim of usefulness, and honest about the tensions it will have to navigate. It should answer the question: what change in perception, relationship, culture, or institution would make this work worth the difficulty of building it?

The living language should preserve that image without turning it into a dead slogan. The essay warns that language loses force when no new associations renew it. The team should therefore treat important words as working instruments. When a term becomes automatic, it should be reconnected to an example, a decision, or a person's lived experience. Metaphor is valuable here because it can reveal relations that a technical description leaves separate. But metaphors must remain answerable to reality; otherwise they become ornamental rather than clarifying.

The repeated experiences should make the promise visible in action. People learn what a venture values by watching how it handles trade-offs, disagreement, failure, and the interests of those outside the immediate team. The purpose is not to stage emotion. It is to create a pattern in which the team repeatedly sees the connection between imaginative purpose and practical behavior. Over time, that connection becomes part of the organization's character.

This approach also changes how leaders should communicate. The aim is not to provide constant motivation. The essay's account of poetry is more demanding: poetry enlarges the mind, increases sympathy, renews perception, and organizes knowledge. Communication should therefore sometimes make the familiar strange again. It should help the team see the customer, the problem, the colleague, or the consequence without the veil of familiarity. It should also allow sorrow, uncertainty, and contradiction into the account of the work. A vision that cannot contain difficulty will not survive contact with execution.

Assumptions and Measures of Progress

This recommendation rests on several assumptions that should remain explicit.

The first is that the team's primary coordination problem includes meaning, not only information. If the problem is exclusively a missing process or unclear ownership, imaginative language will not solve it. The proposal assumes that people need a common account of significance in addition to a common account of tasks.

The second is that a stronger shared vision can improve judgment rather than merely improve morale. This should be tested through decisions. Does the vision help the team identify relevant consequences, understand affected people, resolve disagreements, and make consistent trade-offs? If it only produces enthusiasm without better choices, it is not doing the work described here.

The third is that the venture's promise can be expressed without pretending certainty. The essay presents poetry as a source of possibility, not as a guarantee. The team should be able to say what it hopes to make true while acknowledging what remains unknown. Intellectual substance and emotional commitment are not opposites; each becomes more credible when the limits of the other are admitted.

Progress should therefore be assessed through evidence of integration: whether people can explain the venture's purpose in their own language; whether decisions across functions reflect a recognizable set of priorities; whether disagreements become more substantive rather than merely personal; whether the team can imagine the experience of people outside itself; and whether the venture's language continues to generate insight rather than becoming ceremonial.

These are not substitutes for financial, operational, or product measures. They are indicators of whether the organization possesses the imaginative capacity required to use those measures wisely. The essay's central warning is that knowledge can accumulate faster than the capacity to assimilate it to human nature. A venture should watch for the same imbalance: more information, tools, and external power without a corresponding increase in understanding, generosity, and coherence.

Open Questions

Several questions should remain open rather than being resolved by rhetoric.

What, specifically, is the future this venture asks people to help create, and can that future be described without borrowing exhausted language?

Which human experiences are currently invisible in the team's analysis because they are difficult to quantify or because the team has become too familiar with its own assumptions?

What forms of imagination does the venture need most: the ability to generate new possibilities, to empathize with affected people, to synthesize conflicting evidence, or to preserve a long-term ideal under pressure?

Where might the venture's promise conflict with immediate utility, and what principles will govern that trade-off?

How will the team distinguish a living vision from emotional manipulation, especially when the venture faces disappointment or needs to ask for sacrifice?

What inherited ideas, categories, or phrases have become dead language inside the organization, and what new associations would make them useful again?

These questions matter because imagination is not a single answer. It is an ongoing capacity to perceive relations, create meaning, and renew the terms under which people act together.

Recommendation and Next Steps

Adopt imaginative vision as a formal part of venture-building. Do not position it as a retreat from strategy, execution, or evidence. Position it as the faculty that joins them.

The immediate next step is to articulate the venture's promise as a picture of changed human or institutional possibility, not merely as a description of the product or near-term utility. Then test that picture against the venture's actual choices. Ask whether it enlarges the team's understanding, strengthens its sympathy,

clarifies its trade-offs, and gives people a reason to act together when calculation alone cannot decide.

Next, develop a small, durable vocabulary that carries the promise into daily work. Retire language that has become conventional without meaning. Replace it with expressions that reveal the relations among the venture's purpose, the people it serves, and the decisions the team makes. The language should be memorable, but its credibility must come from repeated practice.

Finally, treat the team's culture as part of the venture's output. The essay argues that poetry preserves and transmits what is best and most beautiful, renews perception, and creates an inner world that liberates people from accidental impressions. A venture likewise leaves behind more than its immediate utility. It shapes what its members admire, what they can imagine, and what forms of cooperation they consider possible.

The ambition, then, is not to make the team feel inspired for a moment. It is to make the venture capable of inspiring disciplined action over time. The most durable organizations do not merely solve a problem. They give people a new way to perceive the problem, one another, and the future they can build together.

That is the practical meaning of the essay's final claim that poets are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." The people who shape the governing images of a community may hold no formal authority, yet their language can influence what others believe is valuable, possible, and worth doing. A newly formed venture is already participating in that work. It should do so consciously, rigorously, and with enough imagination to make its promise larger than its current limitations-but concrete enough to guide the next decision.