

Memo: Imagination as an Operating Force for the New Team

A venture does not become durable by calculation alone; it becomes durable when imagination gives people a shared picture of what their work can make possible.

To: Founder Subject: Using imagination to unify the team and extend the venture's value

Bottom line

Treat imagination not as decoration around the strategy, but as one of the venture's operating forces. Reason can enumerate facts, compare differences, and calculate consequences. Imagination unifies those materials, perceives meaningful similarities, and creates new thoughts with internal integrity. The team needs both: calculation to decide what can be done, and imagination to understand why it should be done together.

This is the practical implication of Shelley's broad definition of poetry. Poetry is not limited to metrical verse; in its general sense, it is the expression of imagination. Language, gesture, and the arts become ways of representing and transmitting the combined effects of nature, society, and human feeling. For a newly formed team, the venture's language can perform the same unifying function: it can either create a shared world of meaning or leave each person operating from a private interpretation.

Why this matters now

The central risk is not simply insufficient knowledge. Modern society, Shelley argues, can possess more moral, political, scientific, and economic knowledge than it can translate into practice because it lacks both the creative faculty to imagine what it knows and the generous impulse to act on that imagination. A new venture can face the same gap internally: people may understand the plan while remaining unconvinced that it belongs to them, matters beyond immediate tasks, or deserves sustained effort.

Calculation alone also carries a risk. Unmitigated calculation can produce inequality and social danger when it is detached from humane ideals. In organizational terms, a team that optimizes only for immediate utility may lose

sight of the relationships, perceptions, and institutions it is helping to shape. The venture may become efficient without becoming meaningful.

What imagination contributes

1. It creates a common object of commitment.

Poetic language is "vitally metaphorical": it discovers relations that were not previously apprehended and gives them a form others can recognize. The venture therefore needs language that does more than describe its offering. It should make the intended change perceptible-what kind of human relationship, culture, or institution will be different if the work succeeds?

This is not a request for inflated slogans. Language becomes dead when inherited associations are repeated without renewal. The test is whether the team's central language helps people see a real connection between their daily decisions and the larger future they are trying to bring about.

2. It enlarges sympathy.

Shelley's account of moral power is not primarily instruction. Poetry "awakens and enlarges the mind itself." The great secret of morals is a movement beyond one's own nature: the ability to imagine and share the pains and pleasures of others. That makes imagination a leadership capability. It helps the team understand people affected by its decisions rather than treating them as abstract variables.

Repeated imaginative engagement strengthens this faculty as exercise strengthens a limb. The implication is cultural: shared stories, examples, and representations of other perspectives can train the team's capacity for empathy more effectively than moralizing directives alone.

3. It turns separate capabilities into a unified effect.

Shelley presents Athenian drama as a coordinated use of language, action, music, painting, dance, and religious institutions to produce a common effect. The lesson for the venture is synthesis. Strategy, product, communication, leadership, and relationships should not appear as disconnected activities. They should reinforce one intelligible picture of the venture's purpose.

Recommended action

Build the team's internal narrative around three questions:

- What new possibility are we helping people imagine?

- What human relationship or shared condition are we trying to enlarge or repair?
- Which choices would preserve that possibility when short-term calculation points elsewhere?

Use the answers to evaluate decisions, not merely to inspire people at launch. A compelling vision should organize action, sharpen trade-offs, and help the team recognize when an apparently useful choice undermines the deeper value being created.

Guardrails

Do not confuse imagination with willful optimism. Shelley says inspiration cannot be manufactured at will; conscious labor can preserve and connect inspired moments, but cannot simply command them. The team still needs craft, discipline, and reason. Nor should the vision become explicit moralizing. Imagination is more powerful when it enlarges perception and allows people to recognize possibilities for themselves.

The standard for usefulness should also be broader than immediate material benefit. Shelley defines higher utility as what strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges imagination, and adds spirit to sense. By that standard, a venture creates durable value when it produces not only an outcome, but also a more capable, connected, and humane way of seeing and acting.

The founder's task, then, is not merely to explain the plan. It is to give the team a language and image of the future strong enough to coordinate judgment, deepen commitment, and outlast the pressure of the next calculation. In that sense, the venture's most important work may be to become a small institution of shared imagination—one capable of shaping perceptions, relationships, and eventually the world around it.