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Set the Horizon

A practical guide to leading your firm with a 10-year vision

PAY IT FORWARD with Barrett Young

There is a question I hear from firm owners constantly, and honestly, it is one I have wrestled with myself:

How do you set a 10-year vision when you have no idea what the next 10 years look like?

I want to share how I think about this, because I believe it is one of the most important things a firm leader can do, and one of the most avoided.

The Temptation to Skip It

When you are running a firm, there is always something more immediate to deal with. Next tax season. The next hire. The next client problem. The 10-year vision feels abstract by comparison, so it gets pushed.

And when people do sit down to write one, they usually fall into one of two traps. Either they write something so ambitious it feels completely disconnected from reality, or they freeze entirely because the future feels too uncertain to commit to anything.

I understand both reactions. I have been there. But I have come to believe that uncertainty is not a reason to skip the vision. It is actually the reason you need one.

> "UNCERTAINTY IS NOT A REASON TO SKIP THE VISION. IT IS ACTUALLY THE REASON YOU NEED ONE."

The Captain and the Ship

The analogy I keep coming back to is this: leading a firm is like captaining a ship.

The analogy

It is the captain's job to say, "land is that way, we are sailing that way." Not because the captain can see every storm ahead. Not because the route is perfectly mapped. But when the captain points a clear direction, the crew can wake up every morning and do what they need to do. They can face uncertainty within their own roles because they trust that someone has their eye on the horizon.

When the captain does not point a direction, something quietly breaks. The crew starts to second-guess. They wonder if they are backtracking. They lose confidence in where the ship is headed. And over time, they stop investing in the journey.

That is what happens in firms without a long-term vision. People work hard, but without a shared direction, the effort does not compound. It scatters.

Why Three Years Is Not Enough on Its Own

A lot of firms work in three-year cycles, and that is a good practice. But a three-year vision can shift dramatically between cycles. You can do three years of excellent work and end up somewhere you never intended if each cycle is not pointing toward the same long-term direction.

The 10-year vision is what connects those cycles. It makes sure that each three-year push is advancing toward the same general horizon, so that over time, all of that effort actually compounds in one direction.

Without it, you can work hard and still drift.

Principles Over Predictions

Here is where most people get stuck. They think a 10-year vision has to be a specific prediction about revenue, headcount, or market position. And when they cannot make that prediction confidently, they give up on the exercise entirely.

But the further out you look, the fuzzier the future gets. And that is okay. The answer is not to predict more accurately. The answer is to lead with principles instead of predictions.

I have been working on eight guiding principles for my own firm. They reflect what I believe about the future of the profession, the role of the trusted advisor, and what will remain true regardless of how much technology changes around us. They are broad enough to hold up through uncertainty, and clear enough to actually guide decisions.

That is what a 10-year vision can be. Not a fixed destination. A compass.

What This Looks Like in Practice

Here is how I recommend working through this:

01 Start with what will not change

Ask yourself what you genuinely believe about the value of your work, the role of the accountant, and what your clients will always need. Strip away everything that could be disrupted by technology or market shifts. What is left is the foundation of your principles.

02 Name the direction, not just the destination

Your 10-year vision does not have to be a number. It can be a clear sense of the kind of firm you are building, the kind of work you want to be known for, and the kind of people you want to serve. Direction is more durable than destination.

03 Check your shorter cycles for alignment

Once you have a sense of your long-term direction, look at your current three-year picture. Is it pointing that way? Or is it just reacting to what is immediately in front of you? Each cycle should be a step toward the same horizon, not just a response to the moment.

04 Write down your guiding principles

These do not need to be perfect. They need to be honest. What do you believe about this profession? What will still matter in 10 years? What do you want your team to be able to count on, no matter what changes around them? Write those things down and share them.

05 Share the vision with your team

A vision that stays in the owner's head does not function as a vision. It functions as a private hope. Your team needs to know where the ship is headed. When they do, they can navigate uncertainty within their own roles because they trust the direction.

The Uncomfortable Part

I will be honest. Setting a 10-year vision when the future is genuinely uncertain takes a certain kind of discipline. It requires you to commit to a direction even when you cannot guarantee the outcome. That feels risky.

But I have found that the risk of not doing it is higher. When there is no long-term direction, every short-term decision carries more weight than it should. Every setback feels more disorienting. Every change in the market or the profession triggers more anxiety, because there is no steady horizon to return to.

> "THE 10-YEAR VISION IS NOT ABOUT BEING CERTAIN. IT IS ABOUT BEING COMMITTED TO A DIRECTION, SO THAT YOUR TEAM CAN TRUST THE JOURNEY EVEN WHEN THE PATH GETS COMPLICATED."

How to apply this in the next 7 days

Exercise

DAY 1–2	Write down what you believe will still be true about your firm and your profession 10 years from now. Do not filter yourself. Just write.
DAY 3	Identify two or three principles that emerge from what you wrote. These are the things that will guide your decisions regardless of what changes around you.
DAY 4	Look at your current three-year goals. Are they pointing toward those principles, or are they purely reactive to what is in front of you right now?
DAY 5	Draft a short version of your 10-year direction. It does not need to be polished. It needs to be honest and pointed.
DAY 6	Share a draft with one trusted person on your team or in your life. Get a reaction. Refine it.
DAY 7	Commit to sharing it more broadly with your team, even if it is still in progress. The act of sharing it is part of leading with it.

Summary - At a glance

- *Uncertainty is not a reason to skip the 10-year vision. It is the reason you need one.*
- *Your job as a leader is to point the direction, not to predict every storm.*
- *Guiding principles are more durable than fixed predictions.*
- *Three-year cycles only compound if they are all pointing toward the same long-term horizon.*
- *A vision only works if your team knows about it.*

This manual is part of **Pay It Forward**, a series by Anchor focused on sharing the ideas and experiences shaping modern firms.

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