

Creating An Architectural Vision: Collecting Input

By Ruth Malan and Dana Bredemeyer

Bredemeyer Consulting

Email: dana@bredemeyer.com

Web: <http://www.bredemeyer.com>

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A compelling architectural vision is key to the success of an architecting effort (see Mehrdad Foroozesh's article "[The Making Of A Successful Enterprise Technical Architecture](#)"). As part of the start-up phase to the architecting project—we call it Init/Commit (see "[Software Architecture Action Guide](#)")—the vision serves to:

- build management commitment
- align the architecting team

As the project progresses, the vision guides the architects in their scoping and structuring decisions, and is also used to help build broader support for the architecture in the organization.

In creating a compelling vision, it is helpful to understand

- where we have come from (Graphical History¹)
- our current context (Context Map¹)
- our expected future context (Technology Roadmap¹)
- our desired future state (Desired State Interviews)

In this article, we will discuss Desired State Interviews as a means to gathering information from key influencers in the organization.

Desired State Interviews

Desired state interviews stimulate creativity and free the person being interviewed from the shackles of present circumstance by placing her "in the future." From that vantage point, the interviewee is asked to look at the results achieved with the architecture, and the path that was taken to get to there.

Who to Interview

The goal is to create a vision that inspires and motivates. To do that, you need to understand the values of those who you want to champion the vision, and those who you want to buy into the vision. You also want to understand what will be important to your customers in the future. In selecting who to interview, you are trading off the time your team will need to invest in conducting the interviews and analyzing the interview data, with the benefit of making stakeholders feel part of the process and having their inputs play a role in shaping the vision. You should at least include managers who will be called upon to sponsor the architecture, and influential project managers and engineers. To gain an understanding of where your markets are headed, interview lead customers and members of your future product marketing group.

It is sometimes a challenge when starting out with this technique, to ask colleagues, especially senior managers, to imagine themselves in the future. Put aside your preconceptions—this is not child's play. Rest assured, in our experience senior management tends to be most comfortable with this very rewarding technique. Peer engineers may be less receptive, but you can practice with fellow team-mates until you are good at helping a person be comfortable in the imagined future state.

Interview Guidelines

Pick a time in the future when the architecture is complete and its benefits are being reaped. Ask your interviewee to imagine herself at that future time, and ask her to talk about the results she sees and what she hears others saying about the architecture. Help her to "stay" in the future, by staying in the future yourself

¹ These are the tools we use to collect group input (Malan and Bredemeyer, 2000a).

as you ask her questions to stimulate her imagination or to get clarifications of what she is reporting. Ask her to share details. Encourage her to use all her senses, and let imagery and ideas flow unchecked. The more richly imagined, the more inspiring this input will be to the architectural vision.

Once you are sure that the interviewee is comfortable imagining that future state, ask the following questions:

- What do you have, now that you have the architecture in place?
- How do you know you have it?
- What does this get you?

The first of these questions identifies results, the second evidence, the third the underlying value to the interviewee. This latter is the most valuable information of all, as it will help you create a vision that truly motivates.

Tips

- Check to make sure the interviewee is imagining the vision already accomplished, and that you are treating it as such. You should be using the present tense to talk about that future state, and the past tense to talk about what was done to get there.
- Avoid evaluations!
- Encourage people to “just make it up” if they seem to have trouble imagining the future state.

Data Analysis

Once your interviewing is done, the team should meet to put together the information you have gathered and

- sort for common vision elements, keeping as much detail as possible
- look for central themes, unifying imagery and metaphors, etc.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shared a technique that we have found particularly effective in collecting the inputs that will enable one to create a compelling architectural vision. In a future article, we will discuss formulation and presentation of the vision.

Acknowledgments

Desired state interviewing is something we learned from our former colleagues in Hewlett-Packard’s Product Generation Consulting group. We would like to particularly thank Rand Barbano and Ron Crough for their thought leadership in this area. Though some form of desired state interviewing is practiced elsewhere (e.g., Grove Consultants incorporates it in their practice and training), Rand and Ron developed an effective technique and trained our consulting group in its use. What we have presented here leverages what we learned from them and what we have learned applying the technique in the architecture domain.

References

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