BIG IDEA: WHY DID THE IDEA FAIL?

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INTRODUCTION

In December of 2003 Phil Vischer was saying goodbye to a dream. Big Idea Productions, the company he had started, was bankrupt now. Only 45 of the company's 210 employees still worked there and, in a few days, they would be packing up their offices as well. The company had seemed like a family at one time. Big Idea's facility, located in the Yorktown Center mall in the Chicago suburb of Lombard, had once crackled with creative energy. Veggie Tales, a computer-generated animation series designed to teach Christian values to children, had been the company's mainstay. They had sold 7 million videos in 1999, bringing in $40 million in revenue. Vischer had hoped the company would keep growing until it rivaled the Walt Disney Company as a leader in family entertainment. Those hopes were dying a painful death now. Ironically Vischer's sadness was giving way to acceptance, even relief, as he reflected on the past decade and on his company's uncertain future. (Smietana, 2004b, May)

Founding of the Company

Big Idea Productions had started in 1993 in a spare bedroom. A couple in a Bible study group Phil Vischer attended had lent him $60,000 to make the movie he had been dreaming about. (Smietana, 2004b, May) Vischer and his former college roommate Mike Nawrocki developed a universe of talking vegetable characters like Larry the Cucumber and spent several months bringing them to life on the computer. The two of them had written and performed puppet shows as college students so scripting and creating the voices for animated characters was a natural step.

The choice to use vegetables as characters was practical as well as creative. Vegetables do not have arms, legs, or clothing that had to be modeled and animated. Vischer had considered making his starring character a talking candy bar, but his wife warned him that mothers might not respond well to a product that might be accused of making children love candy even more than they already do. Vegetables, on the other hand, were safe. (Luscombe, 2002) Big Idea's first movie, "Where is God When I'm S-Scared?" was unsuccessful until Word Entertainment agreed to distribute it to Christian bookstores. Bookstore employees, many of them college students, appreciated the video's quirky, intelligent humor and played it over and over on bookstore monitors. (Gilbreath, 2002) The company sold 50,000 videos in 1994.
Over the next decade, Big Idea sold more than 25 million Veggie Tales videos. Sales finally peaked at 7 million videos in 1999. Though the company had started out selling its videos exclusively through Christian bookstores, they had entered the mass market by forming a distribution agreement with Lyrick Studios of Dallas in 1998. Veggie Tales videos began to appear on the shelves of Wal-Mart and Target stores. Lyrick Studios was the company that produced the *Barney and Friends* series for children. Vischer had a great deal of respect for Dick Leach, the company's founder. One provision of the distribution agreement with Lyric was

that Big Idea could renegotiate the deal if Lyrick ever changed ownership. They no longer wanted to work with the company if a media giant like Disney were to purchase it. (Vischer, 2006) A legal draft of the agreement was passed back and forth between the companies' lawyers, but never finalized. This would cause problems later. (Evans-Price, 2004)

Company's Mission and Values
In 1997, Vischer read the book *Built to Last* by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras (1994), two researchers from the Stanford School of Business. In the book, Collins and Porras profiled companies like Sony, Ford, 3M, General Electric, and Disney. Reading that companies such as these were guided by clearly articulated goals, Visher began to craft statements of his company's core beliefs and values (See: Table 1).

Table 1: Big Idea's Core Beliefs and Values

Core Beliefs:
*The irresponsible use of popular media has had a profoundly negative impact on America's moral and spiritual health. *The same media, used responsibly, can have an equally positive impact. *The best way to improve people's lives is to promote biblical values and encourage spiritual growth.
Core Values:
*Personal and corporate integrity *Creative excellence and design innovation in all we do *The prioritization of people over products and profits

(Vischer, 2006)

Coming up with a purpose statement was a bit harder. If Vischer's purpose statement sounded too "religious," the media would label Big Idea as, to use Vischer's expression, a group of "right wing wackos." A complete omission of religious interests from the statement would not communicate what the company was really about. Vischer finally crafted the following purpose statement: "To markedly enhance the moral and spiritual fabric of our culture through creative media." (Vischer, 2006)

The book also spoke of "big, hairy, audacious goals," or "BHAGs" like NASA's goal to reach the moon by the end of the 1960s. Vischer's BHAG was "To build the most trusted of the top four media brands within twenty years." He wanted his company's name to be spoken alongside those of Disney, Nickelodeon, and Pixar. (Vischer, 2006)

Growth of the Company
Soon the company had grown so large that Vischer found himself overwhelmed by the responsibility. His training had not been in business, and he became convinced that he needed to bring in outside managers. Impressed by the stories of corporate leaders he had read about in

Built to Last, he sought experienced businesspeople who could take his company to "the next level."

Other entrepreneurs like Michael Dell of Dell Computers, eBay's Pierre Omidyar, and Apple Computers founder Steve Jobs had found themselves in similar situations. Dell had found a mentor in 51-year-old venture capitalist Lee Walker who served as the company's president and CEO from 1986 to 1990. He had helped Dell overcome his shyness, become familiar with business, and, in short, become a leader. (Anderson et al, 1993)

Pierre Omidyar, when faced with a similar situation, hired Margaret (Meg) Whitman, a general manager for Hasbro, Inc.'s preschool division who had previously held top management positions at Procter & Gamble, FTD, Stride Rite, and Disney. Omidyar also managed to bring in Scott Cook, the founder if Intuit, a financial software company, and Fred D. Anderson, the executive vice president and CFO of Apple. Omidyar stayed on as chairman of the board and oversaw the company's overall direction, business model, site development, and community advocacy. (Marino, 2005)

For Steve Jobs, who had cofounded Apple Computer with his friend Steve Wozniak, the choice to bring in more experienced management nearly proved to be his undoing. When Jobs brought in PepsiCo executive John Scully to serve as Apple's CEO, Jobs ended up clashing with the other members of the board of directors and being ousted from the board by the same man he had recruited to run the company. Jobs left the company in 1985 only to return in 1997 as interim CEO. Scully, by then, was no longer with Apple. (Wawro, 1999)

It is interesting to note that the authors of *Built to Last* actually advised against the bringing in of outside executives:

> Simply put, our research leads us to conclude that it is extraordinarily difficult to become and remain a highly visionary company by hiring top management from outside the organization…. Do not fall into the trap of thinking that the only way to bring about change and progress at the top is to bring in outsiders, who might dilute and destroy the core. (Collins and Porras, 1994 page 183)

Vischer's admiration of the companies described in Collins and Porras' study and, perhaps, his desire to shed the weight of corporate leadership and return to the artistic creativity that he enjoyed, led him to disregard the authors' advice. He also failed to consider the importance of the religious element in his company's mission, something that was not an issue at Dell, eBay, or Apple.

Vischer began assembling his new team in early 1998. For his president, he brought in an insurance company CEO who had worked at GE Capital under GE CEO Jack Welch. In 1999, he hired a CFO from Price Waterhouse and a sales and marketing executive with brand management experience at Motorola and Kraft and another marketer from Coca-Cola. None of them, interestingly, had worked in the entertainment industry or in faith-based ventures. Vischer

noted, however, that many large entertainment firms were hiring packaged goods specialists to manage the distributions of videotapes, DVDs, and other widely-distributed products.

At first Vischer was thrilled to have such an experienced team managing the company he had formed. Within a short time, however, he began to lose touch with the company's operations. Before hiring a financial manager, Vischer had developed his own system for keeping up with sales and expenses. After he hired a finance professional, however, he found the company's financial statements filled with foreign concepts like amortization and depreciation and could no longer interpret them. The new team made other choices as well. They raised the salaries of its animators in order to attract talent from large west coast studios like Disney and Pixar. This seemed to fit with Vischer's BHAG of positioning his company alongside Disney in the public consciousness. Each executive also began to build a team. Instead of merely an accountant and a marketer, the company soon had a finance department and a marketing team. Delighted by the growth of his company, Vischer began plans for a new studio that would be set up for public tours. In 1999, his company attended the Christian Booksellers Association convention in Orlando and Vischer was invited to speak at Disney's Orlando animation studio. It seemed, for a time, that Vischer was on his way to achieving his dreams of being like Walt Disney, a man whose accomplishments he greatly admired. (Vischer, 2006)

Problems for the Company

Over time Vischer began to have concerns about some of the choices his new team was making. The management team began meeting without him. Vischer visited his company's website and found that the marketing department had rewritten most of what he had said because, the VP of marketing explained, "It sounded too Christian. It would limit our growth." Increasing the annual salaries of animators raised the price of producing a single Veggie Tales video from $250,000 to over $1 million while the company was still producing only two videos a year. The company's accountant quietly insisted, "We're spending too much money," but the rest of the management team assured Vischer that there were no problems. (Vischer, 2006) The stress of managing Big Idea began to take its toll on Vischer's health. He experienced pericarditis, strep throat, and shingles. (Smietana, 2004b, May)

The growth of the company led to other problems as well. One was the cultural clashes that took place between the company's early employees and those hired later. While Veggie Tales produced Christian videos, not all of the animators hired by the company during its early years shared Vischer's beliefs, and he could not legally justify basing hiring decisions on religion. While he spoke boldly about his company's Christian vision to church groups, he did not feel comfortable discussing his beliefs with his animators. (Vischer, 2006) After the company became more popular, Christian animators from around the country flocked to Big Idea seeking jobs because they believed in the company's message. One of these was Tom Bancroft who left his job as a supervising animator for Disney and took nearly a 50% pay cut to work for Big Idea (Smietana, 2004b, May). Some of the Christian employees began openly and forcefully trying to convert coworkers who were not Christians. Ironically Big Idea, a company that produced

Christian videos, was driven to develop policies limiting evangelistic activities in the workplace. (Vischer, 2006)

Big Idea's financial problems began in 2000. After earning $40 million in 1999, the company's management team had projected that the company's revenues would grow to $125 million by 2002. Based on these projections, they had spent money freely, hiring new staff and signing a multimillion dollar loan agreement. Instead of increasing, however, the company's growth flattened in 2000, and the company could no longer pay its bills. (Smietana, 2004b, May) Big Idea desperately needed to cut costs by laying off employees, but Vischer had promised himself he would never treat his employees that way. Some members of the management team recommended that he outsource much of his company's actual animation work to Canada where it was less expensive, but Vischer was reluctant to take that step. There had to be another way. (Vischer, 2006)

Efforts to Save the Company

One alternative to terminating employees was to somehow increase revenues. If the company could somehow generate enough income to cover its costs, Big Idea could avoid or at least reduce the number of layoffs. In an attempt to preserve the company he founded, Vischer secured a loan to produce a feature film based on the Biblical story of Jonah.(Smietana, 2004b, May) The film was to be released through FHE, a division of Artisan Entertainment, which would give it an instant credibility with theaters that many Christian-produced films lack. (Gilbreath, 2002) *The Omega Code*, a low budget Christian film, had just grossed $13 million at the box office with only $2 million spent on marketing.. Vischer believed his company, with its existing fan base, could easily match *The Omega Code*'s success. If he could produce the film for $7 million and market it for $7 million, box office sales of $18.5 million and video sales of 3 million could cover production costs with profits to spare. (Vischer, 2006) Big Idea also secured licensing agreements for bandages, clothing, toys, books, towels, and a number of other consumer products based on the movie's characters (Gilbreath, 2002).

In the end *Jonah* exceeded the expectations of critics by grossing $25 million at the box office and selling 2.5 million copies, but it was not enough. Production costs had climbed to $14 million, well past the projected $7 million, and Vischer's executives had talked him into spending more on marketing than he had intended. The company's box office proceeds had paid off a loan to the distributor, but did nothing to relieve the financial distress of the company itself. The night of the movie's premiere, Vischer's voice was choked with emotion. Many believed he was excited about the new film, but this was not the case. He knew what his animators did not: The day after the premiere, he was going to have to lay off a number of the people who had worked on the film. Many reacted to their terminations with anger and a sense of betrayal. One artist sent out an email to all of the employees asking if anyone had seen his copy of "Where is God When I'm F-Fired." Vischer, who had viewed the company as a family, was crushed by the layoffs. Big Idea was more than $40 million in debt by 2003. In an effort to change the direction of the company, Vischer ultimately replaced most of the management team he had hired. (Vischer, 2006)

In addition to the *Jonah* film, Vischer had taken other steps to diversify Big Idea's product base. None of them worked out as planned. The company had produced *The Cartoon Adventures of Larryboy*, a 2D animation using Macromedia Flash animation techniques used in shows like Dexter's Laboratory. Fans of VeggieTales' 3D animation did not respond well to the animation, commenting that it looked cheap. *3-2-1 Pen*guins, another Big Idea project, launched with record sales for the Christian video market, but the second and third episodes each sold 25 percent fewer copies than the previous one. Though the videos sold better than any of the other video series on the Christian market except VeggieTales, they did not generate enough revenues to cover the $1 million it cost to produce each of them. Big Idea had worked with Clear Channel, the leading U.S. theatrical production company, to produce a stage show called *VeggieTales Live!* The show opened to near-sellout crowds in Minneapolis and continued to draw crowds in other cities. In spite of the show's popularity, it barely managed to break even. The sets were so elaborate, it took four trailer trucks to transport them instead of the usual two and more union labor to load, unload, and set up. Big Idea worked with Clear Channel to simplify the show, but these efforts came too late. In each case, Vischer had hoped for a financial success that would save his company, but none of his efforts met with the needed success. (Vischer, 2006)

The Final Blow

As the company struggled to stay afloat, it was hit by a lawsuit from Lyrick Entertainment, its former distributor. (Smietana, 2004b, May) Lyrick founder Dick Leach, an elderly man, had begun the process of selling his company and retiring when he died after falling and hitting his head at an airport. Leach's death was a personal blow to Vischer who had liked and respected the older man. Lyrick had been bought out by HIT Entertainment, a large publicly-traded British company. Shortly after purchasing Lyrick to get *Barney and Friends*, HIT also bought out the company that created *Thomas the Tank Engine*. According to Vischer, the new firm was mainly interested in companies it could purchase and not those whose products it simply distributed for other firms. Vischer was not satisfied with this arrangement and was certainly not interested in selling his company to HIT. Though Big Idea's agreement with Lyrick had stipulated that Big Idea could terminate its agreement if Lyrick was ever bought out by another company, that agreement had been passed back and forth among lawyers but had never actually been finalized. (Vischer, 2006, Boliek, 2006) Lyrick Studios, under the control of HIT, filed a lawsuit against Big Idea for breach of contract. Vischer offered to settle with the distributor for $400,000, but they refused. They sued Big Idea for $11 million. (Smietana, 2004b, May) Vischer writes that he was sure the jury would see how flimsy the distributor's case against him was, but was stunned when they ruled in favor of Lyrick. It was this final financial blow that sent the company tumbling into bankruptcy. Even though the suit was later overturned in appeals court, the damage had already been done. The company had already been sold. (Vischer, 2006)

In an interview, Phil and Lisa Vischer remembered times early in the Veggie Tales venture when the money had run out and checks from friends had suddenly appeared in the mail to bail them out. As Vischer walked through the dark, empty offices at Yorktown Mall, it seemed as though Big Idea Productions had finally run out of miracles. (Smietana, 2004b, May)

In December of 2004, Big Idea was sold to Classic Media, a New York-based company that focused on family-oriented properties like *Lassie* and *The Lone Ranger*. Though Classic was not a Christian-owned firm, they supported the values Big Idea promoted. CEO Eric Ellenbogen told interviewers that he would not try to shape the creative content of the VeggieTales videos but would leave it to the creative team that had been working with Big Idea for years. Ellenbogen said that even if the *Jonah* film had been more successful, it still might not have been enough to save Big Idea from bankruptcy. He warned that success can make filmmakers believe they have a secret formula for making successful movies. "Then you make a second feature, and it's a flop and you lose everything. There is no secret formula." (Smietana, 2004a, May)

On a December day, Phil Vischer walked through the company's offices and reflected on the events that had led to his company's rise and its long, painful decline. Big Idea would move its offices to Nashville, Tennessee, the following summer. Mike Nawrocki, who had co-founded the company with Vischer, would remain with the company. (Smietana, 2004, February) Vischer planned to stay behind in Chicago, but hoped Classic Media would allow him to work as a part-time writer and director (Smietana, 2004b, May).

Vischer's Reflections

After the selling of his company, Phil Vischer reflected on the decisions he had made. What would have happened if he had been content to keep his company small, to be a successful niche player, instead of trying to duplicate Disney's success? Instead of raising salaries to compete with West Coast studios, should he have viewed his studio as a training ground for younger animators? Collins and Porras (1994), the authors of *Built to Last* had written that a company should have a BHAG, a "Big Hairy Audacious Goal," a big and outrageous dream to strive for. Vischer's BHAG, "To build the most trusted of the top four media brands within twenty years," now seemed absurd to him. He felt that he had let his own ego, his own dream of being "the next Walt Disney" influence his decisions too much rather than taking the time to think and pray over them. (Vischer, 2006)

Though Vischer was still involved with the creation of VeggieTales videos, he was no longer involved in the daily activities of the company he had founded. He had started over with a small animation studio in Chicago. He explained his choice to name the studio Jellyfish Studios: "Jellyfish can't locomote. They can't choose their own course. They can go up a little, and they can go down a little, but to get anywhere laterally—to get from point A to point B—they have to trust the current." (Vischer, 2006)

"Where I am tomorrow is none of my business," Vischer said at a graduation speech. "So our plan at Jellyfish—and it's an odd one, I'll admit—is to make no long-range plans unless God gives them explicitly. No BHAGs, no inspiring PowerPoint vision statements. Just a group of people on their knees trusting God for guidance each day. Holding everything loosely but God himself." (Vischer, 2006)

Organizational Life Cycle

The Organizational Life Cycle (OLC) model uses a biological metaphor in discussing and analyzing the stages organizations pass through. Lester, Parnell, and Carraher (2003) describe the life cycle as "more of a collective interpretation of the organization's environment" and not something firms uniformly and inexorably pass through. Davis (1951) proposed one of the earlier life cycle models and a number of other writers have expanded upon the idea since then. Greiner (1972) described the stages of the life cycle as a set of stages with each ending in a crisis.

Phase 1: Growth through creativity leads to a crisis of leadership. The firm starts out creatively, but founders must develop a more formalized set of management practices or bring in someone who is capable of putting a formal structure in place.
Phase 2: Growth through direction leads to a crisis of autonomy. Top level managers have to delegate more and more authority to lower level managers as the firm continues to grow.
Phase 3: Growth through delegation leads to a crisis of control. This stage involves a clash between employees who are used to operating autonomously and managers who perceive that they have lost too much control and must reestablish their authority.
Phase 4: Growth through coordination leads to a crisis of red tape. The accumulation of policies and procedures bogs the firm in bureaucracy. This slows decision-making and hurts innovation.
Phase 5: Growth through collaboration is characterized by the use of teams, reduction in corporate staff, and simplification of systems. The author did not formally propose a crisis for this stage.

Using Greiner's (1972) framework, Phil Vischer faced the first crisis and brought in managers to give his business a formal structure. He faced the second crisis as he hired more and more managers to handle operations in the various departments. He was happy, at first, to hand the responsibilities over to someone else. Then he found the firm changing in ways he did not intend as the managers he had brought in redefined the firm, added staff, and raised salaries. The managers of the various departments became too comfortable with managing their own affairs free of Vischer's "interference" and Vischer faced the crisis of control described in Greiner's third phase. Instead of the company moving smoothly ahead with a group of capable managers at the helm, the crisis ended with Vischer dismissing some of his managers to reestablish control. Instead of moving ahead to Phase 4, the company moved back to Phase 2 as a new set of lower level managers was brought in.

Hanks, Watson, Jansen, and Chandler (1994) conducted an empirical study of the life cycles of technology firms. They gathered information about the ages, sales levels, numbers of employees, and organizational structures of the companies. They received data from 126 firms and identified the following life cycle-based clusters:

Table 2: Life Cycle Clusters for Technology Firms:

Cluster/Stage	Mean Age	Mean Sales	Mean Sales Growth	Mean No. Employees	Mean Employment Growth	Mean No. Specialized Functions
Cluster A: Stage I	4+ yrs	$271,000	93%	6.46	29	1.5
Cluster B: Stage II	7.36	$1.4 million	297%	23.64	94%	4.91
Cluster C: Stage III	6.66	$3.7 million	99%	62.76	28%	10.17
Cluster D: Stage IV	16.2	$45.76 million	37%	495	57%	15.3
Cluster E: Stage IB	18.7	$410,000	34%	7	-.01	.57
Cluster F: Stage II B	12.66	$2.05 million	44%	24.65	.04	6.17

(Hanks, Watson, Jansen, and Chandler, 1994)

Cluster A: Stage I: This first cluster consists of young, small firms. Management was highly centralized and very informal. The most consistent specialty is research and development, present in 86% of firms and the priority is product development.

Cluster B: Stage II: This second cluster consists of slightly older and larger firms. These companies have generally adopted a functional structure, with 50% of them including specialized sales and accounting departments in addition to research and development.

Cluster C: Stage III: Firms in this cluster are slightly younger than those in Stage II, and are growing rapidly with an average of four levels of management. Specialized functions added from the previous stages include shipping and receiving, finance, purchasing, quality control, customer/product service, production planning and scheduling, and payroll.

Cluster D: Stage IV: This cluster consists of mature companies. While the majority had adopted functional structures, divisional structures had also emerged in several. Centralization was low and formalization was high. Specialized functions not found in the previous stages included personnel, building maintenance, advertising, marketing research, and inventory control.

While the firms in clusters A-D seemed to represent consecutive life-style stages, those in clusters E and F apparently represented alternative paths. Though still, on the average, experiencing some financial growth, they were not as large as their same-age counterparts in other clusters.

Cluster E: Stage IB: Companies in this cluster are older than their cluster A counterparts. They exhibited virtually no specialization and less than two organization levels and employed a simple

organization structure. In contrast to Stage I firms, only 14% employed a full-time R&D specialist. These may represent life-style firms where the owners have chosen to keep their firms small.

Cluster F: Stage IIB: These firms were older than their Cluster B counterparts, with an average age of 12.66 years. Most firms used functional departmental structures, though some still used a simple structure. Employee growth is slow (around 4%) but sales growth is almost 44%. Like Stage II firms, these employee specialists in research and development, sales, and accounting and also have customer/product service and production planning and scheduling.

Where would Big Idea have fit into this cluster when it started having problems? In 1999, the five-year-old company earned $40 million dollars. At its peak, it had employed 210 people. The size of the company was more comparable to the mature Cluster D firms while its age was closer to the younger Cluster C firms. The company had experienced phenomenal sales growth in a short amount of time. It is unfortunate that the circumstances and decisions that followed led to its bankruptcy.

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