

On Visionary Leadership

By Katherine Ebner

Visioning is a proven and practical process for moving you and your organization or community from where you are today to where you want to be in the future. Articulating a vision is a crucial leadership skill, one required for effective leadership in an increasingly fast-paced and changeable world. Yet, the process of visioning is still little known and understood, despite the fact that great leaders have been using this skill since ancient times, when indigenous leaders relied on visions to guide the future. We recall the vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. whose dream inspired a movement and significant change in the world. Or John F. Kennedy's leadership vision, which included putting a man on the moon within a decade of his speech. Your own vision as a leader will serve to focus and guide you and others to the future you want to manifest.

“But I’m not visionary...”

“I’m not really visionary,” confides the newly appointed CEO. “I know I’m supposed to have a vision, but I’m not sure how to go about it.” We hear this often as leadership coaches who work with vision development. Many people struggle to feel confident using the skills of vision. Misperceptions about vision can inhibit people from fully developing and utilizing this powerful skill. For instance, many leaders believe their visions must be extraordinary and grand in order to be worthwhile and are unsure of their own ability to generate and deliver on such a vision. Others say that they are uncomfortable imagining the future, stating that they prefer working with “reality” than working from the “possibilities-thinking” that vision calls for. Still others admit being afraid that if they articulate a vision and don’t achieve it, they will lose credibility and appear foolish. And many people believe that they simply don’t have time to develop and gain buy-in for vision, even if they knew how to do it.

Leaders today must not hold back from being visionary. There is no advantage to the leader—or the organization—for tentativeness. Vision is how we galvanize people to see a shared path and to realize it, to deliver results, to come together to do what may well seem impossible given the constraints. Vision is the way that we lift ourselves from the mundane slog of objectives, tasks, and the slow, hard climb up the ladder and begin to work from passion—passion that is fueled by creativity and possibility. Vision is how we turn challenges into meaningful learning experiences that serve a higher purpose rather than hurdles to be passed joylessly. Vision invites creativity, problem-solving and shared purpose and passion. People are naturally creative. We thrive on hope, optimism and possibilities—all the by-products of vision. Vision transforms organizational mission into a picture of what future success, most fully attained, actually looks like, making it much easier for people to understand where they are going.

Vision—A Key Characteristic of Leadership Excellence

In a survey administered to more than 75,000 people around the globe, Kouzes and Posner, authors of *The Leadership Challenge* asked: “What values (personal traits or characteristics) do you look for and admire in your leader?” Respondents were asked to select the seven qualities that they “most look for and admire in a leader, someone whose direction they would willingly follow.” Respondents identified more than 225 different values, traits, and characteristics. After analysis, these were reduced to a list of twenty characteristics and then further synthesized into four traits that consistently received over 50% of the votes worldwide.

As the data clearly show, for people to follow someone willingly, the majority of constituents must believe the leader is:

1. Honest
2. Forward-looking
3. Competent
4. Inspiring

As you can see, numbers two and four – forward-looking and inspiring – speak directly to the skill of visioning.

Forward-looking

Forward-looking was selected by more than 70% of recent respondents as one of their most sought-after leadership traits. People expect leaders to have a sense of direction and a concern for the future of the organization. This expectation directly corresponds to the ability to envision the future. The message is clear: leaders must know where they are going if they expect others to willingly join them on the journey.

By the ability to be forward-looking, Kouzes and Posner don’t mean the magical power of a prescient prophet. The reality is far more down-to-earth: being forward-looking is the ability to set or select a desirable destination toward which the company, agency, congregation, or community should head. Vision reveals the beckoning summit that provides others with the capacity to chart their course toward the future. A clear vision tells people what the organization will look like, feel like, be like when it

arrives at its destination in six quarters or six years. By describing it in rich and specific detail, we know what we are aiming for and how to recognize it when we’ve arrived. By working backwards from the vision, we can more easily plan the best route (strategic plan) for getting there.

Inspiring

As *The Leadership Challenge* demonstrates, we also expect our leaders to be enthusiastic, energetic, and positive about the future. It’s not enough for a leader to have a dream about the future, no matter how clear or exciting. A leader must be able to communicate the vision in ways that encourage us to sign on for the duration. Thus, creating a forward-looking view of the organization is not enough. The leader must also be able to frame the vision in the context of our shared history and our present realities, setting context for the vision and linking our own perspective to it. Thus the leader serves as Chief Storyteller, demonstrating understanding as well as enthusiasm, energy and a positive attitude that can make the context even more meaningful. Whatever the circumstances, when leaders breathe life into our dreams and aspirations and help us connect our work to a higher purpose, we are more willing to enlist in the endeavor. To put it simply, when a leader displays passion for a vision and a thorough understanding of the context for the vision, the merits of the vision and of the leader become evident to us, attracting our support and commitment. When this perspective and passion is missing, we do not enroll. After all, if the leader is not enthusiastic and fully engaged, why should anyone else be?

Elements of a Leadership Vision

According to a 2009 article by Ibarra and Obodaru, “Women and the Vision Thing” published in the *Harvard Business Review*, being visionary means doing three things well: 1) sensing opportunities and threats in the environment; 2) setting strategic direction, and 3) inspiring constituents.” A visionary leader is indeed a storyteller who communicates compellingly about current state, desired state and the path for getting there. Through communication of a strategic vision, she illuminates the path forward. When the vision is clearly articulated, widely known and well understood, the effect is to unify, empower, and motivate others.

Working towards a vision is an act of imagination, one that can provide great focus and energy for the organization and the work itself. Conversely, without a galvanizing vision to provide direction and focus, teams often lose their way, confusing busy and urgent activity with productivity towards a shared vision of success. Tap into your individual or collective creativity with confidence to crystallize a picture of where you would like to be in the future.

10 Hallmarks of a Powerful Vision

1. Mission-driven
2. Values-based
3. Forward-looking and engaging
4. Provides picture of a positive future
5. Has historical context and relevance in the present day
6. Is stated in the present tense
7. Inspires
8. Invites others to be part of it
9. Aspirational AND achievable
10. Set in the foreseeable future

Making the Shift from Reactive to Purposeful

It is a well-known fact that results follow actions and actions follow thoughts. Another way of saying this is that you will get results where your attention is. If you want to make something happen or lead an important advance or change, use vision to ensure that you are bringing people together in a focused effort towards what you really want to achieve.

If you do not use vision to energize a focused, shared effort, consider that you and your organization will deliver results anyway—wherever individuals are focused or feel a personal sense of urgency. Visionary leaders pre-empt reactive, issue-of-the-day behaviors and help people to work together purposefully.

By allowing yourself to be visionary for your leadership (and your life), you are choosing to work towards a positive view of the future, and you are enlisting others to join you. As a visionary, you make the shift from a reactive, passive stance to a purposeful stance, an effective leadership stance that is forward-looking, inspiring and well worth following. Give yourself permission to imagine the life you want to live, the leader you want to be, the results you want to generate. Imagine it, and then live into it through communication, planning and action.



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