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The Power of Vision

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In order to truly understand how a leader's vision can be an important source of power, we have to go back to the basics—the dictionary's definition of the term. Vision is the act or power of anticipating that which will or may come to be. Noted journalist and historian David Halberstam, writing in his best-selling book titled *War in a Time of Peace*, applauds Colin Powell for a refined sense of anticipation throughout his career. It is this sense of anticipation that Powell used in order to help his bureaucratic superiors understand what was coming down the pike.

Powell was not an honor student in high school, and it was only when he joined ROTC at City College of New York, from which he graduated in 1958, that he discovered the discipline that gave him focus and meaning. A child of Jamaican immigrants who worked in New York City's Garment District, Powell appreciated the fact that the army gave him clearly stated, straight signals—something that resonated with his intelligence, hard work, and drive. Powell's autobiography, *My American Journey*, sold 1.3 million copies—a tribute to readers' belief in the American Dream.

Powell's story is mirrored by many other Americans who felt empowered by "the dream"—a vision of what they could become. Lee Kinard, a former host of *The Good Morning Show*, America's longest running and most successful local television show, tells the story of how his dream for a better future served as a life-saving beacon when, as a child, he was sent to care for his alcoholic and abusive father in West Virginia. Kinard, in his best-selling book, *Good Morning*, relates how he failed the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, after which a few caring teachers helped him turn his life around. Kinard had a

small desk in the hallway of a cold, run-down, West Virginia house, and it was there that he began to discover and use his intellectual skills that ultimately led to a doctorate. It was part of his mission in life to tell his story and share his dream with school children, particularly those at risk, throughout North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Madeline Albright's life story demonstrates the power of vision in achieving the American Dream. She was born in 1937 in Czechoslovakia, where her family suffered from the domination of the Nazis and the Communists. Entering the United States at age 11, she exercised her family's interest in foreign policy by founding foreign policy clubs in her schools. Her fluency in four languages and her writing and speaking skills stood her well when, later in her life, she became a National Security aide in the Carter administration. She later became the first female Secretary of State, during the Clinton administration.

It is interesting that, for Powell, Kinard, and Albright, it was not enough for them to simply have and fulfill their personal dreams. They also had the strength of their convictions and willingness to share such dreams, as well as their life stories, with a wider audience.

ARTICULATING THE VISION

Father Theodore Martin Hesburgh, upon retiring from the presidency of the University of Notre Dame after thirty-five years, was asked about the secret to his self-assured sense of command. He responded: "The very essence of leadership is you have to have a vision. It's got to be a vision you articulate clearly and forcefully on every occasion. *You can't blow an uncertain trumpet.*"¹

Many of us have come to the place where we have little faith in written vision and mission statements. It is from walking around the building with a CEO, governmental leader, or a school principal—and from observing their verbal and nonverbal behavior, as well as others' reactions to them—that we learn the officially appointed leader's real vision, or lack thereof. A school principal, for example, demonstrated that she cared about her school by walking me to my car in the parking lot, all the time talking about how proud she was that the staff did everything they could to reach every child. The stories she told revealed the authenticity of her convictions.

The role that focus plays in articulating the vision of an organization was brought home to me several years ago while having breakfast with a university police officer. He told me the story of a fellow officer, whom I shall call "Bob." Bob's problem was that his original goals were often displaced by immediate concerns. "Bob would drive down an alleyway to investigate the theft of equipment from a building. He would stop his car suddenly and begin to write a ticket for an illegally parked car. His partner would remind him that the police car was blocking two cars from proceeding down the alley, and the original reason for this trip was to investigate the theft of equipment from a building."

It seemed that Bob's partner had a fulltime job in getting Bob to the right place at the right time.

Once again, a key ingredient of focus is the strength of one's convictions. William F. Buckley brought this to my attention in his book, *Atlantic High*. "Ken Galbraith and I have in common what strikes some as a disadvantage, but it isn't: namely, our plainspoken bias, which gives a harnessing energy to our work."² Their biases were not the same, given the fact that Galbraith is a liberal Democrat and Buckley is a conservative Republican, but, nevertheless, their convictions energized them.

I can't conclude this discussion without telling a story about vision that brought my attention to its real, night-after-night value on the North Carolina coast. For several years, a few neighbors and I took our teenage children on fall fishing trips to the Outer Banks. On one occasion, two of my children and I walked into the town of Buxton to shop at a well-known bait and tackle store. We became so engrossed in the store's contents that we failed to see that it was getting dark. Because it was our first visit, I became disoriented when we walked out the door. My confusion was quickly dispelled when the sweeping beam of the lighthouse engulfed us. We sure-footedly made our way to the campground next to the origin of the beam.

Likewise, your vision, or anticipation of what should and can be, will help you as a leader when you find yourself in life's many wildernesses. Hold fast to your personal and organizational dreams, for they will often bring light when you least expect it—a gift to others and yourself. Grounded in your understanding of the past, you will find meaning in the moment while, at the same time, having an eye on important new directions for the future. In short, you will be living, and thus sharing with others, the power of your vision.

Implications for Leaders

Larry D. Coble

ORIENTATION

The process of visioning falls within the realm of developing a personal vision for one's life, within the context of both an organizational identity and a personal identity. A leader can have a vision for her life outside of the organization, a vision for herself within the organization, and a vision for the organization and those she leads. Visionary leaders will choose to create visions around their personal identity at home and at work. They will certainly lead the visioning process for the organizations in which they

work, whether their responsibility is for leading a department in a company, a corporate division, a hospital, a classroom, a school, a school system, or any other organization.

Many who write about the process of visioning and visionary leaders have tended to oversimplify these concepts, often suggesting that the creation of a vision and visionary leadership is a cognitive activity. In other words, one might infer that once I decide to develop a personal vision or a vision for those I lead, all that remains is to “install” the visioning process. It simply does not work that way. Visions and visionary leaders develop over time through reflection, communication, and connection with others. Based on our research, the research of other scholars in the field of leadership development, and our life experiences at work and at home, we can offer suggestions that will enhance and accelerate the readers’ personal development in the area of visioning and visionary leadership.

My personal belief is that developing a vision and becoming a visionary leader will always be a work in progress. I have found that to be visionary does not mean that there is necessarily a once-and-for-all vision. As a leader, you go as far as you can see at any given time. A vision is about the future, and it does provide direction. It includes speculation, making assumptions, and making value judgments on the part of the leader. As circumstances change and values are reevaluated, visions are altered in keeping with the growth and development of the leader and the needs of the organization.

TRANSFORMATIONAL VISIONING

Powerful visions that tend to transform individuals and organizations become extremely personal. The vision is appropriate, in the mind of the leader, for himself and the organization he leads. The visioning process that leads to transformation reflects an idealism that causes others to want to get on board. The visionary leader creates conditions under which others feel inspired and committed to something greater than themselves. Visionary leaders are able to literally “paint a picture” with their words, which leave stakeholders with an understanding of purpose and direction.

Visionary leaders are skilled communicators. They are able to communicate their visions in a way that their followers feel new energy and a shared responsibility and a shared accountability. This renewal seems to be built on the idea, that by “buying in,” there is hope for a future that is clearly better than the current set of circumstances.

One very powerful example of a visionary leader is Walt Disney. His vision for Disneyland was one that captured the heads, the hearts, and the hands of all those associated with his enterprising genius. Look at the picture that Walt painted with his words and see how, after reading his vision, you actually feel tremendous hope and excitement about a future that will be better for everyone:

The idea of Disneyland is a simple one. It will be a place for people to find happiness and knowledge. It will be a place for parents and children to spend pleasant times in one another's company: a place for teachers and pupils to discover greater ways of understanding and education. Here the older generation can recapture the nostalgia of days gone by, and the younger generation can savor the challenge of the future. Here will be the wonders of Nature and Man for all to see and understand. Disneyland will be based upon and dedicated to the ideals, the dreams and hard facts that have created America. And it will be uniquely equipped to dramatize these dreams and facts and send them forth as a source of courage and inspiration to all the world.

Disneyland will be something of a fair, an exhibition, a playground, a community center, a museum of living facts, and a show-place of beauty and magic. It will be filled with the accomplishments, the joys, and hopes of the world we live in. And it will remind us and show us how to make those wonders part of our own lives.³

My guess is that practically every individual associated with the Disney organization, once they heard Disney's well-articulated vision, could quite easily understand the concept of Disneyland. They certainly began to realize that there would be no other theme park as unique as, and that, if they were able to make Walt's vision become a reality, they would create an organizational uniqueness that would make their park truly special.

SHARING IN THE TRANSFORMATION— A PERSONAL APPROACH

Walt Disney articulated a powerful transforming vision that resulted in Disney theme parks throughout the world. What he did with his vision was to create a direction that enabled individuals to begin to sort out their own roles in the accomplishment of the larger super-vision. He realized that, for his vision to be accomplished, each and every Disney employee or "cast member" would need to create a personal vision that would contribute to the corporate effort. Disney recognized, as do all visionary leaders, that shared vision begins with personal vision, his own and the personal visions of all his employees.

The hope for a "better future" constructed around a theme park like no other meant that they, as Disney employees, through their individual and collective contributions, could make the vision come alive. Effective leaders, such as Walt Disney, tend to "enroll" their followers with the "corporate identity," and, as a result, followers commit and share in the pride that goes with being a part of something greater than themselves.

From my experiences in having led several large complex organizations, if the visioning process is successful, each "player" creates her own view of the larger vision. This means that each individual in the organization has a view

of the future that is aligned with “the” vision but is unique at the same time. Organizations become transformed when individuals create personal visions that are aligned with the larger vision, but they carry with them the uniqueness of their individual contributions. People have a choice. When they choose to enroll in the process, attaining the vision becomes a force in their hearts and becomes intrinsically motivating. The result is an emotional commitment and not just compliance.

MAKING THE TRANSITION TO VISIONARY LEADERSHIP

Having had long career in leading organizations, and based on my work over the last decade in leadership development, I’ve grown to believe becoming a visionary leader requires an effort of conscious soul searching and more. To attempt to become visionary through some cookbook approach does a severe injustice to the process of leading. Visionary leadership is more of a function of who you are becoming and not so much who you are. It does, however, require an in-depth understanding of who you are if you wish to “become” visionary.

In order to help you jumpstart your journey to visionary leadership and stay on track with your leadership development, consider the following recommendations:

- Take the time to reflect on your early childhood beginnings and be honest with yourself about early childhood experiences that played a significant role in the person you are today. This reflection should include “rules” that you were taught for the purpose of running your life, as well as critical life experiences from which you learned “lessons.” Recognize that this “shaping” process has resulted in the person you are today. Some aspects of this shaping help you in being effective and some aspects hinder your effectiveness. You must truly understand who you are before you can connect with others. You cannot become a visionary leader unless you are able to connect with others.
- As you begin to understand how you have been “shaped” and who you are, spend time identifying those things in your personal and organizational life about which you truly feel passionate. If you are going to become a visionary leader, it is imperative that you are passionate about the nature of your work. For example, as a hospital administrator, you may feel great passion for improving patient care; as a corporate leader, you may feel passionate about offering the best service to your customers of any organization in the industry; or, as a school administrator, you may feel passionately about providing opportunities for the economically disadvantaged students under your direction.

- Develop your skills as a highly effective communicator. Do whatever you have to do to become a master communicator. You may have the greatest vision of all time, but if you can't communicate it, then you can't lead. Take into account not only the "message," but also the way it is delivered. The words you choose should be "selling" words and should be easily understood by everyone. Go back and think about Walt Disney. You have read the written version of his vision, but imagine him and the style he used in talking about his vision. All of us can visualize his easy, confident, matter-of-fact type of delivery style, and we can visualize why Disneyland would be good for all of us.

Consciously begin to formulate your vision. You should start by choosing key words that capture your passion and help define where you want to move the organization. Remember that you are not leading from the past, you are leading to a better future.

Practice talking about your vision. Talk with anyone and everyone about your vision. Less is more in terms of explanation. You should say enough to capture the future direction accurately, but not so much that it is overload. Repeat your message over and over to new audiences. You will get better. Your message will improve. And your vision will become clearer with time.

CONCLUSION

The reality of leadership is that you may have gotten in touch with those aspects of your life that have contributed to your effectiveness and have addressed those that are getting in your way of becoming more effective. You may enhance your ability to communicate through a variety of methods. You may formulate your vision. You may share your vision through practice. The reality, however, is that some people will never accept your vision. Do not be discouraged. Leadership is a process, not a person. It involves the leader, the followers, and the situation. If the majority is unwilling to accept your vision, then you will need to modify it so that it is more in keeping with the culture and the times. *Majority* is the operative word here. You will probably never get 100% support, but you will need a majority in order to recognize success.

Do not compromise your dream or your passion. Recognizing when it is appropriate to modify your vision and then acting on this recognition is in itself a developmental activity. Visionary leadership also involves taking people where they are at any given time and helping them grow and develop their own ability to see a better future.

In order that you might enhance your capacity for visioning, the following exercises may prove useful. Please use them as you see fit as you evolve.

ENGAGING SELF AND OTHERS

The following activities and materials are designed to involve you, the reader, and others, as you and they create learning communities. Because our major emphasis in this book is on leadership lessons for adults, the exercises focus on adult learning.

Activity 1.1

List three major changes you believe your organization will have to face in the year 2010 and what impact each change will have on your leadership techniques, styles, or behavior.

| Major Changes | Impact |
|---------------|--------|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

Activity 1.2

We have already noted that leadership has both a personal and an organizational face. The same thing is true of vision statements. In formulating and articulating personal and organizational vision statements, your enthusiasm for things you wish to change can blind you to personal and organizational reality: in order for some things to change, other things need to be conserved. The leader who refers to himself or herself as a "change agent" intimates, with this language, that others will be expected to change without the leader being changed. The following inventories will remind you that both change and conservation are essential elements that must be recognized by creative leaders.

A Personal Change and Conservation Inventory

_____ (My Name)

What are three things about my leadership that I personally value and want to conserve?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What are three things about my leadership that I personally want to change?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

An Organizational Change and Conservation Inventory

_____ (Name of Your Organization)

What are three things about my organization that I highly value and want to conserve?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What are three things about my organization that I want to change?

1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
-

Activity 1.3

If your organization has a vision statement, obtain a copy of it, read it carefully, and answer the following questions:

Is the audience for the vision statement clearly stated or is the audience implicit?
 Stated Implicit

In either event, do you agree that this is the appropriate audience?
 Yes No

If your answer is no, please identify the audience(s) that should be addressed:

Is the vocabulary level of the written statement appropriate for the audience(s) you feel should be addressed?
 Yes No

Please elaborate:

Is the vision statement too brief, too long, or about the right length?
 Too brief Too long About the right length

Please elaborate:

Who were the people involved in formulating the vision statement?

What is the stated rationale for involving the persons cited above? (For example, one or a limited number of persons were involved in order to write the vision statement efficiently, given time restraints. Or, a larger number were involved in order to achieve core group ownership that could then get others in the organization to buy into the vision statement.)

Is the vision statement consistent with the way members of the organization talk when they walk with guests around your building(s)?

- Yes No

Please elaborate:

Activity 1.4
Visionary Leadership and Changing Organizations

Significant advantages are associated with a leader who has a clear vision regarding how his or her organization should change. There may also be some disadvantages. What are some of the major advantages and possible disadvantages that come to your mind?

| Major Advantages | Major Disadvantages |
|------------------|---------------------|
| | |

Activity 1.5
A Vision for Excellent Service

Can we provide it in our organizations?

Please outline a description of an experience that you remember very clearly in which you got **excellent service** in some organizational setting. It may have been in a retail store, a restaurant, a utility such as the electric or gas company, a bank, a hotel, a school, or any other organization.

Please make your notes complete enough to be able to describe the incident with details.

Now that you have outlined the details of your experience, please answer the following questions:

Why do you remember this particular experience?

Were you surprised at the excellent service or did you expect it?

- Yes No

Why?

What were your **reactions** to the good service you received, other than being pleased or flattered?

Activity 1.7

What Will Your Vision Look Like When it Becomes a Reality?

How will people in your organization be treated by one another?

What will be expected from them?

What will they be prepared to do?

How will the people in your organization feel about going to work?

How will people "see" your vision in action?

CASE 1: Implementing an Assignment on Stating Organizational Vision

The head of your organization approaches you and asks you to lead a five-person committee charged with stating the vision for the organization. The four other members of the committee must now be chosen. Your first decision concerns the basis for your choices—a cross-section of the organization? a few trusted colleagues? persons with particular talents you feel are needed in order to perform tasks? individuals who have high credibility with the organizational head? persons with the most power in the organization? persons who represent the most powerful constituencies in the organization?

The second decision you consider making is what kind of orientation you will share with committee members at your initial meeting. Do you want a well-structured orientation, and, if so, of what length? Or, do you simply want to state the charge given you as chair of the committee? *What is your decision?*

After giving your orientation, a colleague says, "How seriously should we take this assignment? This may well be another fad like the other ones we have followed over the years. If so, let's simply give a minimal amount of resources to this assignment and go back to work." *How will you react to this question?* Your answer is your third decision.

The fourth decision facing you emerges from committee discussion. One member argues with some conviction as follows: "We must begin by having each member of this committee state his or her personal vision!" A second committee member counters, "We were asked to state organizational vision, not personal vision. Let's get on with it!" *What is your response?*

As your committee continues its work, it is clear that you will need a timetable. Your fifth decision is, "***What is a reasonable amount of time*** that should be spent given the goals and objectives that have been agreed upon by the committee?"

During a recent meeting, a committee member raises the following question: "Should we involve those outside of this committee in shaping and reshaping the organizational vision statement? And, if so, how?" ***What is your reaction to this question?*** Your answer is the sixth important decision confronting you.

The seventh decision is a major one: What format should the committee choose in order to articulate the vision? Should it be a conversational, simple format like that stated by Walt Disney—a more formal and sophisticated format using higher-level vocabulary? ***What is your position on this matter?***

The eighth and final decision has to do with avenues for the articulation and dissemination of the organizational vision statement. ***What kinds of print and nonprint media do you wish to advocate being used? Who should be involved in verbally articulating the vision?***

Throughout this decision-making process, you and your committee will need to decide how you will relate to the organizational head who gave you this assignment. *What guidelines will you advocate to committee members in speaking to this challenge?*

Authors' Recommendations

The italicized questions in the previous case will help guide you through the technical dimensions of vision creation and articulation. It needs to be stated that the leader's role in these processes is very important. Members of the organization will pick up on the leader's verbal and nonverbal messages as to the importance given to vision creation and articulation. The energy level of the leader with regard to these matters will be quickly read by those expected to participate. The authenticity of the leader's involvement in vision creation and articulation is a central issue. Erving Goffman, author of the classic *The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life*, published in 1959, argues that the genuineness or authenticity of the leader is the critical element in establishing the leader's credibility. Members of today's organizations have been exposed to so many fads ("flavors of the month") that they are wary of the introduction of any new program, such as vision formulation and articulation.

SELF INVENTORY

Now that you have completed the readings and activities on "The Power of Vision," think about what you've learned and respond to the following items on a five-point scale: 1 (low) to 5 (high).

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1. My ability to define vision so that others will know what it means. _____
 2. My talent in anticipating what is coming down the pike in and for my organization—the organizational face of vision. _____
 3. My ability to anticipate what will happen to me personally in my organization—the personal face of vision. _____

Prelude to Leadership

4. My ability to develop a personal vision for my life as a whole and understand what this means for my personal identity. _____
5. My ability to articulate my personal vision to those with whom I wish to communicate it and integrate my personal vision with organizational vision. _____
6. My understanding of how both personal and organizational vision can transform the person and the organization. _____
7. My skill as a communicator in helping others shape organizational vision. _____
8. My skill as a communicator in helping others communicate organizational vision. _____
9. My ability to state organizational vision verbally, and with conviction, in one-on-one and small group settings. _____
10. My ability to state organizational vision verbally, and with conviction, in large group settings. _____

Note: If you are in a group setting, form discussion groups in order to share and summarize findings.

Scoring for Self Inventory

Total the ratings and find your score in the following scale:

| | |
|-------|---------------|
| 41–50 | Superior |
| 31–40 | Above Average |
| 21–30 | Average |
| 11–20 | Below Average |
| 0–10 | Poor |

SUGGESTED READINGS

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