

The Science of Leadership

CRAFTING A VISION

by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When we think of a leader with a vision, most of us think of an inspired genius extolling wisdom far beyond the capabilities of the rest of us. The lesson to be learned from the vision research is that vision crafting is a much more mundane process that requires observation, patience, a heavy dose of reflection and a not-undue amount of luck.

In contrast to the popular and romantic notion that a great leader's vision is the result of pure genius in fact it is normally the result of two rather simple activities practiced by the leader of a substantial period of time—social networking and information gathering. Effective leaders don't craft their visions from a spark of sudden insight but from a sometimes slow and arduous process of data gathering and reflection. Most often, the leader's vision does not emerge full-blown but evolves over time.

“Great” visions are often far less than lofty ideas and may embody nothing much more than a few widely understood and shared values.

Transformational leaders are sometimes called visionary leaders signaling the importance of vision to their influence. Indeed the inspirational part of transformational leadership comes through the leader's ability to define a vision for the future and sell that vision to followers. In this article, we will begin to look at the leadership science of vision crafting and persuasion. How does the transformational leader develop a vision and how does he gain the commitment of followers to that vision? As I suggested at the end of my last article, vision crafting is much less of a conjuror's art than we normally consider it to be. That is good news because it suggests that all, or at least most of us, could participate in the “vision thing” as former U.S. President George Bush put it, if we chose to do so.

The leader's vision has been described as “the most essential factor in the concept of charisma”, “the first requirement...for effective leadership” and the “most important factor” distinguishing leaders from non-leaders.¹ Attesting to the importance they give to the leader's vision, some researchers dispense with the terms “charismatic” and “transformational” in favor of simply calling the effective leader “visionary.” The “vision thing” as the first President George Bush put it, appears to be extremely mystical and thus surely the product of true genius. Mere mortals need not apply. However, as we will see in this article, visioning is a much more mundane process and much more in reach of mere mortals than most of us assume. Indeed compelling leadership visions can be nothing more than the product of practical necessity and, as we shall see in the next article, don't even have to be that compelling if presented in the right way.

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What it means to have a vision

Leadership researchers variously and imprecisely define "vision" as:

*A picture both of the future and the present appealing simultaneously to logic and to feeling.*²

*Future-oriented goals that are highly meaningful to followers.*³

*A set of idealized future goals established by the leader that represent a perspective shared by followers.*⁴

*A conceptual roadmap or set of blueprints for what the organization will look like in the future.*⁵

*A set of idealized future goals established by the leader that represent a perspective shared by followers.*⁶

*An image of the future that provides a sense of direction, a set of ideals, and feelings of uniqueness for the organization.*⁷

*Cherished end values shared by leaders and followers.*⁸

and

A mental model of an idealistic future or future perfect state, which sets standards of excellence and clarifies purpose and direction.

As Jay Conger and Rabindra Kanungo say, “*vision* is a problematic term with a silver lining.”⁹ The term sensitizes us to a phenomenon that is really important even if its meaning isn’t very clear.

Perhaps the best way to grasp the meaning of vision is to view some. Here are a few I cited in a previous book.

Henry Ford said this about his vision for democratizing the automobile:

*I will build a motor car for the great multitude...It will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces.... When I'm through, everybody will be able to afford one, and everyone will have one. The horse will have disappeared from our highways, the automobile will be taken for granted...[and we will] give a large number of men employment at good wages.*¹⁰

Here is how Walt Disney described his dream for Disneyland:

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, and exhibition, a playground, a community center, a museum of living facts, and a showplace 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 lives.*¹¹

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Here is Churchill's famous vision for Britain's "finest hour"

*Hitler knows he will have to break us on this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free, and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, the whole world, including the United States, including all we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age, made more sinister and perhaps more protracted by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'*¹²

And, finally, here is Martin Luther King's dream for America:

*...I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day the nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal." I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the State of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering in the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today....*¹³

Why the leader's vision is important

Why are *visions* important for effective leadership? In his 1989 book, *The Charismatic Leader*, Jay Conger identifies three roles a leader's vision plays in the leader/follower relationship.

First, says Conger, the vision of charismatic leaders provides a kind of "strategic umbrella" under which more specific tactical goals can be assembled.

The vision then is an alignment device in the sense that it provides broad action guidelines for followers...[A] well-articulated vision provides organizational members at all levels with a simple memory tool to align their values, actions, and decisions with the organization's strategic objectives. Its simplicity also promotes clarity of focus.¹⁴

In short, a well-articulated vision clarifies what is important, focuses effort, and provides guides concerning how scarce resources should be used.

Second, says Conger, a well-articulated vision plays an important motivational role. Studies have repeatedly shown that people perform better when they have specific, clear and challenging goals.¹⁵ Perhaps one reason for this is that challenging goals make people feel somehow special.

The vision usually is portrayed as a *unique* set of goals heightening the followers' sense that their endeavor is a special one. As such, the charismatic leader's vision creates for followers the perception that they are at an active center in the social system—those rare and remarkable arenas in society where change and innovation are taking place.¹⁶

Finally, notes Conger, the leader's vision heightens followers' sense of a collective identity. As researchers from the University of Texas and the International Institute for Management Development put it, the leader's vision defines what is central, distinctive, and unique about the organization by linking the past (who we used to be) to the present (who we are) and to the future (what we would like to become).¹⁷

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The source of the leader's vision

Given the importance of the leader's vision, we might ask how the effective leader crafts his or her vision. Is the vision a "gift from the gods," the product of some sudden great insight, or is it the product of something much more mundane? The latter say the researchers. In contrast to the popular and romantic notion that a great leader's result pure genius in fact it is normally the result of two rather simple activities practiced by the leader of a substantial period of time—social networking and information gathering. Effective leaders build and maintain wide social networks and monitor those networks to detect changes in the environments in which their organizations must operate and changes in follower needs and capabilities. They are skilled observers and constant data gatherers. They're inquisitive. They prowl for ideas and learn from experience. They have, as Jay Conger and Rabindra Kanungo put it, a "heightened sensitivity to environmental opportunities, constraints, **and** follower abilities."¹⁸ Conger and Kanungo say when they interview subordinates about effective leaders they inevitably hear comments like the following describing Orit Gadiesh, the charismatic vice chairman of the consulting firm Bain & Company.

She has extremely good antennae. She knows exactly what is going on [with staff and clients].

[She has]...an uncanny knack for reading people and situations exactly right.¹⁹

In short, effective leaders don't craft their visions from a spark of sudden insight but from a sometimes slow and arduous process of data gathering and reflection. Most often, the leader's vision does not emerge full-blown but evolves over time. That was the case of Anita Roddick and her vision for The Body Shop. Conger and Kanungo note that Roddick's initial goal/vision for her business was essentially just simple survival. A loftier ambition came later. Lacking money to afford new bottles for her products, Roddick encouraged customers to bring their own. The company's trademark color of green, which came to symbolize its commitment to environmentally safe products was chosen not for environmental reasons but rather as the color best able to hid mold and mildew in the original Body Shop store. In short, the genesis of Roddick's vision was more necessity than inspiration.²⁰

In a similar fashion, Jack Welch's vision for General Electric Corporation changed over time. In the early 1980s, he focused the company on four basic goals: (1) market leadership, (2) above average returns, (3) competitive advantage, and (4) leveraging the company's strengths. It was only later after these goals had been largely met that Welch developed his vision for his famous "boundary-less" organization where suppliers wouldn't be outsiders and the divisions between internal functions would blur.

Finally, effective leaders' "great" visions are often far less than lofty ideas and may embody nothing much more than a few widely understood and shared values. For example, Conger and Kanungo point out that Herb Kelleher's *vision* for Southwest Airlines is "essentially to be a friendly, efficient 'flying car': nothing more, nothing less." Kelleher's vision, they continue, "is shaped more by the attainment of certain values around teamwork, friendly service, speed, and competing against industry giants than it is a social mission."²¹ Obviously, the visions of some leaders, particularly leaders in the social, religious or political arenas such as Churchill and Martin Luther King are transcendental but effective visions do not have to reach such lofty standards.

Practical Lesson

When we think of a leader with a vision, most of us think of an inspired genius extolling wisdom far beyond the capabilities of the rest of us. The lesson to be learned from the vision research is that vision crafting is a much more mundane process that requires observation, patience, a heavy dose of reflection and a not-undue amount of luck. People can be inspired by simple ideas provided, of course, that the ideas are presented in the right way. We will look at that issue in our next article since even leaders with the loftiest of visions still have to get people to follow them.

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NOTES

¹ See Kim, Kyoungsu, Fred Dansereau and Insook Kim, "Extending the Concept of Charismatic Leadership: An Illustration Using Bass's (1990) Categories," in Avolio, Bruce and Francis J. Yammarino, eds., *Transformational and Charismatic Leadership: The Road Ahead*, (Boston: JAI, 2002), 147.

² Snyder, Dowd & Houghton cited in *Ibid.*, 147.

³ Tichy and Devanna (1986) cited in *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴ Conger and Kanungo (1998) cited in *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵ Tichy and Devanna (1986) cited in Conger, Jay A. and Rabindra N. Kanungo, *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1998), 156.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷ Kouzes and Posner (1987) cited in *Ibid.*, 156.

⁸ House (1995) cited in *Ibid.*, 156.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁰ Collins, James C. and Jerry I. Porras, "Building Your Company's Vision" *Harvard Business Review* 1996/September-October, 74.

¹¹ Nanus, Burt. *Visionary Leadership: Creating a Compelling Sense of Direction for Your Organization*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers), 288.

¹² Collins, James C. and Jerry I. Porras, "Building Your Company's Vision" *Harvard Business Review*, 1996/September-October, 74.

¹³ Safire, William. *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History* (New York: Norton, 1992), 498-499.

¹⁴ Conger, Jay A. and Rabindra N. Kanungo, *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations*, 158.

¹⁵ See for example, Locke and Latham cited in Conger, Jay A. and Rabindra N. Kanungo, *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations*, 159.

¹⁶ Conger, Jay A. and Rabindra N. Kanungo, *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations*, 159.

¹⁷ Boal, Kimberly B., "Strategic Leadership Research: Moving On," *Leadership Quarterly*, 2001/11/4, 527.

¹⁸ Conger, Jay A. and Rabindra N. Kanungo, *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations*, 121.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 164.