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Resource

Redefining Visionary Leadership



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Redefining

Visionary Leadership

by Gary Mayes

Western leadership thinking elevates the notion of leader-as-super-heroic visionary to a dangerous level. You know what I mean. When we think of a great leader, we immediately imagine one who wows people with their visionary capacity. They are inspirational cheerleaders who motivate and rally people to give themselves to a compelling larger-than-life cause.

We frequently talk and act as if *the* most important criteria of leaders is the ability to create and communicate vision single-handedly. We expect leaders to develop vision from scratch and then articulate it with god-like inspiration. As a result, scores of people devalue their capacity for leadership for the simple fact that they don't excel at this full-feature visionary role.

I have had the unique privilege of working alongside leaders around the world and am shocked by the discouragement I hear. Over and over I have heard good men and women tell me about leadership books they have read or speakers they have heard and how a sense of inadequacy was the result. They tell me things like, "I don't think I am a good leader because I am no good at the vision thing." "I don't fit the mold of the visionary and guess I need to become content with being less than a 'multi-talent' leader." But my conviction is that leaders are not those who wear the "red-cape" of a superhero. Superheroes are a fantasy.

Now, if my analogy of vision as organizational oil is accurate at all, then leaders need to be champions of vision. But, that doesn't mean leaders are required to create vision in isolation. We were created to live, work, and lead in community with others. So, where did we get the idea that leaders are to go it alone when it comes to the challenge of vision? Who says that vision is discovered in the vacuum of independence?

I would like to suggest that visionary leadership comes in multiple forms. Therefore, to contribute to the beginning of a new dialog, I would like to introduce three distinctly different ways visionary leadership can be expressed. Sure, there are those rare people who are uniquely visionary by nature, but I am also convinced that a greater majority of leaders might find themselves with one of the following strengths. (By the way, I am sure there are many more than these three types.)



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1. VISIONARY as PROBLEM SOLVER:

I think Bobb Biehl deserves credit for initially suggesting that most leaders should forget about vision and just solve problems. In fact, I believe he said that very few people indeed are pure visionaries, the vast majority think in terms of problems to be solved.

A problem solving leader recognizes the logjams that are inhibiting an organization. They pay attention to those threats that might sink the ship. And then they set a course for solving these problems. If you are this leader, you are in great company.

Because of the limits of our leadership language and because people who are wired as problem solvers see their role as practical, it is easy to miss the visionary components of such an approach. The process of calling attention to a problem and motivating people to work toward its solution is a form of visionary leadership. The key is helping people focus on and dream about what is possible after the problem is solved.

YOUR CHALLENGE: If this is you, you are vulnerable to the “danger” of fixating on what’s wrong. One of the most important things you can do is stop and imagine what things will be like when the problem is solved. Once you have done this, challenge people toward that new reality as opposed to attempting to motivate them by the drama of the problem. Eradicating a problem is worth the trouble because of what could or should be possible if it were resolved.

2. VISIONARY as CONSENSUS BUILDER:

There is a rare breed of people who typically live below the radar of notoriety. While a positional title may identify them as a leader, their behavior is consistently about serving others. Rather than force feeding people with grandiose plans, you spot these leaders listening to and inviting input from those they are called to lead.

On a bad day, consensus builders run the risk of abdicating their authority and responsibility out of an overly cautious concern for everyone’s feelings. However, the consensus builder has a unique capacity to develop trust among the people they lead. They have an uncanny ability to build an environment where people find it safe to process their thoughts and ideas.

When it comes to vision and direction, these leaders have a unique opportunity to cultivate ownership and participation in shared



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vision. The key is that having cultivated vision through listening and consensus, these leaders then need to step up and champion the vision which has emerged. Generally consensus building leaders have earned enough trust-shaped-capital to take the risk of leading people into a conversation about what they need to accomplish together and then into alignment with that vision.

If this is you, then I would suggest that you invite people into a series of conversations about the dreams they have for the impact of your organization or ministry. Ask people about the difference they long to see accomplished in the world around you as a result of your efforts. In terms of methodology, you can have these conversations one-on-one or in small groups. My hunch is that you will find other people give clarifying words to the general sense of vision you have felt all along.

At some point you will recognize key threads that live among your people. And, by the way, while listening to your people you will also have surfaced a few people who excel at making ideas concrete—they have a way with words. They have abilities you lack, so gather all that you have heard and ask those who are great with words to help you summarize the core centerpiece of vision that has emerged.

YOUR CHALLENGE: Once this consensus-built vision has substance, you need to receive it like the hand off of a baton. Take it, grab firmly onto it, and leverage the consensus you have built to lead your people into living out that vision with courage. Contrary to the myopic notion that the positional leader must create the vision, the consensus approach facilitates shared participation in the development of vision. You will simply need to be secure enough to acknowledge that it was a group effort. You didn't create the vision alone, but now that you hold the baton, you need to become the champion of that vision.



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3. VISIONARY as POSSIBILITY THINKER:

A third 'alternative breed' of visionary leader is the one who finds herself or himself frequently thinking about "what if scenarios." That is to say, they don't naturally focus on any single unifying theme, but seem to be always thinking about a host of needs, opportunities, and possibilities.

This is the leader who often finds it hard to slow down enough to slog through the mental discipline of narrowing their focus from a myriad of possibilities to a specific definable vision. However, their ability

to ask and answer what if questions is a strength that can serve the development of vision.

The common challenge of vision is imagining what a different future could look like. Most people struggle to picture the future, yet those who naturally dwell in the realm of possibilities and, “what ifs,” have an uncanny ability to think that way. However, leaders like this need others around them who will help them narrow down the scope of possibilities to focused vision.

YOUR CHALLENGE: If you are wired like this, you don’t need help dreaming up possibilities, you need help narrowing down from what is possible to what is necessary. You need people who will help you make the painful decision of eliminating good but not best options. You need people who will help you evaluate the essential value of all the possibilities you can imagine. And you need to surrender to their wisdom.

You need to trust people enough to invite them to help you stay focused, even to hold you accountable to agreed upon priorities. Without trusted people who will hold your feet to the fire, you run the risk of “leadership ADHD,” constantly bouncing from one good idea to another.

A suggestion: consider a modified version of what the consensus builder needs to do. Gather a group of people to serve as a ‘clearing committee.’ When you are together, do three things.

1. *Determine what you or your organization is truly good at and then brainstorm what might be possible if you applied those strengths to making a difference in the world.*
2. *Looking at the ideas you generate in #1, ask yourselves, which are we most motivated to accomplish?*
3. *Having narrowed your focus, now it is time to turn the “possibilities leader” loose to dream as widely about all the possibilities they can imagine. Consolidate those ideas into a picture of how the future could be different.*
4. *Select a few people to work together with you to help you stay the course.*



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And finally, if you are wired this way, lean into your wiring to help you innovate new approaches and opportunities to make your vision reality. Utilize your ability to craft creative methods for communicating vision with freshness. Keeping vision alive calls for continual reinforcement. (see the article on “overcoming the half-life of vision.)

Personal Reflection Worksheet

1. If you one of the majority, who find typical notions of discerning vision challenging, which of these other three types of visionary leader is most like you?
 - ... Problem Solver?
 - ... Consensus Builder?
 - ... Possibility Thinker?

2. Which of the three is most like your organization?

Considering the public communication in your organization, which of the three is most likely to reflect the way that plans, projects, or problems are talked about?

3. P : What is one major project or priority on your plate right now? Is it...
 - a problem to be solved?
 - the result of group consensus?
 - a possibility to be pursued?
4. How have you personally been talking about the issue in Q #3: as problem/ need for consensus/ or a possibility?
 - What has been the strength of your communication?
 - What has been missing or confused about your communication?
5. Thinking about your personal 'visionary style' what steps could you take to increase the impact of your leadership in the area of vision?
 - What specific steps will you take?



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