



Focusing on the Future:

A Look at Leading with Vision

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“I feel really grateful to the people who encouraged me and helped me develop. Nobody can succeed on their own.”

– Sheryl Sandburg,
Chief Operating Officer, Facebook

VISIONARY LEADERSHIP

Visionary leadership is a rich and significant phrase. It stirs up a sense of idealism, excitement, hope and courage. It is a phrase that inspires us to challenge ourselves to “reach for the stars.” In short, visionary leadership is exciting.

Typically, people associate visionary leadership with the greatest and most influential people throughout history. Julius Caesar, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. are regarded as strong and effective leaders. Each had the ability to inspire others to buy into their vision. From Caesar’s expansion of the Roman Empire to King’s impact on the civil rights’ movement, they each had a unique ability to see a future that would be demonstrably different than the present. That is what visionary leaders do.

In terms of corporate and organizational leadership, visionary leaders influence others to reach their full potential, thus creating profitable and sustainable companies and organizations. Steve Jobs, Sheryl Sandburg and Donald Trump are examples of modern day business leaders who have led with vision and have taken risks while doing so. In fact, Steve Jobs once said, “You’ve got to be willing to crash and burn. If you’re afraid of failing, you won’t get very far. Most people never pick up the phone and call. Most people never ask and that’s what separates the people who do things from the people who just dream about them.”

CHARACTERISTICS OF VISIONARY LEADERS

Perhaps the most exciting element of leadership is the fact that everyone has the ability to lead. You do not have to change the world or become a household name in order to be a great leader. Being a great leader simply means having a positive influence on those around you. Leaders are able to create organizations and teams that are founded on vision and ideals in which they encourage others to rise above mediocrity and perform at their best. It does not matter if you lead a staff of two or a nation of millions, the principles are still the same – and they can be learned.

Great leaders are not necessarily more talented than other people but they do have a unique approach to creating solutions and inspiring change. To illustrate, following are some characteristics that visionary leaders share:

- They know what they want and work with all their might to execute their goals
- They have clear goals and know how to accomplish them
- They have a passion for making their vision a reality
- They are always 100 percent present, prepared and focused
- They do not allow events and circumstances to determine outcomes
- They use their vision to rise above adversity, setbacks and, even, failure
- They empower others
- They shape others by providing guiding purpose

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A leader's responsibility is to unleash the creative potential in people by creating conditions in which they can meaningfully contribute. Leaders define the boundaries and then encourage people to be self-governing using resources, time frames and constraints.

According to Erika Andersen, a leadership coach and author of *Leading So People Will Follow*, visionary leaders are farsighted and "see possible futures that are good for the enterprise; articulate their vision in a compelling and inclusive way; model their vision; see past obstacles; and invite others to participate in the vision."

Visionary leadership requires the ability to see people and situations clearly – not only for what they are but also for their potential. It also offers a clear image of a possible future, one worth working for. When visionary leadership is applied, organizations are able to prioritize unconditional acceptance while encouraging personal growth.

Being visionary is not necessarily what makes someone a leader. People may have clear visions, but without the power to translate that vision into reality, they are not leaders. Translating a vision into reality has to do with motivating and gaining the support of others and channeling their efforts into a common direction.

The most important factors for sustaining long-term business success include:

- Leaders who have the power to make things happen and influence the organization
- Leaders who are responsible for all of the factors involved in the organization's success
- Leaders who create the infrastructure, including the processes, systems and structure in which the organization can succeed
- Leaders who provide the vision, inspiration, and direction to attract and motivate others to be successful

DISPELLING THE MYTHS OF LEADERSHIP

As noted, visionary leaders have specific personality traits and abilities, but are they rare? It depends on who you ask. Though we often associate leadership with highly visible and acclaimed figures, such as those previously mentioned, there are a number of examples of visionary leadership in our everyday

lives, including mentors, coaches, non-profit volunteers and co-workers. Leaders come in all shapes and sizes and, for the most part, concentrate on changing "their" world as opposed to "the" world.

Still, there are differences, notes the *Harvard Business Review* in the article "Why are Creative Leaders so Rare?" The article focuses on a presentation given by Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the former president of India, in which Kalam argues that "corporations as well as nations desperately need 'creative leaders,' a new breed of visionary and empathetic leaders who act less as commanders and more as coaches, less as managers and more as facilitators, and who foster self-respect rather than demanding respect."

In addition, Kalam articulates many tenets of leadership (some of which have been previously mentioned in this paper), including :

- The leader must have a vision for the organization
- The leader must have the passion to transform that vision into action
- The leader must be able to travel into an unexplored path
- The leader must know how to manage both success and failure
- The leader must have the courage to make decisions
- The leader should have nobility in management
- Every action of the leader should be transparent
- The leader must work with integrity and succeed with integrity



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For years, a debate has raged about whether leadership is innate or learned. The most accepted view today is that it is both. Most people possess some leadership qualities and can further develop their leadership skills if they choose to do so.

As noted by Preston C. Bottger, Ph.D., Australian Graduate School of Management, "Understandably, the line taken by management educators tends to be that most leadership qualities can be developed, given adequate amounts of key personal characteristics, notably intelligence and physical energy. But, the fact is that you do not know what you are born with until you try very hard to express it."

Some leaders are charismatic and others are not. Some people believe they must be to gain acceptance. There are many personality types, both extraverts and introverts, who make good leaders.

In "Fulfillment at Any Age," published by *Psychology Today*, there is this analysis of whether extroverts or introverts are better at visionary leadership: "The personalities of leaders and followers should be in harmony for a group to achieve maximum productivity. However, because groups are most effective when they reflect the efforts of everyone, leaders who draw out the best efforts of their group members will engender the best performance and most likely to allow their members to feel invested in the group's efforts."

Often, people believe leadership exists only at the top. Leaders exist at every level of the organization, from the executive suites to the shop floor. Leadership is not defined in terms of position, but rather as a person's ability to act from clear vision and influence others to the realization of that vision.

Finally, the last myth people believe about leaders involves their insistence on controlling, directing and prodding those below them. Some leaders are controlling and directive in their approach. However, the most effective leaders are those who create enduring change by eliciting commitment from within, rather than imposing control from without.

Nick Friedman, co-founder and president of College Hunks Hauling Junk and College Hunks Moving and co-author of *Effortless Entrepreneur*, noted in the *Huffington Post*, "Despite the depiction of successful leaders in movies, authoritative leadership will only get you so far. That sort of leadership is shortsighted and limited in effectiveness. There's a reason why dictatorships rarely survive and political regimes that represent the voice of the people tend to thrive. People have voices that they want heard; consequently, if you're a leader who refuses to listen, you are setting yourself up for failure."

James MacGregor Burns, in his classic book *Leadership*, indicated there are two types of leaders: Those who lead through control and coercion and those who lead by inspiring and empowering others.

Empowering leaders are people who accomplish their objectives by creating an environment that elicits the internal motivation and commitment of those they lead. They view the people they lead as capable human beings with their own will, feelings and opinions. They seek mutually beneficial goals and even seek to raise those they lead to higher levels of motivation, behavior and even morality. These leaders, according to Burns, judge their effectiveness not by "press clippings," but by actual social change or the transformation of individual and organizational attitudes and behaviors.

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EMPOWERING LEADERS

- Create an environment in which people are motivated and committed
- Encourage brainstorming and feedback
- Encourage employees to be empowered and engaged
- Support new ideas and processes
- Trust people
- Are confident people can succeed and do well at their jobs
- Feel successful when their team or organization succeeds

CONTROLLING LEADERS

- Impose external control on their followers or subordinates
- Micromanage employees
- Do not inspire others to put in extra effort
- Do not nurture teamwork
- Stifle opinions, creativity and ideas
- Do not trust others
- Believe only they can complete a task accurately
- Feel they are more important than others



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**“Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower.”
– Steve Jobs, Founder, Apple**

As leaders, to empower those you lead, establish the boundaries and encourage people to be self-governing in how they execute within the boundaries. To put it simply, the leader defines the “what” and the people decide the “how” for themselves.

As organizations prepare to compete in today’s changing and challenging environment, they understand that leadership is the most important theme in business training. It is critical to the success of any organization. Therefore, when we practice visionary leadership, we place trust in our dreams and ideas while utilizing the insight and knowledge of our experience. With it in place, the organization comes together around a clear vision and things that once seemed impossible become real.



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