

Ignite Newsletter September 2007 (a)

## Leadership and Vision

Why is it so important for leaders to have a clear vision of the future? It's because leadership is about going somewhere. And if you and your people don't know where you are going, your leadership doesn't matter.

### Where Do You Want to Go?

Alice learned this lesson in Alice in Wonderland when she was searching for a way out of Wonderland and came to a fork in the road. "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" she asked the Cheshire Cat. "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," the cat responded. Alice replied that she really did not much care. The smiling cat told her in no uncertain terms: "Then it doesn't matter which way you go."

Knowing where you're going requires having a clear vision. A vision builds trust, collaboration, interdependence, motivation, and mutual responsibility for success. Vision helps people make smart choices, because their decisions are being made with the end result in mind. As goals are accomplished, the answer to "What is next?" becomes clear. Vision allows people to act from a proactive stance, moving toward what they want rather than reactively away from what they don't want.

### Make Your Vision a Reality

In their book Full Steam Ahead!® Unleash the Power of Vision in Your Company and Your Life, Ken Blanchard and Jesse Stoner define vision as "knowing who you are, where you're going, and what will guide your journey."

Knowing who you are means having a significant purpose. Where you're going means having a picture of the future. What will guide your journey are clear values. However, vision alone is not enough. For a leader to ensure that the vision becomes a reality—a shared vision that mobilizes people—Blanchard and Stoner identify and discuss three important issues and guidelines that people must follow: how the vision is created, how it's communicated, and how it's lived.

### Creating the Vision

The process of creating the vision is as important as what the vision says. Instead of simply taking the top management to a retreat to put the vision together and then announcing it to others, encourage dialogue about the vision. While the initial responsibility for drafting an organizational vision rests with the top management, the organization needs to put in place mechanisms to allow others to have an opportunity to help shape the vision—to put their thumbprint on it.

For a departmental or team vision, it's possible to craft the vision as a team. Although the leader must have a sense of where he or she is going, it's important that he or she trusts and utilizes the knowledge and skills of the people on the team to get the best vision. Regardless of how you initially draft the vision, it's important that you get input from those it affects before you finalize it. Ask people these questions: "Would you like to work for an organization that has this vision? Can you see where you fit in the vision? Does it help you set priorities? Does it provide guidelines for making decisions? Is it exciting and motivating? Have we left anything out? Should we delete anything?" Involving people will deepen their understanding and commitment and create a better vision.

### Communicating the Vision

Creating a vision—for your organization or department, for your work, and for your life—is a journey, not a one-time activity. In some organizations, a vision statement may be found framed on the wall, but it provides no guidance or, worse, has nothing to do with the reality of how things actually are. This turns people off. Visioning is an ongoing process; you need to keep it alive. It's important to keep talking about the vision and referring to it as much as possible. Max Depree, the legendary former chairman of Herman Miller and author of Leadership Is an Art, said that in his visionary role, he had to be like a third grade teacher. He had to keep on saying it over and over and over until people got it right, right, right! The more you focus on your vision, the clearer it will become, and the more deeply you will understand it.

### Living the Vision

The moment you identify your vision, you need to behave as if it were happening right now. Your actions need to be congruent with your vision. As others see you living the vision, they will believe you are serious, and this will help deepen their understanding and commitment. Two strategies will support your efforts to live your vision:

- Always focus on your vision—Your vision should be the foundation for your organization. If an obstacle or unforeseen event throws you off course, you may have to change your short-term goals, but your vision should be long lasting. Change is bound to happen. Unforeseen events are bound to occur. Find a way to reframe what is happening as a challenge or opportunity on the road to living your vision.
- Show the courage of commitment—True commitment begins when you take action. There will be fears; feel them and move ahead. It takes courage to create a vision, and it takes courage to act on it. In the words of Goethe, "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it."



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