

JOHN BUCHANAN



What's your everest?

The vision is Everest

It is my view that leaders, managers and coaches need to ‘take people where they have never been before’ as Henry Kissinger was once quoted as saying.

The role of a coach is to challenge individuals and teams with *possibilities* and take them outside their comfort zones into the realms of uncertainty. In experiencing these situations we learn more about ourselves and grow as people.

This is how a baby learns to crawl, and then walk. This is how we first learn to ride a bike. It is how we move through our education. And it is how we make it through to day two of our first job. In order to achieve milestones such as these, we are prepared to move outside the safe and comfortable ‘world we know’ into a world that is unknown. We usually fall down a few times, but if we get up one more time than we fall, we have learnt something new. If we don’t, we won’t gain that extra learning, but do discover something valuable about ourselves.

Like parenting, coaching is about creating a vision and providing a safe environment that allows individuals to fall down a number of times during their learning, their growth and their



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development, as they journey towards becoming a whole person.

Before I was appointed coach of the Australian Cricket Team in October 1999, I was always struck by the huge potential of the team and the players in it. I also believed the team was only scratching the surface of its potential. So, in my first meeting with the players in Brisbane before the First Test against Pakistan, I talked about a vision I saw for the team. The vision was about taking a journey together to a symbolic place called *Everest*. However, *Everest* is never reached because it is constantly being redefined. What we set out to achieve was a higher *base camp* than we had reached before.

For the first meeting I wanted to give the vision some substance. I also wanted to link history with the present, so I used the word 'invincibles'. This was the name given to the Australian cricket team captained by Sir Donald Bradman in 1948. The team journeyed to England, won the Ashes, and left the country undefeated in all their games – a feat never repeated. The vision was not that the current team be regarded as invincible, or even compared with that 1948 team. The vision for this team was to aspire to being better than it already was, and it had that capacity. Time and history will ultimately label this team and its era; however, the players had the collective abilities to take this team from being regarded as very good to one that could be referred to as great!

Steve Waugh had just taken over as captain and, while he was uncertain about the concept of 'invincible', he too shared a vision of the team putting its mark in the annals of Australian and world sporting history. Indeed, it would do this sooner than we



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both had envisaged. After winning the First Test against Pakistan reasonably comfortably, we miraculously won the Second Test in Hobart with a come-from-behind win – Adam Gilchrist and Justin Langer's partnership sealing one of the greatest winning chases in the fourth innings of a game.

While there is nothing like winning, there is nothing like winning the seemingly unwinnable to fuel the belief of a team. This Australian Cricket Team went on to win sixteen consecutive Test matches across six series and four countries – a record that still stands.

Having a clear vision of where you want to take people is one of the most important roles of managing and coaching a team. Everything else follows: the leadership, the team ethos and culture, the methodology for achieving the vision, and the type of people needed to drive it.

As with any team or organisation, for a vision to become reality it has to be shared by the majority of its members, especially the leaders. This can be a difficult process as different people may have a different picture of what can and should be achieved. The important role here for the coach or the leader is to recognise who the key players are and what they see as the future of the team or organisation.

I have often used various quotes from visionaries such as Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War*, and his military principles of war to reinforce the concept behind a team's vision. A few examples of quotes that can emphasise the message behind a vision are:

- '... we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit ...' Aristotle.



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- 'Every job is a self-portrait of the person who did it ... autograph your work with excellence ...' author unknown.
- 'If better is possible, good is not enough!' author unknown.
- 'It is not how good you are, it is how good you can be.' A former coach's comment on tennis player Roger Federer.
- 'I do not skate to where the puck is, I skate to where the puck will be.' Wayne Gretsky, one of the greatest North American ice hockey players.

Spend time influencing the team visionaries to accept a common vision that then becomes part of everything done. This influencing process will take many guises and require a great deal of patience. It will not always be direct and quick. It will require placing notes under the door, circulating information, sending messages, having meetings and encouraging team members. It will require a great deal of repetition. It will also require being prepared to detour from one's direction and shelving the vision temporarily while immediate tasks and emergencies are dealt with. However, you must never lose sight of the endpoint.

Here are a few examples of the quotes I used to encourage and inspire the vision for the Australian Cricket Team:

- Aim to have history record this team and this era of Australian cricket as one of the great periods of world cricket.
- Become a great side, not just a very good side.
- Take the game to a new level by changing the way the game is played.
- Have all sides in awe of the Australian Cricket team (for the 2003 World Cup).



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- Be the best skilled team the world has ever seen (for the 2007 World Cup).
- Be the first team to score 400 in One-Day International cricket.
- Be the first team to have truly multi-dimensional players (i.e. can use both sides of their body).

The vision must be inspiring to the team. It must be extremely challenging so it becomes a real test of the team's abilities. It must be exciting due to the possibility of achieving something that has not been done before. And quite probably, the vision may seem too big, too difficult, but nonetheless, it may also seem within reach.

The leader or coach must constantly monitor the progress of the vision, accelerating the climb to Everest whenever possible. If the climb has become too difficult, the coach must be prepared to ease the ascent to a 'base camp', until the time is right to begin the climb again.



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KEY MESSAGES

1. The leader or coach must have a clear vision for the team or organisation.
2. The vision must be inspiring, exciting and extremely challenging.
3. The vision is designed to take the team outside its comfort zone.
4. In order to achieve a vision, it must be shared and owned by team leaders.
5. Invest time in influencing team leaders to agree on a common vision.
6. The role of the coach or leader is to constantly monitor the journey towards the vision.

Extract from *If Better is Possible* by John Buchanan

