

Visionary Leadership: The Hope of the World

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An inscription on a church wall in Sussex England, c. 1730, says:

"A vision without a task is but a dream. A task without vision is drudgery. A vision and a task are the hope of the world."

Take the Next Step

The ability to create a vision compelling enough to engage others in a truly connected way is what legends are made of. We get inspired just hearing names like these:

- Abraham Lincoln (Abolition of slavery)
- Mahatma Gandhi (Indian Independence Movement)
- Winston Churchill ("Never Surrender" wartime leader in World War II)
- Joan of Arc (Inspiring hero who compelled troops in the recovery of France from English domination)
- Martin Luther King, Jr. ("I have a dream")
- Nelson Mandela (End of apartheid)

Why do these leader make our hearts soar? Because they were visionary leaders who cast inspiring visions for which others were willing to lay down their lives.

In a 2014 *Trends in Executive Development* research study conducted by Executive Development Associates (EDA), the need for vision was confirmed by senior leaders and heads of executive development in more than 130 companies. They identified the ability to create a vision and engage others so they feel ownership and passion in achieving that vision as the single most important capability needed in the emerging generation of leaders. Regrettably, that same study revealed that this capability is also one of most lacking skills in the next generation of leadership talent. Clearly, today's leaders are worried about the leaders of tomorrow and their ability create a path forward that others will want to follow.

The Baby Boomers wanted to change the world, and they have in weighty matters such as impressive healthcare advancements, massive support to third-world countries, and increased inclusivity across gender, ethnic, and sexual orientation. Now Gen X is headed for the "Suite Seats," and do we know what they want?

- Do **they** want to change the world?
- Are they willing to lead the change?
- Are they gutsy enough to create a compelling vision and courageous enough to carry it out?

Well, its time to find out. The Boomer exit is finally and dramatically upon us, and we have 11% fewer Gen Xers, which for many means a weak bench and light leadership pipeline. If we ever needed visionary leaders, we need them now.

And yet, visionary leadership is not a stand-alone talent. Creating a compelling vision and critical thinking for strategy, planning, and results go hand in hand. According to EDA's *Trends in Executive Development* research, critical thinking was a close second in the ranking of leadership capabilities needed in next generation of leaders. No matter how exciting the vision is, it has to be realistic, achievable, and the right vision in the right timing for the organization. Even if leaders are able to create a compelling vision, they must implement the vision with critical thinking skills to develop the appropriate business strategy and then bring others into the program with specific and aligned goals. Vision without strategy is just wishful thinking. It's lightweight and without impact. And neither the vision nor the strategy will move forward without the engagement of others in the often long and tiring road to achievement of the vision.

We need next generation leaders to compel us through vision and engage us through sound decision making. We don't need a dry mission statement affixed to the lobby walls. Instead, we want leaders who express the vision as much by what they do as by what they say. Like Gandhi, Churchill, and Joan of Arc, we need leaders who are not behind the desk sending out directives. We need them to roll up their sleeves, put themselves on the front lines, and lead the charge.

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Have we seen this type of leadership in recent times? Absolutely. Consider the legendary leader Bill McGowan, the CEO of MCI Telecommunications. In the book **Forbes Greatest Business Stories of All Time**, the author Daniel Gross wrote that MCI was “a tiny company with a handful of employees and no revenue.” He continues, “But the underdog MCI had one thing that AT&T lacked: the visionary CEO Bill McGowan.” McGowan had more than a vision. He also had a strategy, which led to the breakup of Ma Bell, the AT&T monopoly. It has been referred to in many publications as a story similar to that of David and Goliath, with the exception noted that MCI did not have a slingshot. At the time, AT&T was sustained by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) protection and controlled 90% of the nation’s local phone calls and nearly 100% of long-distance telephone service. McGowan’s plan included preparing an antitrust lawsuit against AT&T and its local operating companies, sending briefs to the FCC, encouraging the Justice Department to take similar antitrust action, and a marketing campaign that tapped into the feelings of paying too much for long distance calls home. By the time McGowan died in 1992, MCI had grown into the nation’s second-largest phone company in the world, with 31,000 employees, an 18% market share, and annual sales of \$10.6 billion. Perhaps even more importantly, he had launched a telecommunications revolution which led to a dramatic drop in long distance calling costs. “You have to have stamina,” he told a public television interviewer in the 1980s. “Otherwise you give up. Otherwise you get turned. Otherwise you listen to people tell you things ... What you are listening to are those people’s ideas about what they can do, not your ideas about what you can do.” While all good stories must come to an end, Bill McGowan’s compelling vision and critically thought out strategy ended with the fateful merger with WorldCom in 1998 and later in 2006, the MCI network was bought by Verizon, a story captured in the documentary **Long Distance Warrior**.

Another modern visionary leader was Mary Kay Ash. If you visit the website of Mary Kay, not only can you purchase cosmetics, but you can read about the founder “Mary Kay Ash, a true original.”

“As an entrepreneur and a philanthropist, she started her business from a tiny store in Dallas, Texas, with five products and one big dream. That dream was to inspire women to transform their lives, and in doing so, help other women achieve success.”

After her experience in the corporate world, Ash envisioned a company where working women could determine their own levels of advancement and compensation, be their own bosses, and set work schedules that would still leave time for their children. She is well known for using the power of recognition with her famous pink Cadillac awards to inspire others. Her motto is “Pretend that every single person you meet has a sign around his or her neck that says ‘Make Me Feel Important.’ Not only will you succeed in business, you will succeed in life.”

Mary Kay, Inc. now has 3 million consultants in 35 countries to whom the founder suggests success is achieved with 3 steps:

1. A plan
2. Persistence
3. Work toward achieving it

Since the 2008 downturn, many business leaders, including those being groomed for the top leadership positions of the future, were rewarded and promoted for their ability to cut costs, increase revenue, and stock prices. As a result, most have never been required to inspire others and critical thinking was limited to cost-cutting decisions and survival tactics. Therefore, the incoming leaders have not yet developed those capabilities.

Not only does the world need visionary leadership, but the massive Gen Y generation is not going to engage without it. This group, still under 30, do not expect to work their entire careers at one company and, in fact, often take jobs with the intention of leaving in two to three years. At the same time, these younger workers want to work for an organization they can be proud of and whose values they share. If the incoming leaders will reach beyond profit and loss and touch the hearts of the Gen Y crowd, then 20 years from now we will be able to write their stories. And we can help by intentionally guiding and grooming our next generation leadership into compelling visionaries.

5 Ways to Develop Visionary Leadership?

- 1) Coaching and Mentoring:** Every organization has current and retired leaders who, over the course of their careers, have articulated a strong and compelling vision. Organizations can tap this already connected talent, as these organizational leaders can be exceptional coaches and mentors to the upcoming generation of leaders who need to develop this skill.
- 2) Training:** These skills can be learned in executive training programs through creative thinking and cognitive readiness development, business scenarios, simulations, storytelling, and practice. The organization’s senior leaders, including the CEO—can be brought in to talk about how they developed their own visionary leadership style and how they have inspired others to perform. Participants can practice in breakout sessions in which they are assigned to create a vision for a product, division, or department, followed by sharing the vision with others and receiving feedback.
- 3) Team Building:** Structured team building sessions, such as a facilitated new leader and team assimilation session, can encourage leaders to prepare and think through their personal vision and leadership approach. Having dialogue as a team about shared norms, expectations, and values can also help a team create a shared vision and purpose.
- 4) Gathering Input of Gen Y:** Creating a vision means looking ahead to the ideas that will capture the imagination of new generations of employees and customers. This younger, less jaded talent pool can provide valuable insight into the kind of products they and their peers would like to buy, as well as the kinds of organizations they want to work for. Cross-generational teams can be formed to provide input for new products and services.
- 5) Corporate Culture:** Finally, the importance of developing vision and engaging others around it must be made part of the overall organizational culture. This means bringing life to the mission statements and values affixed to lobby walls by sharing success stories and examples that provide meaning to workers. It also means incorporating the vision and the strategy into every day actions and communications—through a plethora of methods—and ultimately aligning all of it via organizational systems such as recognition programs and performance appraisals.

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About The Author

Bonnie is CEO of Executive Development Associates. EDA is a 29-year-old internationally known boutique consulting firm in custom executive development. In addition to leading the firm, Hagemann has a unique background and expertise developing leaders. She specializes in executive development, executive coaching and high potential development. To date, Hagemann has conducted coaching programs for over 65 leaders in medium and large organizations including 7 organizational presidents. She has delivered over 250 presentations and speeches on leadership, teambuilding, communication, conflict, and behavior. She has 11 published works, is co-author of the 2010 book, *Decades of Difference: Making it Work*, on the shifting workforce demographics and their impact on leadership. Her contact info is bhagemann@executivedevelopment.com Her co-author is Sandra Stroope. Sandra is a Human Resources Manager at Intermountain Healthcare with 20 years of experience creating HR and development solutions that align with business strategy and achieve results in a variety of industries (healthcare, aerospace, defense, mining, energy, telecommunications) at award winning, global and Fortune 500 companies. Sandra has published 14 works in publications such as *T&D Magazine*, *Leadership Excellence*, the *Pfeiffer Training/Consulting Annuals* and a chapter in a book "*Talent Management Scorecards*" to be released in 2013 by ASTD Press. Her education includes a Master's degree in HR Management, Bachelor's degree in Psychology, PHR certification and several coaching and training/development certifications.