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The Ultimate Power of Vision

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Those of us who specialize in developing leaders often speak about the power of vision. Great leadership is always visionary leadership, we say.

When asked why vision is important, we typically talk about the inspiration it offers. The focus it gives. The direction it sets. And these are indeed great benefits when vision is well articulated. But my recent three weeks in Russia started me thinking about vision in an altogether different light. And it has changed my perspective on what ultimately makes vision so important.

In Quest of a National Idea

Russia today is in search of what President Putin and others call a "national idea." This phrase popped up repeatedly at dinner with prominent political figures. In interviews with journalists. In casual exchanges with intellectuals. And especially in the seminars where I trained over 200 high school teachers to provide character training for students.

The Russian phrase "national idea" embraces several English-language concepts. It includes what we would think of as vision or a defining purpose, as well as our concept of identity. The Russian language, unfortunately, does not have terms that are direct equivalents of what we mean when we talk about our "purpose" in life or about our personal sense of identity. So the term "national idea" is the catch-phrase that is being used as short-hand to convey what we could sum up with the words "vision, purpose, and identity."

Now, why would the Russians be pursuing this dialogue so urgently? The answer takes us back to the days of Mikhail Gorbachev, who began the process of dismantling the Soviet system. He introduced the West to the word *perestroika*, which became an umbrella term for the changes he forged in Russia.

In the United States we tended to view *perestroika* as a great step forward for mankind. In Russia, however, most people I talk to see it as one of the greatest tragedies in Russian history. Not that they were enamored with the communist system that *perestroika* toppled. They clearly had no sympathy with the Soviet regime.

But the regime did have a vision for the role Russia should play in the world, a vision that gave the Russian people a sense of identity and gave meaning to the sacrifice the system demanded of them. The Soviet system also had a clear code of ethics that was ingrained into standardized curriculum across the entire educational spectrum.

Gorbachev's reforms basically brought an end to that Soviet consensus, but without developing either a new vision, a new ethic, or new institutions to replace those that were being discarded. Almost overnight the state-run industries started to collapse. Unemployment became rampant. Four out of every five families quickly fell below the poverty line. (Most have never risen back above it.) And with no clear career paths for which to prepare students, education spiraled into disarray.

Gorbachev's successor Boris Yeltsin seemed more occupied with privatizing state industries than with building a new legal code appropriate for a democratic society and the free economy which Russia was striving to adopt. In the absence of adequate laws, the Mafia simply took over. It rapidly bought many legitimate industries outright. It got control of supply systems. And it started "buying" elections for candidates who would aid the criminal agenda. Russia is now fighting back from those travesties. But the challenges are immense.

No Defining Vision

Meanwhile, no one has yet arisen in Russia who can articulate a vision for Russia's future. The basic ethic today is survival. Hope is minimal. Distrust is rife. Doctors, for instance, told me that 80% of the medicine in Russia is fake, sold in high-quality counterfeit packaging that is indistinguishable from the genuine product. Apart from family, which is still a cherished value in Russian culture, many people have little to live for. Little to dream of.

In this climate of aimlessness, the common people have almost no sense of meaning for their lives. They are reminiscent of a quote from the great Russian writer Anton Chekhov, who said, "In reality everything is beautiful in this world when one reflects everything except what we think or do to ourselves when we forget our human dignity and the higher aims of our existence." Whenever I use that quote in one of my seminars, it resonates with every teacher in the room. Indeed, teachers have told us, "We are tired of looking into the empty eyes of our students."

Without personal clarity about "the higher aims of our existence" (to use Chekhov's term) daily life becomes mere motion. Meaningless motion. And no life is more empty than one void of meaning.

Vision, Meaning, Fulfillment

Thinking about that as I watched throngs of people at a bus stop in Novosibirsk one day, it suddenly struck me why Russia's quest for a "national idea" is so extremely urgent. Why vision is so vitally important in any culture, whether it's the culture of a company, a political movement, or a society.

In a word, vision is what gives *meaning* to the sacrifice, dedication, and commitment that leaders ask of their people. Vision is more than merely providing a dream that gives us a sense of direction or that provides a reference point for aligning priorities, as vital as these functions may be. Vision's greater power is its ability to address our deep need to have meaning at the core of our existence. A "why" for pressing on.

No one likes "busy work," because it has no purpose. No meaning. Yet, in the absence of vision, all action quickly degenerates into busy work. Motion without meaning. Vision is therefore the first step toward a life filled with meaning, and meaning is essential if life is to have fulfillment.

So I've come back from Russia with a renewed resolve to emphasize the importance of clear, compelling vision. Not all leaders, to be sure, have the gift of great intuitive insights that translate into exhilarating vision. Nor is it necessary for every leader to have such a gift. Some of the most talented and effective leaders I've ever worked with would be among the first to tell you that they are not visionary thinkers.

But they did have the ability to recognize a compelling vision when they saw it, identify with it, make it their own, and communicate it inspirationally to those they lead. Only when leaders convey meaning through vision-casting will organizations and cultures reach their highest potential, for only then will sacrifice and commitment have meaning.

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