

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

January 1, 2003

Is Vision Really Necessary?

by Dr. Mike Armour

Pick up any book on leadership, and you're likely to find it: an unequivocal call for leaders to be men and women of vision. Some even argue that those who are not visionary are not truly leaders.

As for me, I'm not so sure about that. Over a lifetime of organizational experience, I've been privileged to work with some truly exceptional leaders. And many of them were genuine visionaries. But not all.

What they did all share in common was focus — the ability to stay zeroed in on what really counts.

Staying Focused

Knowing what really counts, of course, depends on vision. Only when vision is clear can we know where to focus. What really counts. So somewhere in the organization we need visionary leadership. But even huge organizations require only a handful of leaders who are visionary, people who are gifted, original thinkers in the realm of vision. Why so few? Because the organization needs singular focus. It does not need fifty cooks in the kitchen, each brewing up his own vision.

Thus, organizations depend on a few visionary leaders to set the pace. To set direction. To inspire. They genuinely create vision. Other leaders are not so much concerned with creating vision as implementing it. And this is where the greatest leadership occurs in most organizations.

The Non-Visionary Leader

Many of the best leaders I've known freely confess that they are not visionaries. And from working with them, I agree with their self-assessment. But I'm constantly impressed with their ability to recognize a great vision when they see it.

Even more impressive is their infectuous zeal in embracing that vision and making it work. They latch on to it. They internalize it. They stay focused on the priorities that assure it success. Their focus — not their ability to be visionary — is what makes them effective leaders.

Visionaries and Leaders

Just as many leaders are not visionaries, great visionaries are often not leaders. The "visionary" mind and the "leadership" mind function in distinctly different ways.

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Visionaries are given to the "big picture" of the dream, not the commitment to details which translates dreams into reality.

Leaders, on the other hand, must implement the dream. They have to manage the details, since their calling is to turn concept into something concrete.

While we can all cite instances of people who are both superb visionaries and exceptional leaders, their numbers are few. Far more common is the great leader who gains inspiration from the insights of genuine visionaries.

More common still is the leader who is not gifted at developing vision, but who makes a stellar contribution by staying focused on the priorities of a vision someone else has articulated.

Which takes me to a final admonition. Don't kick yourself if you're not a visionary leader. And ignore those voices that accuse you of defaulted leadership if you're not a person of vision. Where you need to judge yourself is on your ability to stay focused.

Leadership is more about focus than vision. A visionary who cannot lead gets little done. The same is true of a leader without focus. Vision simply tells us where to focus. It tells us what counts. But if we fail to stay focused, vision counts for nothing.

Be visionary if that's your gift. But whatever you're calling, be focused. And in the end, you'll turn dreams into reality — even if you were not the first to dream the dream.

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