

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

March 1, 2003

You Can't Overcommunicate Vision

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Few leadership tasks are more urgent than casting vision — uniting everyone behind a common commitment to a shared future. Yet, for all our efforts at vision-casting, organizations easily lose sight of their vision. More strategic plans gather dust than gather momentum. Vision can languish quickly!!

Knowing that tendency, successful leaders talk constantly about vision. In fact, they've found that it's almost impossible to "overcommunicate" on the subject.

Contrasts in Motivation

One reason we need to "overcommunicate" vision is because each person has a unique motivational pattern. Our individual patterns are some mixture of two basic responses to events. Either we move toward things we want (a "toward" motivation) or we move away from things we don't want (an "away-from" motivation).

All of us run some combination of "toward" and "away-from" patterns. We simultaneously strive for certain things and work hard to avoid others. On balance, however, most of us lean toward being either "toward" motivated or "away-from" motivated. We use that preferred pattern more often than not to motivate ourselves.

About 40% of the populace are primarily "toward" motivated. They usually spur themselves into action by focusing on what they want. Another 40% are "away-from" motivated. They "get moving" when they focus on what they want to avoid. And the balance are people whose motivational pattern is roughly a 50-50 split of "towards" and "away-froms."

Thus, if your organization is a cross-section of the community, about half of your people are "toward" motivated, the other half "away-from" motivated. And each of these will have a different reaction to your vision statements.

The Motivational Structure of Vision

By their very nature, statements of vision are "toward" oriented. They emphasize what we want to achieve. Where we want to go. As a result, they resonate most fully with people who are themselves "toward" motivated.

Conversely, vision statements (which are inherently about dreams) are not so likely to energize those who are "away-from" motivated. That's because "away-from" motivations center on what I dread more than what I dream. People who are "away-from" motivated are much clearer on what they don't want than on what they truly want.

Perpetual procrastinators are typically "away-from" motivated. As are people who kick into high gear only when a deadline is upon them. When it's either "act now" or face eminent failure, they finally manage to get moving. They are motivated not so much by achieving success, but by avoiding failure.

If your statement of vision ignites a "fire in the belly" among your workers (or volunteers), it's most likely to do so with those who are "toward" motivated. They connect with the "toward" structure of your declared vision.

On the other hand, your "away-from" motivated people may find the vision statement appealing, but not necessarily inspiring. It's attractive to them only to the degree that it keeps them away from something they don't want. But unless that "don't want" is gnawing at the door, they may not feel an urgency to "do all it takes" to make the vision a reality. They settle for doing well enough to get by, and nothing more.

When that happens, their low state of urgency creates a drag on organizational momentum. Left unchecked, this drag eventually becomes an energy drain for everyone. Even those who are "toward" motivated begin to lose their excitement for the vision. Their focus on the vision fades.

Restoring Momentum

At first glance the strategy for solving this problem might be to generate a "buy-in" to the vision by those who are creating the drag. But if their low enthusiasm for the vision comes from an "away-from" motivational structure, getting "buy-in" from them is unlikely.

Instead, leadership must focus on re-energizing the workers who are "toward" motivated. Our strategy must be to keep them so highly committed to the vision that their enthusiasm overcomes the forces that are threatening momentum. Which is why leadership must communicate vision over and over and over. By doing so we restoke the excitement of those who are "toward" motivated. It's how we keep them focused on vision. It's how we counter the drag.

Does this mean that we should forego any effort to inspire "away-from" people with vision statements? Not at all. Few people are 100% "away-from" motivated. Those who are primarily motivated by "away-froms" generally have "toward" motivations, too. Their "toward" motivation is simply far less pronounced than their "away-from" motivation.

But to get things done — to convert the vision into reality — our "bread and butter" folk are the ones who are "toward" motivated. Keep them focused on the vision. Keep their passion for the vision running high. And they'll bring the rest of the organization along with them.

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