

# How to Create a Vision that Inspires

# Congratulations!

You're a leader, congratulations! If you haven't figured this out yet, let us be the first to tell you: People want to know where you are going. And, perhaps more importantly, they want to know why they should help you get there.

Leadership always begins with a picture of the future. To create a compelling picture, you will need a new skill: you must be able to see the unseen. This is not only what people need from us as leaders but also what they expect. This expectation comes in many forms.

- We are expected to see the changing landscape in our industry—before it changes.
- We are asked to see the outcome of potential strategies years before the final verdict can be rendered.
- We're expected to see the potential in people before that potential has been translated into performance.
- We must have a picture of the future we are attempting to create for our organization -- we must have vision.

For some leaders and aspiring leaders, this Fundamental is daunting. Whether **Seeing the Future** energizes you or terrifies you, it will be this ability that allows you to enter the ranks of true leadership. If you've read anything about leadership, you'll know this picture of the future is often referred to as vision. Vision is more than an indispensable ingredient for effective leadership; it is the cornerstone.

# Uncommon Leaders See the Future

To see the future, to see the unseen, is the first Fundamental of all Uncommon Leaders. Here's our working definition of this concept:

**The ability to determine how you want the future to be different from today.**

In order to See the Future and create a compelling vision, it will be helpful if you **Remember the Past, Remain Grounded, Dare to Dream, and Paint the Picture.** Let's take a deeper look at each of these and explore some ideas for action.

## Remember the Past

What lessons from your past can you harness for your advantage in the future? I promise you they are there. Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." The best leaders always learn from the past but they never live there. Our vision for the future should never be an extension of the present or a return to the past.

The founder(s) of your organization saw something—an opportunity, an unmet need, a confluence of forces, something. They had an idea, an insight, or an impulse to do something, and they did! From that catalytic moment, your organization was born. As you think about the future, what can you learn from your founder(s)? Do you need

more courage? Do you need to listen to your customers more intently to discern their needs? Certainly, our founders were human with both strengths and weaknesses. How did they leverage their strengths? How did they mitigate their weaknesses? Were their strategies successful? Have you read what they wrote during their tenure? Their speeches? The letters they wrote to the stakeholders? Read the interviews they did with the media too. If they wrote a book, you should read it—again. Periodically, you should immerse yourself in their work. You will probably be surprised what you'll find.

## Remain Grounded

In *Smart Leadership*, I made the case to Confront Reality as the first Smart Choice that enables a leader to scale his or her impact. I stand by that.

**Only when we are grounded in truth can we lead from a position of strength.**

Unfortunately, this is much easier to say than to do. The more responsibility you have in an organization and the higher you have climbed the structural ladder, the more difficult it will be for you to know the truth.

In our recent surveys of leaders around the world, we discovered a perception gap of about 40 points between senior leaders and front line associates on multiple topics. The gap exists when evaluating the success of change efforts, recommending your

organization as a great place to work, or even the level of excitement about going to work. I'm sure if we explored more topics this gap would persist. Leaders, particularly senior leaders, are typically out of touch with the reality of many of the people in their organization. If you are not grounded in reality, your warped perception of your current state is a huge liability as you think about your preferred future and the path to get there. Here are some ideas to consider as you seek to be grounded in reality.

To remain grounded, listen broadly and proactively. Who do you listen to? Do you have a network of trusted advisors? I trust you listen to your inner circle—your leadership team. Who else? Do you have a coach? Mentors? A personal board of directors? I have no doubt you listen to your customers. I'm also confident you listen to your employees. Here's the point of this line of thinking: you need to listen to more than your gut. Your instincts matter, and at the end of the day, you, as the leader, will make a lot of decisions. However, is your intuition informed? If so, by whom? Here's another question: Is your listening strategic or sporadic? Are you proactive or reactive? I know some organizations do exit interviews with employees—fine. How many employees are you interviewing **before** they decide to leave?

### You need to listen broadly and proactively.

Make a list of all the audiences (voices) you would like to listen to over the course of a typical year. Indicate the frequency with

which you engage each group. What could you do to be more proactive and strategic? Pay special attention to any gaps in audience or frequency as you map out your Strategic Listening Plan for the next twelve months.

## Dare to Dream

What is your dream? This is not the same as a spreadsheet on which you compute a modest compounded growth rate over the next decade. Is there something bold in your future? If not, could there be? What about the future excites you? What challenges you? What will enliven your organization? The answers to these questions, and others like them, could illuminate your dream.

### To help you dream, elongate your perspective.

Unless leaders are diligent, we will allow time compression to compromise our future. The best decisions are almost always made with a long view in mind. Many leaders appear to understand this better on a personal level than for their organizations. Look no further than 401(k) contributions. People with a long view and an understanding of compounding are quick to sign up for the program. Not because of how much cash they will have on hand in five years, but because they realize how much they will accumulate over the next 30 years. Vision is like this. When visions are big and bold, your initial progress may feel small, and it may be minor in the short term. But to pursue something so big it will take a lifetime to achieve can change your thinking, your energy, and your actions today.

This is one of the challenges with the way Wall Street works.

## Leaders forced to hit quarterly numbers often make short-term decisions with dire long-term consequences.

One of my friends and mentors is John Maxwell, the internationally recognized leadership expert. John challenged me with the idea that too many leaders overestimate what they can accomplish in a day and underestimate what they can accomplish in a decade.

When Seeing the Future, imagine you are looking at the health indicators for your organization a decade from now, maybe two decades -- elongate your perspective. What metrics would you look for to determine the overall health of the organization? With these metrics in mind, what strategies and tactics do you need to embrace today?

## Paint the Picture

This is the moment your experience, judgment, creativity, intuition, and knowledge coalesce to create your preferred picture.

This is the stage in your journey when you synthesize all you know to be true with what you want to be true. This activity will require time. How much? We don't know. However, you'll know when you're ready to test the vision with those closest to you. Before you can share the vision, you have to have one.

The more vivid the picture, the more vibrant the colors, the more likely you are to create a compelling future others will be interested in pursuing with you. Here are some questions to stimulate your thinking and your creativity. The answers to these questions become the paint on your palette. From these colors, you'll be able to create your masterpiece.

- What do you want to be true in the future that is not true today?
- What are you trying to accomplish?
- What are you working to become? Why does it matter?
- Why is it important for you to accomplish your vision?
- What are you willing to invest your life and career to accomplish?
- What are you convinced that your organization should endlessly and tirelessly strive for?
- What is big enough that you could work toward it your entire career and then pass the baton to others to pursue?
- What is so big and so admirable, you can think of nothing better to devote your leadership energy toward accomplishing?
- What pursuit would energize you and your people?
- What is something you feel must be passionately pursued?
- What have others done in similar circumstances that might inform your vision?
- What could you pursue that would create a new competitive advantage?

# See the Future – Create the Future

Peter Drucker, the world-renowned leadership guru famously and accurately said,

“The best way to predict the future is to invent it.”

We agree with Dr. Drucker.

Leadership always begins with a picture of the future. Leaders are the architects of the future, but we must see the future before we can rally others to build it. You were born for this! Don't make the common mistake of assuming this is someone else's job. Every leader must have a vision for what you've been entrusted to steward. The difference between the CEO's vision and the frontline leader's is breadth and time horizon, but both still need vision in order to lead well.

- If you hired a consultant to help you with this, what do you think he/she would suggest you do next?
- What trends are emerging that could impact your team/organization?
- What was your organization born to do?
- What fires you up about the future you are trying to create?
- What is it about the future you envision that compels you to pursue it?
- What do you want the legacy of your organization to be one hundred years from now?
- How would you explain why you exist (not what you do) to a small child?
- What greater good can your organization contribute to the world?
- If your organization went away, what would the world lose?
- What are you uniquely positioned to do that would enhance your value to customers?
- If time and money were not a factor, how would you describe your perfect life, team, or organization in a decade?
- What in your past gives you clues as to what would be advantageous for your future?
- If you could eliminate all fear of failure, what would you attempt over the next decade?
- How would you describe the future of your life/team/organization or cause in such a way as to generate new levels of passion and excitement in you and those you lead?



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can best lead your team, email us at:

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