

Understanding Visionary Leadership

The topic of leadership has always excited people. From the earliest times, our mythologies and folklore have been filled with stories of charismatic leaders who have bravely led the human race successfully through the trials of their time. Even in business, the study of leadership is not new. Whether an organization does well or whether it does badly, good or bad leadership is the most common explanation.

Early leadership studies were mainly focused on the role of rewards and punishments in bringing about desired changes in behavior. These studies assumed that the only way to influence followers was to provide desired rewards and to avoid undesired punishments. However more recent studies have highlighted the role of charisma, vision, and inspiration in engaging the attention and energies of followers towards common goals¹. If we reflect on our own experience and look for an individual who has inspired us, touched our life, and transformed us, we will find that we were not inspired so much by material rewards, as we were by the charismatic personality or the compelling vision that was provided by the individual. This type of leadership, which completely engages followers and takes them beyond mere rewards and punishments has come to be known as transformational, visionary, or charismatic leadership.

Researchers across cultures have found that transformational/visionary leaders display four common types of behaviors². First, transformational leaders are highly charismatic individuals who are role models for their followers and can be trusted to do the right thing. Doing the right thing in the face of adversity requires courage and visionary leaders possess the required strength of character. It is this quality that attracts followers towards them and makes followers emulate them. Secondly, visionary leaders are able to provide an inspirational vision which motivates followers to look beyond the mundane activities of their jobs. An inspiring vision not only presents a glorious future but shows how the individual can work towards it in his/her current job. Thirdly, visionary leaders encourage their followers to think independently and creatively, to challenge the status quo and to look for novel solutions to existing problems. This crucial aspect of independent thinking is what distinguishes authentic leadership from mere indoctrination. Finally, visionary leaders recognize their followers as complete human beings and act as mentors to their followers.

One of the most crucial elements of leadership is the content and communication of the vision. A good vision must not only inspire and engage followers; it must also make the followers believe that it is something that is achievable by them collectively. Most inspiring visions have a common theme of dealing with change by making people work together towards ideal goals³. But what is it that makes the crucial difference between a vision that remains a set of good intentions, and a vision that inspires followers to enthusiastically engage themselves in pursuit of its implementation? Let us see a few instances of successful and unsuccessful visions to understand this.

From 1942 to 1944, Dr. W. Edwards Deming, then a consultant to the U.S. Department of Defense, conducted twenty-three seminars of eight days each for the engineers on techniques of statistical quality control. For his time, Deming's message was quite revolutionary; he stressed the human factors in production as much as the technological elements. However, as Deming would recall later, "the courses were well received by engineers, but management paid no

attention to them at all.” In fact, American managers ignored Deming’s ideas for almost four decades. On the other hand, in 1950, when Deming was invited to conduct a series of seminars by the Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers, his ideas were wholeheartedly accepted. Deming was able to convince the Japanese about a whole new philosophy of management, which would actively involve workers in finding ways to improve the quality of goods they produced and help them design the entire process such that it revolved around serving the needs of customers⁴. Enthused by the power of Deming’s ideas, the Japanese soon overtook the rest of the industrialized nations of the world.

Why were Deming’s ideas which inspired the Japanese, ignored by the Americans? It is easy to blame the audience and say that they were not mature or intelligent enough to recognize the wisdom of the leader’s vision. There are numerous such examples of leaders whose dreams for transformation fell on deaf ears. Consider Robert Owen, an industrialist in the early nineteenth century who first campaigned for decent working conditions such as reducing the working hours from 13 to 11 and for abolishment of corporal punishment in factories. Owen’s ideas were outright rejected not only by the industrialists but also by the courts and the intelligentsia. Even Peter Drucker, was unable to convince General Motors in 1946 when he advised them to give up their highly bureaucratic structure and to gear up for global competition, increasing automation, and a change in customer preferences. Do these examples suggest that leaders are at the mercy of their followers’ maturity or intelligence in executing their vision? Once spurned, should a leader then seek other constituencies better suited and more worthy of his or her inspirational message? Or should the leader keep using logic and arguments to convince the followers of the vision?

How often have we tried to convince a family member, a close friend, or a colleague about *what we thought was good for him or her*, with exhortations such as: “This isn’t good for you!”, “Stop smoking!”, “Don’t overeat!”, or “Start exercising!” Such attempts at transformation despite being supported by endless logical arguments rarely succeed in winning over the target. Even when successful, they only yield half hearted compliance, never enthusiastic commitment. What then is the secret of inspiring another to wholeheartedly commit to a vision?

Commitment to a vision can only occur when three conditions are fulfilled⁵. First, the leader must possess credibility. Credibility means that the leader must possess integrity, reliability and trust in the eyes of the follower. Credibility can be established either through close relationships or through expertise. The second prerequisite for commitment is that the vision be based on universal values (e.g. oneness, equality, and non-violence) which can encompass diverse audiences. Narrow sectarian or divisive values which promote an “us versus them” mindset may engage followers in the short term, but they cannot form the basis for enduring transformation. Third, the leader’s communication must be easily understandable by the followers. Communication can be reinforced through stories, anecdotes, metaphors, and analogies. Finally, leaders must not ignore the emotional aspect of the follower’s personality. Rationality and logic provide the building blocks of an argument, but emotions form the glue that holds the blocks firmly in place.

More than anything else, the leader’s vision must address the followers’ authentic needs. The leader’s first task is to empathically listen to followers and understand their real needs, their ideals, and their aspirations. The next step is to make people aware or conscious of their deepest aspirations in the form of a compelling vision. Finally, the leader’s task is to make those values so compelling that the followers are moved to purposive action.

One of the best examples of visionary leadership was provided by Naoroji P. Godrej (NPG). Naoroji's genuineness, simplicity, and concern for his people made him an extremely loved and respected leader. After India became independent, the dream of every Indian was a technologically self-reliant nation. At that time there were no indigenous manufacturers of typewriters and British companies were making a huge profit on the typewriters that they sold in India⁶. Making an Indian typewriter was an important step towards the vision of a technological self-reliant India. Because, the leader's vision was rooted in the authentic needs and aspirations of the people, they were inspired and gave their best to making the Godrej typewriter a great success.

Conventional leadership wisdom describes a leader as an intelligent individual occupying a senior position in the organization, who dreams up a great idea, and through his superior oratory skills convinces a group of passive followers into following his ideals. This mode of leadership may at best lead to very superficial and short-lived changes in followers. Authentic and enduring transformational leadership, on the other hand can occur at all levels in the organization and it always starts with understanding followers' genuine needs and grows by engaging them in pursuit of an inspiring vision built out of their own unspoken needs.

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¹ Notable amongst these works were James MacGregor Burns' (1978) *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row); Abraham Zaleznik's (2004) article entitled *Managers and Leaders: Are they different* (Harvard Business Review, Vol. 82, Iss. 1, pg. 74-81); and Robert House's (1977) piece- *A 1976 theory of charismatic leadership*, (in J. G. Hunt & L. L. Larson (Eds.), *Leadership: The cutting edge* (pp. 189-207). Carbondale, IL: South Illinois University Press).

² These four factors of transformational leadership were derived by Bernard M. Bass and his colleagues by asking a number of people to think about leaders who had inspired them and then asking them to enumerate their behaviors. The factors were later validated in numerous studies across the globe. For a fuller discussion on the four factors of transformational leadership see: Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York: Free Press.

³ Sashkin, M. (1988). The visionary leader. In J. A. Conger, & R. N. Kanungo (Eds.), *Charismatic leadership: The elusive factor in organizational effectiveness* (pp. 122-160), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁴ O'Toole, J. (1996). *Leading change: The argument for values based leadership*, CA: Jossey-Bass.

⁵ Conger, J. A. (1998). The necessary art of persuasion. *Harvard Business Review*, May-Jun, 84-95.

⁶ Karanjia, B. K. (2000). *Final victory: The life-and-death-of Naval Pirojsha Godrej*. New Delhi: Viking.