

To Lead, Create a Shared Vision

by James M. Kouzes and Barry Posner

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Being forward-looking—envisioning exciting possibilities and enlisting others in a shared view of the future—is the attribute that most distinguishes leaders from nonleaders. We know this because we asked followers.

In an ongoing project surveying tens of thousands of working people around the world, we asked, “What do you look for and admire in a leader (defined as someone whose direction you would willingly follow)?” Then we asked, “What do you look for and admire in a colleague (defined as someone you’d like to have on your team)?” The number one requirement of a leader—honesty—was also the top-ranking attribute of a good colleague. But the second-highest requirement of a leader, that he or she be forward-looking, applied only to the leader role. Just 27% of respondents selected it as something they want in a colleague, whereas 72% wanted it in a leader. (Among respondents holding more-senior roles in organizations, the percentage was even greater, at 88%.) No other quality showed such a dramatic difference between leader and colleague.

This points to a huge challenge for the rising executive: The trait that most separates the leaders from individual contributors is something that they haven’t had to demonstrate in prior, nonleadership roles. Perhaps that’s why so few leaders seem to have made a habit of looking ahead; researchers who study executives’ work activities estimate that only 3% of the typical business leader’s time is spent envisioning and enlisting. The challenge, as we know, only escalates with

managerial level: Leaders on the front line must anticipate merely what comes after current projects wrap up. People at the next level of leadership should be looking several years into the future. And those in the C-suite must focus on a horizon some 10 years distant.

So how do new leaders develop this forward-looking capacity? First, of course, they must resolve to carve out time from urgent but endless operational matters. But even more important, as leaders spend more time looking ahead, they must not put too much stock in their own prescience. This point needs to be underscored because, somehow, through all the talk over the years about the importance of vision, many leaders have reached the unfortunate conclusion that they as individuals must be visionaries. With leadership development experts urging them along, they've taken to posing as emissaries from the future, delivering the news of how their markets and organizations will be transformed.

Bad idea! This is not what constituents want. Yes, leaders must ask, "What's new? What's next? What's better?"—but they can't present answers that are only theirs. Constituents want visions of the future that reflect their own aspirations. They want to hear how their dreams will come true and their hopes will be fulfilled. We draw this conclusion from our most recent analysis of nearly one million responses to our leadership assessment, "The Leadership Practices Inventory." The data tell us that what leaders struggle with most is communicating an image of the future that draws others in—that speaks to what others see and feel.

Buddy Blanton, a principal program manager at Rockwell Collins, learned this lesson firsthand. Blanton asked his team for some feedback on his leadership, and the vast majority of it was positive and supportive. But he got some strong advice from his team about how he could be more effective in inspiring a shared vision. One of his direct reports said to him, "You would benefit by helping us, as a team, to understand how you got to your vision. We want to walk with you while you create the goals and vision so we all get to the end vision together."

As counterintuitive as it might seem, then, the best way to lead people into the future is to connect with them deeply in the present. The only visions that take hold are shared visions—and you will create them only when you listen very, very closely to others, appreciate their hopes, and attend to their needs. The best leaders are able to bring their people into the future because they engage in the oldest form of research: They observe the human condition.

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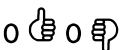
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Interesting statement about not thinking that every leader is necessarily a visionary. Thanks.

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