

breakthrough

WINTER 2009

VOLUME 3 ISSUE 4

Envisioning a Preferred Future

One of the most important responsibilities of every leader is to envision the future. While Visionmaking should be a daily activity, tradition has us start every New Year with intentions and resolutions for positive change. This issue of Breakthrough will deal with practices of inventing the future, a future that frees us from the quagmire of *the status quo* and allows us to enter a “field of possibility.” Possibility is the geography that supports individual and collective growth, development and achievement.

Every leader has an enemy...and that enemy is the status quo. The status quo is defined as “*a state of stasis where there is neither motion or development and where there is no hope of change.*” It is common knowledge that in business, as in life, we either advance or decline and there is nothing in between. The status quo disguises decline. We are seduced into the false sense that things remain exactly the same, when we’re actually heading downhill but so slowly that it is virtually imperceptible until free-fall occurs. By the time we recognize we’re falling, it’s too late.

By Patrick O’Neill

Story continued inside...

Envisioning a Preferred Future

Story continued from front cover

Wise leaders see that the status quo is the breeding ground for organizational inertia, the inability or unwillingness to move or act. Once this condition arrests an organization, team or individual, the result is lethargy, apathy, and disinterest. These are the signposts of decline ...and an announcement that leadership has been abandoned. Sir William Osler, the father of modern medicine, suggests that such conditions can be formidable in their ability to undermine our energies and jeopardize our preferred future: *"By far the most dangerous foe we have to fight is apathy—indifference from whatever cause, not from a lack of knowledge, but from carelessness, from absorption in other pursuits, from a contempt bred of self satisfaction."*



PATRICK O'NEILL

Carelessness, distraction and narcissistic pre-occupation undermine a chief resource in leadership—the practice of reflection. Reflection is the act of turning the eyes from the outer world to the inner landscape of our aspirations, dreams, possibilities and opportunities. This is the domain of the future and vision is fashioned in the silence of careful contemplation.

REFLECTION

Reflection is the ability to quiet the mind and journey to a place of stillness, where we can be simultaneously alert and relaxed. It takes discipline and regular practice. In today's busy world, reflection appears to be a lost art. The rhythm of life is weighted almost entirely to action. But action that is not guided by wisdom, the fruit of reflection, is misguided. Often it results in missteps in our tasks and relationships, strategic and tactical blunders, reactivity and expediency, and superficial solutions that tackle symptoms but not root causes.

"I don't have time" is the most prevalent reason I hear when coaching leaders who are missing the mark as a result of poor visioning practices. For many people, time is seen as a bridge that is burning out from under our feet rather than as a resource within which to create. Leaders need to be time-sensitive, but recognize that time is ours to *manage*. We collude with "busy-ness" and haste by not seizing control of the pace of the game, slowing it down when we require time to think, dream, plan, and then recovering the pace when decisive action is required. Wayne Gretzky dominated hockey because of his ability to control the pace of the game, slowing it down and speeding it up at will. That is an act of mastery and a lesson we should all remember when we find ourselves lost but making good time.

REFLECTION IS THE DOMAIN OF "WHAT" QUESTIONS:

- What has heart and meaning?
- What are the breakthroughs that would most support my personal effectiveness, the effectiveness of my team, the success of the organization as a whole?
- What are the most important lessons of the past year and how will I apply them?
- What will I do differently as a result of what I have learned?
- What are the current conditions in the economy telling me about the journey forward and how do I turn these conditions into opportunities?
- What are the impacts of the past year on people? What do I need to stop/start/continue to do to ensure that my people enter the year from a place of confidence, strength and wellbeing?
- What does success look like to me, to the team, to the organization, to our stakeholders and customers?
- What risks are we exposed to as we plan our course for the year?
- What must we put in place to mitigate those risk factors?

Reflection also permits us to do a "gut check" in decision-making. This important, but often subconscious, guidance system is critical in decision-making because it allows a leader to gather insight that is available "below the radar."

ARTICULATING A PREFERRED FUTURE

Once we have spent adequate time in reflection, it is important that we envision a *preferred future*. A preferred future is a longer-term vision, destination or outcome that can be achieved through careful planning and enterprise-wide action.

The preferred future and the steps toward its accomplishment must be clearly articulated. It is not enough to have a vision of it happening; we must be able to build a bridge of language from current circumstances to outcomes through clearly articulated objectives and plans. Many leaders whom I have worked with over the years have been astonished by the difficulty

of building such a language bridge. Some lacked an adequate vocabulary that was up to the task. Others expected that their lieutenants would do it and were disappointed when several interpretations—all of them flawed—began to compete for support within the organization. Still others carried a belief that it was up to everyone in the organization to wrestle with vagary and make meaning out of metaphors.

These leaders labored under false expectations that vague statements are directions, that people can create maps of uncharted territory without guidance and support. This is not leadership. It is a form of high-stakes gambling—hoping that luck will provide the means to invent the future in the absence of good direction and planning.

13 WORDS OR LESS

A best practice of those who have been successful in building a bridge from the present to the future is to write a preferred vision statement in 13 words or less. The statement is most effective when it is in easily understood language, not because the audience is dim, but because it demands that leaders hone their message in a way that is clear and actionable. General Romeo Dallaire recounted in a recent speech that military officers study action verbs for years before they go into the field! There it is: learning to build the language bridge from vision to action!

Testing the preferred vision statement on small focus groups: friends, teammates, colleagues, is a way that feedback can be gathered and used to revise or refine the message. Such feedback is necessary stimulation and helps us to look deeper, work harder, and develop the language for action necessary to launch a campaign for the future.

ACTION PLANNING

Action planning is the third phase of activity in envisioning the future. System-wide planning needs to begin with the premise that change does not occur by doing the same things over and over again expecting something different to happen. That's a definition of insanity. Naturally, those competencies that are providing the leverage necessary to accomplish meaningful goals need to be nurtured and supported. But new competencies and approaches need to be added to supplement what is currently working well. In this way, change is driven from a stable base.

The best action plans are those that are formulated at the frontlines of the journey. This kind of planning requires engagement across the organization and at every level. It is engagement such as this that unifies, aligns and builds ownership of the preferred future deep within the heart of the organization.

ACTION PLANNING IS THE PROVINCE OF “HOW” QUESTIONS.

- **How can we accomplish the journey to our preferred future wisely, efficiently and effectively?**
- **How will we measure the progress we are making?**
- **How will we reward individual and collective performance?**
- **How will we attract the talent we need to continuously improve?**
- **How will we structure roles, responsibilities and decision-making to support the preferred future?**
- **How will we support the journey with systems and structures that advance our knowledge and productivity?**
- **How will we ensure that our culture does not become undermined by poor communication, overwork, fatigue, morale issues or inequity of workloads?**
- **How and when will we acknowledge and celebrate accomplishments, breakthroughs and success?**

The status quo is no match for those who do the important work to envision a preferred future, develop meaningful goals, and engage in heartfelt action. Rather than be driven by fear of the future, enterprising leaders take charge of their circumstances and use the challenges and obstacles they meet as fodder for the adventure.

A journey worth making is a journey worth completing. To Elbert Hubbard, best known for his book *Message To Garcia*, perseverance and tenacity are central to manifesting vision. “When the Captain of a ship has put out from Singapore bound for Boston...” he writes, “...we have only one question to ask. And this question does not refer to typhoons, hurricanes, pirates, shoals, shallows or icebergs. The one question we ask is, ‘Did you bring the ship into port?’”

NEWS FROM EXTRAORDINARY CONVERSATIONS



VISIONS™ BLOG LAUNCHED

Patrick O'Neill, President of Extraordinary Conversations, has launched a new blog called **Visions™**. If you like the Breakthrough newsletter, you'll love Visions™. Every two or three days, Patrick explores the principles and practices of visionary leadership, which he calls *Visionmaking*.

“Every one has a dream for their lives, whether they are conscious of it or not. Many of us can see parts of the journey we were born to make but feel ill equipped or unable to take action. Visions™ website is devoted to exploring the principles and practices that allow each of us to follow a path of heart and meaning—in career, relationship, health and well-being and community service.”

You can find Patrick's blog at patrickoneill.ca or through the Extraordinary Conversations website at www.extraordinaryconversations.com.

CORPORATE PROFILE

Extraordinary Conversations helps leaders generate breakthroughs in organizational, team and individual performance.

Since 1988, we have supported large, medium and small organizations to build environments where people can do their best work. Clear vision, commitment and responsibility, open communication, courage and the passion to accomplish meaningful goals lead to extraordinary results.

We have proven approaches that can assist you and your organization to create breakthroughs in:

- Productivity
- Change Management
- Teamwork and Collaboration
- Conflict Resolution
- Leadership Education
- Organizational Communication
- Individual and Team Coaching

Equip your organization with the knowledge, the skills and the will to create breakthrough results.

Extraordinary Conversations works with diverse industries including manufacturing, retail, financial institutions, entertainment and service companies. Our clients include Fortune 500 leaders, medium-sized national companies and small entrepreneurial enterprises. Our work has taken us to global corporations in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia, to the townships of South Africa and the peace process in the Middle East.



59 Berkeley Street, Toronto ON M5A 2W5
T: 416 361 3331 F: 416 361 3284
www.extraordinaryconversations.com

© 2009, Extraordinary Conversations All rights reserved.