

## THE VISIONARY LEADER

PATRICK O'NEILL

**Where there is no vision,  
the people perish.  
Proverbs 29:18**

Leaders at all levels of organizational life must be prepared to meet the challenging expectations held by those who follow them. The people we lead want and need answers to difficult questions: "Where are we headed?" "How will we get there?" "What are your expectations of me?" These are the questions that bring clear focus and direction and fuel purposeful action, the engine of enterprise. >

**We, undisciplined in discernment of the inward, knowing nothing of it, run after the outer, never understanding that it is the inner which stirs us; we are [like] one who sees his own reflection but not realizing whence it comes, goes in pursuit of it.**

PLOTINUS

## THE VISIONARY LEADER (continued)



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It often comes as a surprise to leaders how much of each day is devoted to providing direction. For some of us, the answers come easily. We are able to provide inspiring and pragmatic directions that stand as landmarks for the journey, including:

- A **Vision** of the future that is positive, exciting, doable and beneficial to all
- A **Mission** that informs the team about what success looks like in the near and medium term
- A **Tactical Plan** to succeed

For the rest of us, however, the answers are hard work. We are charting unknown territory, inventing solutions to challenges that require new ways of thinking, or searching for approaches that reside beyond conventional ways of doing things. Not easy work, and some of us have not stopped long enough to consider our vision for the way forward.

How does one become a visionary leader? Author Evelyn Underhill suggests that perhaps we already possess that capacity however latent it may be: "He (man) has been called... a tool making animal ... More surely he is a vision-making animal...."

Occasionally we encounter individuals who are pursuing their vision with energy, economy and purpose. We see these people as uncommonly gifted and view them with a mixture of admiration, envy and deep longing. How do they do it? What is their secret?

Everyone has the capacity to be a visionary leader. Visionmaking is a discipline that can be practiced and applied by anyone through conscious intent.

### THE CYCLE OF VISIONMAKING

The chief tool of visionary leadership is the Cycle of Visionmaking, which includes five practices: **reflection, insight, wisdom, foresight and purposeful action**. Each individual practice is a transformational act. When practiced together, the Cycle of Visionmaking is a bridge that allows each of us an access point to the future.

### Reflection

The Cycle of Visionmaking begins with Reflection, the practice of turning the eyes from the outer world to what cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien calls the four-chambered heart: full, open, clear and strong.

Through daily reflective practices – silence, solitude, meditation, stillness, and contemplation – the Visionmaker asks for the heart's guidance. Just fifteen minutes twice a day in reflection yields tangible results as the visionary leader looks and listens deeply for direction:

#### Strong heart:

- "What is my heart directing me to act upon at this time? Where are there impediments on the journey? How do I remove obstructions or correct these situations?"

#### Clear heart:

- "Where am I doubtful, lacking clarity, uncertain or stuck? How do I bring greater clarity to bear at this time on my relationships and tasks?"

#### Open heart:

- "Am I open-hearted to other people, accepting of different perspectives, suggestions and help?"

#### Full heart:

- "Am I fully engaged in my tasks and relationships? Where am I half-hearted? Why? What actions do I need to take to remove the blocks or obstacles to full-heartedness?"

### Reflection leads to Insight

Insight is the ability to apprehend the true nature of a thing. Few people ever see clearly enough to move beyond their assumptions, opinions, beliefs and family and cultural conditioning. By aligning the eyes with the heart, the visionary leader breaks the constraints of conditioning and learns to see directly and for him or herself. As the filmmaker Wim Wenders observed: "The more opinions you have, the less you see."

The Four Humble Questions are the way we gain original perceptions and acquire direct insight:  
“What if how I see this person, situation or event is not right?”  
“What if the opposite is right?”  
“What if it is only partly right?”  
“What if it is just right for me?”

### Insight leads to Wisdom

Wisdom is “the guidance system that applies what is true, just and lasting to relationships, work, health and resources”<sup>i</sup>. When leaders approach purposeful acts with a wise eye, their endeavors carry a greater chance of the kind of positive impact that endures no matter what circumstances one meets.

In the absence of wisdom, action is misguided, reckless, and often shortsighted. Expedient action may feed our immediate desires but deprive us of a greater good.

“If you have wisdom, what do you lack?” writes Rabbi Midrash. “If you lack wisdom, what do you have?”

### Wisdom leads to Foresight

Foresight is the practice of casting the eyes forward to see a “field of possibilities” – the full spectrum of the choices available and to consider what impact each might have.

**Young men’s minds are always changeable, but when an old man is concerned in a matter, he looks both before and after.**

HOMER

Traditional wisdom counsels us to consider the impact that one’s actions may have on seven generations. This doctrine reminds us that what is true and just must also be lasting. Are we taking into consideration the personal, family, organizational and community impacts of visionmaking?

### Foresight leads to Purposeful Action

The visionary leader is now seized by a creative fire called generativity. Generativity means “capable of producing or creating”.<sup>ii</sup> Generativity is the whole

point of leadership. Thinking and talking about things holds them in a state of potential only, and makes no substantial difference in the world. Only Purposeful Action can make a change.

The two most important vehicles for Purposeful Action are **Intent** and **Choice**.

**Intent** is the engagement of the will that comes when one is completely committed. When we have something at stake, we act from our commitments rather than our circumstances.

**Choice** is the vehicle to express our commitment. Visionary leaders are required to make choices – without them, one is less than fully engaged, less than fully empowered.

Jose Ortega Y Gasset presents a compelling argument for the power of choice:

“We are not launched into existence like a shot from a gun, with its trajectory absolutely predetermined. The destiny under which we fall when we come into this world ...consists in the exact contrary. Instead of imposing on us one trajectory, it imposes several, and consequently forces us to choose. To live is to feel ourselves fatally obliged to exercise our liberty, to decide what we are going to be in the world. Not for a single moment is our activity of decision allowed to rest. Even when in desperation we abandon ourselves to whatever may happen, we have decided not to decide.”

By practicing the Cycle of Visionmaking, the visionary leader prepares him or herself for the responsibility of making wise choices. Through wise action, we can each lead a meaningful and compelling journey that serves the greater good, the individual, the family, organization and the community.

### PATRICK O’NEILL

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NEXT ISSUE: “The Responsible Mentor”

This is an abridged version of the article. For the full text, please visit our website, [www.extraordinaryconv.com](http://www.extraordinaryconv.com)

i Angeles Arrien and Patrick O’Neill, “Triumph of the Imagination,” 1999

ii Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1981 ed.

# visionary leadership & communications

ELINOR TRAINER



Communications designed to align and mobilize the energy, imagination and talents of all employees is a foundational tool for leaders committed to creating change that will bring their vision to life.

Strong trust in the leadership and a clear understanding of the vision, strategy and tactical plan is fundamentally important to leading people successfully. People need to trust the people who lead them. They also need to understand how decisions made and actions taken relate to achieving the vision. Implementing a sustained communications plan that helps build relationships, generates confidence in the future and clearly articulates “where we’re going together”, “how we’re going to get there”, “where we are on the roadmap” and “what each individual needs to do to contribute to our success” helps leaders inspire and engage everyone around them.

Elinor Trainer is Extraordinary Conversations’ Vice President specializing in Leadership and Change Communications. With almost two decades of communications experience, she has partnered with many senior executives to help them communicate and engage their organizations in new visions, corporate strategies and initiatives.

## 8 ways to help bring your vision to life

### 1 COMMUNICATE FACE-TO-FACE

Leadership’s visibility & spokespersonship fosters relationships, builds trust and commitment to the vision and change processes.

### 2 SET CONTEXT

All communications recap the vision and strategy to reinforce reasons for change and create alignment on action.

### 3 DISCLOSURE

Build and retain trust through candid information sharing. Tell people as much as you can, as soon as you can & as often as it takes for messages to be understood and absorbed.

### 4 INTERACTIVITY

Timely communication minimizes the impact of the “grapevine”, enhancing reliance on mainstream information channels.

### 5 TIMELINESS

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### 6 DIALOGUE

Develop channels that enable everyone to ask questions, receive answers and provide input and feedback to leaders.

### 7 RECOGNITION

Publicly acknowledge contributions of teams, individuals and strategic allies. Regularly report on progress, accomplishments and delivery of promises.

### 8 FREQUENCY & FOCUS

Cut through the information clutter by packaging progress updates in short, topic-focused bulletins distributed regularly and frequently. Brand all communications to create instant recognition for vision & change communications.