We all know that vision leadership is much more than simply articulating the vision. But few leaders give enough attention to implementation. Leaders and their visions are judged by how well they have mobilized commitment, by the extent to which new ways of working have become routinized and by how well the overall culture, including their own behavior, supports and reinforces their vision.

In interviewing a well-respected Fortune 100 CEO, I asked him to define leadership. His answer was simple, but robust: “Leaders take organizations to places they would not otherwise have gone!” His argument was that the value add of a leader is the ability to redirect the normal course of business by identifying a goal, a model, an approach, something which inertia would not have created, and then – and this is perhaps the most important – to guide and support its actual implementation to get to this “new place”.

The challenge of “vision leadership,” as Domm points out in the next article, is to recognize that the work of achieving such a vision is substantial – much more than most leaders tend to appreciate and do. It goes far beyond the words – and certainly any of the videos, wall plaques or t-shirts. Domm’s research, quite consistent with my observations over many years of companies going through change, underscores that there are no shortcuts in the task of taking an organization to its new place. The “work” of implementation for a leader requires many levers: constant communication, unyielding focus, tangible and realistic supporting actions, aligned rewards and incentives, and a leader’s personal, sincere passion.

But why do we need so many time-consuming levers? Why isn’t the articulation of the vision – loudly, logically, with authority – 90% of the work? And then why isn’t it just a matter of waiting for people to enact it – the final 10%? In my experience, too many leaders do think this is the case. They privately complain that they have given their “vision speech” ad nauseum and can’t imagine why the troops “don’t get it”. However, the troops report to me, privately of course, that they don’t really understand the vision, that they may have heard it only once and can’t quite remember it, and – most importantly – don’t know what to do differently and/or aren’t really that enthusiastic themselves because the benefits aren’t that compelling for them.

It is to overcome these realities that the work of a leader is indeed far more substantial – to truly mobilize commitment, to embed new ways of doing things, and in some instances to change the culture and underlying values of the organization. That’s why, to be successful at vision leadership, the equation is more likely to be 90% on the implementation and only 10% on the articulation.
Mobilizing Commitment

It has become almost commonplace to have leaders acknowledge the importance of getting everyone “on board”. It is an acknowledgment that is well laid out in academic research as well, stressing the significant difference between actions based on compliance versus commitment. A sample of participants over many years in executive programs that I have taught always identify the challenge of mobilizing commitment as their Achilles Heel, one which too often gets short shrift. And the absence of employee buy-in makes a palpable difference as visions and changes are stalled. Indeed, gaining someone’s commitment to a vision, to a change, requires a skillful and multi-faceted approach. Successful leaders tend to have a good sense about some key questions that must be answered:

1. Whose commitment is critical to the enactment of the vision/change?
2. To what extent are they currently committed?
3. Why are some people not committed?
4. What will increase their commitment?
5. How well can I match the ways to increase commitment with the recipients’ needs?

These questions often have complex, non-obvious answers to them. (Jick 1995) For (1), for example, the key is not to miss a key constituency that might be affected, and that happens all too often, be it an overlooked staff function, a customer group, or a distant region. For (2), it’s difficult to rely on what people say rather than what they do so it requires observing people’s behaviors to test for the presence or absence of real support for the vision. For (3), there is a key difference between those who are not committed due to a lack of will (ie motivation) versus those who lack skill. If you assume one to be the case when it is actually the other, leaders will be busy over-communicating the rationale when they should be offering training, or vice versa – which covers (4). Finally, given the different ways in which people respond to means of increasing commitment (emotional, logical, personal, electronic, etc), the sensitivity to achieve a match between means and audience is a skill that is often lacking.

Finally, there is the task of building a coalition of allies and committed supporters to help make the new vision a reality. If most changes typically engender a bell-curve reaction pattern of strong supporters and resisters on the tails, and a majority of skeptics in the middle, the task of a leader is to proportion their time with these constituencies. From my observations of many effective visionary leaders, they are adept at focusing on the skeptics in the middle, because supporters who were originally skeptical are likely to be even stronger in their convictions than those who initially appeared committed and supportive. Their “conversion” experience stimulates them to be so. On the other hand, strong resisters should be isolated – ultimately either forced out or ignored, because it takes too much time and effort to mobilize their commitment.

Embedding New Ways of Doing Things

A new vision that takes an organization to a new place – if it is to stick – must be operationalized in terms of new ways of doing things. This can be new processes, new measures, new behaviors, new mindsets, new deliverables of one kind or another. When people say “we are serious about this new vision,” they can see observable changes in the way in which people are thinking and behaving on an everyday basis. This is another big piece of the leader’s work: to help embed and institutionalize new habits.

To illustrate, many companies in the last decade have set out a vision of becoming more customer focused and offering solutions rather than products per se. Hard to disagree with; but not so easy to do, it seems. Why? Because in order to get there, a lot has to change when the organization typically had been oriented in an entirely different manner where products ruled the day. (Some years ago, when returning from a management offsite event I facilitated that stressed the theme of customer focus, my ten-year old daughter’s reaction was “Duh! What was the company thinking before? That customers don’t count” and my best justification for the time spent there was that the managers weren’t walking the talk!)
So, here again the task is far greater than convincing people of the merits of the vision, or of the potential benefits. Elegant communications, well done and usually well rehearsed, would not be sufficient. Rather, it was learning new skills, introducing new systems, promoting people for different reasons, hiring people for different purposes, rewarding people for different behaviors. It’s obvious, perhaps. Common sense? Yes, but…not so commonly or sensibly done by a lot of organizations.

Changing the Culture and Underlying Values

The more bold the vision, the more bold the leader, the more likely it is that the achievement of the vision must entail changing the culture and underlying values. If that link is not made between the realization of the vision and the basic genetic code of the organization, the vision will be short-lived or incompletely realized. A new vision may in fact draw strength from aspects of the legacy culture and values, but invariably requires abandoning some aspects of the old culture and enacting new attitudes and behaviors that have never been present. The task of both unlearning old habits and learning new ones is perhaps the most challenging but also with the highest payoff.

So, more and more companies are on the culture change journey – often built around new values – emphasizing key behaviours such as teamwork (abandoning individualism), risk taking (abandoning undue controls), and meritocracy (abandoning closed systems). And in so doing, years (or even generations) of management and employees are challenged to reinvent themselves or be pushed aside in some fashion. This is where many of the most difficult choices have to be made for leaders as they identify new role models of success and diminish, if not eliminate, the traditional models.

The ingredients for instituting a change of culture and values as part of a new vision for an organization are many of the ones discussed by Domm (see also Jick and Hampden-Turner 2001). And they include many of the ones mentioned above, such as extensive engagement and conversations between leaders and the organization as well as extensive realignment of the processes and systems of the organization. Suffice it to say, this process of social reengineering challenges vision leaders in terms of the myriad of changes required to revitalize and reinvent a company.

A Final Thought

A new vision for an organization is tested in the hearts and minds of people every day. However, it is not won or lost in the same linear fashion. It takes quite a while for a vision to be seen as real, as serious, as worthy of one’s commitment. But it can take only a small incident to undermine the credibility of a company’s new vision where a single decision (e.g., a promotion, a budget cut, an investment choice) signals a disconnect between the espoused aspirations and the behavior. Leaders are tested on a daily basis for the consistency between their walk and their talk. And, yes, they can be forgiven and sometimes their behavior can be forgotten; but more often, they are judged on their most recent actions.

They, and their visions, are judged by how well they have mobilized commitment, by how new ways of working have become routinized, and finally, by how well the overall culture, including their own behavior, supports and reinforces their vision. It is no small task. But it is for no small reward.

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References
