

leaders who behaved in a task-directed manner, while simultaneously behaving in a relationship-directed manner, were especially successful or "great." Thus, researchers turned to situational factors in the hope of finding that different behavioral approaches would be effective for different situations. Although these situational or "continuing" approaches were somewhat more successful in helping to guide managers, they did little to improve our understanding of top-level, creative leadership. Researchers were still at a loss to explain outstanding leadership at the top—leadership characterized by vision.

My theory of effective executive leadership, or visionary leadership, considers not only the leader's personal characteristics, not only the leader's behavior, and not only the situation; it considers all three. Only by looking at each of these factors as they relate to one another can we truly understand visionary leadership. Visionary leaders share certain characteristics that are different from the personality traits on which early leadership research was focused. In addition, they have a deep, basic awareness of key situational factors that dictate what leadership approach and actions are required. Furthermore, these leaders not only know what behaviors are required, they can also carry out those behaviors.

Visionary Leadership in Action

There are three major aspects to visionary leadership. The first consists of constructing a vision, creating an ideal image of the organization and its culture. The second involves defining an organizational philosophy that succinctly states the vision and developing programs and policies that put the philosophy into practice within the organization's unique context and culture. The third aspect centers on the leaders' own practices, the specific actions in which leaders engage on a one-to-one basis in order to create and support their visions.

Visioning: Creating a Cultural Ideal

The process of conceiving a vision calls for certain cognitive skills. Central to the ability to conceive a vision is the ability to think in terms of a period of time, that is, not just in terms of daily or weekly goals but in terms of actions carried out over a period of years. Elliott Jaques¹ has shown that there are reliable differences among individuals in terms of the span of time over which they think and work. Effective executive leaders must, according to Jaques, be able to think clearly, to "vision," over periods of at least 5 years and, more

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Visionary Leadership

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To some, history is the story of great leaders. Throughout the first half of this century, most managers and scholars probably accepted the basic premises of the "great person" theory of leadership. But, by the late 1940s, studies at Harvard, in human relations and group dynamics, had shown that only a small proportion of leaders actually fit this theory. Subsequent theories of leadership centered on behavior; perhaps if one were to act like a great leader, the act would become real. As we began to understand how leaders behaved, perhaps it was reasonable to train people to act that way.

But the next 30 years of research failed to yield substantial evidence that

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often, 10 years or longer. In more recent work, Jaques² has constructed a theory of cognitive development, based on Piagetian concepts, specifying in detail the series of hierarchical cognitive tasks required to construct visions over increasingly long spans of time. But whether one is involved in creating a 10-year or 10-week vision, the ability to do so involves four distinct actions, each requiring certain thinking skills.

The first such cognitive skill is in *expressing* the vision—behaving in a way that advances the goal of the vision. Consider the case of a manufacturer's chief executive who wishes to create a plant-level operation to involve all employees in managing the firm. To make this vision real, the CEO must be able to perform these steps:

- write a proposed set of policy actions that would create a plant-level worker involvement program;
- meet with relevant parties—plant-level managers as well as workers—to develop a document detailing the new policy and program;
- meet with, and arrange meetings of, all plant-level managers and all employees to review and revise the program and to plan for its implementation;
- work with relevant managers to identify ways to track the program's effects and effectiveness; and
- oversee the monitoring of the program and work with relevant parties on any further modifications needed.

Leaders must understand and express by their behavior the sequence of actions to be taken to make a vision real.

The second important thinking skill is *explaining* the vision to others—making the nature of the vision clear in terms of its required action steps and its aims. Let us return to the example of the CEO who envisions worker involvement at the plant level. The CEO who can express this vision still may not succeed in implementing it unless he or she can clearly explain to others the steps involved in carrying it out. Unless the CEO can clearly explain the vision to the program manager, uncertainty will arise as to the steps and handling of problems and issues. And unless the CEO can explain the program to plant managers, their support for the vision will fade as the CEO loses touch with the day-to-day program details (as is inevitable for any chief executive). Explaining involves more than mere restatement of the vision's nature or aim. The visionary leader must be able to describe how the actions required for the vision link together until, step by step, the goal is reached.

The third required thinking skill is *extending* the vision—applying the sequence of activities to a variety of situations so that the vision can be implemented in several ways and places. To continue with the above example, the CEO will probably, at some point, wish to extend the vision to other parts of the organization. This might mean working with the program manager to revise the worker involvement plan and apply it to the headquarters staff departments as well as to the plant. Doing so will call for changes in how the program is implemented and may even require alterations in the worker involvement program itself. The expressed vision is an important frame of reference, but the visionary leader must be able to adapt it to varied circumstances, as required. Again, he or she must be able to explain these changes to others and to demonstrate the steps necessary to carry them out.

The fourth thinking skill involves *expanding* the vision—applying it not just in one limited way, and not even in a variety of similar ways, but in many different ways and in a broad range of circumstances. The CEO who has a vision of worker involvement at the operating level, and who goes about implementing this vision in the manner outlined above, still may not be a visionary leader. The true visionary leader will also have the conceptual skill needed to look at the overall plan and effects of worker involvement in the organization. This means more than extending the program to another unit. The visionary leader will think through the effects of the worker involvement vision throughout the organization, consider different ways the program might be spread (for example, unit by unit, or by divisions), and speculate about how to "revise" the entire organization in consistency with the new employee involvement system.

Just about anyone can carry out the four skills of visioning—expressing, explaining, extending, and expanding—with respect to short-range visions—those implemented in a day, a week, or a month. Many individuals can do this over time spans as long as a year. Few people, however, can do so over periods of 1 to 3 years, and fewer still can vision over periods of 5 to 10 years. The person who can think through a vision over a time span of 10 to 20 years is the rare; visionary leader.

In addition to these thinking skills, visionary leaders must also possess the personal conviction that what they do can make a difference. Without this belief these actions would be no more than "going through the motions." Nor will their efforts suffice or their visions endure unless those visionary leaders desire and can use power and influence in positive ways, so that followers are "empowered" to carry out the leaders' visions.^{3,4}

Implementing the Vision Organizationally

Elsewhere I have detailed the process by which visionary leaders turn their cultural ideals into organizational realities.^{5,6} The most important part of this process is creating an explicit organizational philosophy and then enacting that philosophy by means of specific policies and programs. The specific statement of the philosophy is best developed by the leader and his or her key subordinates. In this manner, the visionary leader begins the process of implementing the vision with a strong base of support from the key actors in the system. The statement of philosophy must then be put into practice by means of actual, operational policies and programs. That is, the philosophy must be articulated through action, not just words. Deal⁷ offered some insight as to how this process of articulating the vision takes place. He spoke of identifying heroes, of creating rituals and ceremonies, and of telling stories that support and strengthen the philosophy—and the values behind it—and that make more visible the policies and programs derived from the philosophy. Deal also noted that this process is best accomplished if the visionary leader can identify an “informal network of cultural players”—informal advisers (or even just gossips) and secretaries, for example—who, in effect, preside over the organization's culture, serve as key links to the community, and are keepers of the organization's history. These are the keys to organizational implementation of the leader's vision.

Implementing the Vision Through Personal Practices

Finally, effective visionary leaders put their visions into practice by means of their own specific interpersonal behaviors on a one-to-one basis. Warren Bennis^{8,9} studied 90 exceptionally effective CEOs and identified several sets of characteristics common to many of these visionary leaders. Based on this work I defined five specific behavior categories.^{6,10-12} These behaviors have since proven to be strongly associated with organizational performance.¹³

The first category of behavior consists of focusing others' attention on key issues—helping people grasp, understand, and become committed to the leader's vision. A second group of behaviors is centered on effective communication: listening for understanding, rephrasing to clarify, giving constructive feedback (e.g., being descriptive and not evaluative, being specific and not general), and summarizing when appropriate. These behaviors are easy to describe, but they take tremendous skill to perform.

The third behavior category concerns consistency and trustworthiness. Bennis found that outstanding CEOs exhibited consistent behavior. They did

not ever flip-flop on their positions; it was always clear where they stood on issues. People might not agree with the leader, but they could trust that what the leader said was, in fact, what was really meant. Visionary leaders do not shift their positions with every shift in the political winds.

Displaying respect for self and others is the fourth type of visionary leadership behavior and is similar in essence to what Carl Rogers called “unconditional positive regard.” Leaders must start with self-respect because they cannot really care about others without caring first about themselves. Visionary executive leaders are self-assured, certain of their abilities. This trait is not manifested in an arrogant or superior attitude, but in a simple display of self-confidence. This sense of self-respect, of confidence in themselves and their abilities, comes across not only in leaders' attitudes but also in how they treat others. One of the characteristics of visionary leaders is that we feel good around them because they boost our sense of self-worth by paying attention to us, by trusting us, by sharing ideas with us, by making it clear how important we are as persons. They tell us we are important—“I really value your ability to do that, John; we need you”—and they demonstrate what they say through their behavior.

The final category of behavior involves taking calculated risks and making a commitment to risks once they are decided on. Visionary leaders have no energy to spare for recouping their losses; all their efforts go toward achieving their goals. Moreover, these leaders build into their risks opportunities for others to buy in, to take the risks with the leaders and share in the effort and the rewards. These leaders motivate by “pulling” us along with them, as Bennis put it, rather than by trying to push us in the direction they want to go. Franklin D. Roosevelt displayed this sort of behavior often; he took risks and made commitments and inspired others to join him.

Behaviors of a kind other than these five types surely contribute to the sense of inspiration and commitment we feel when responding to visionary leadership. Most important, however, is what visionary leaders are trying to accomplish through their behavior. They attempt to create cultures that will guide their organizations into the future. . . .