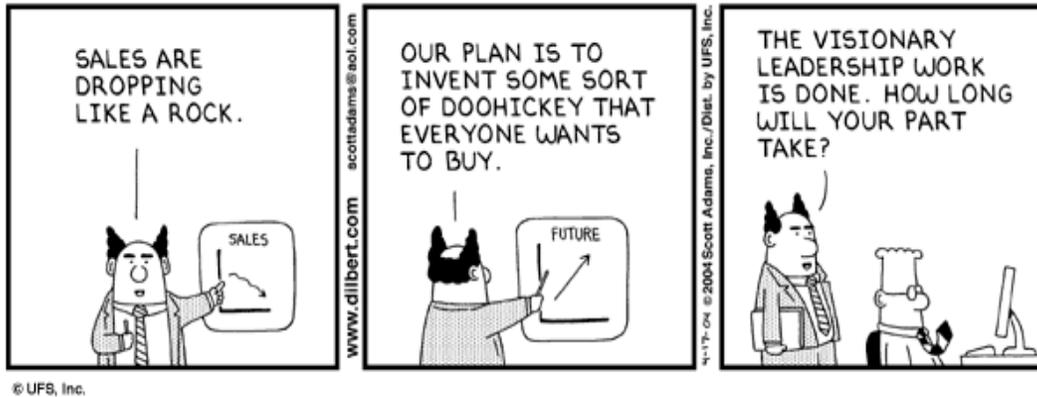


Enough with The Visionary Leadership BS



Last week I came across another article by another supposed best practices researcher that claimed to have surveyed more than 1800 law firm partners on “*what they really want from their leaders.*” This author informs us that they “*asked partners to describe, in their own words, what they saw as the key strengths of their leaders.*”

Survey Says . . . “**being a Visionary**” is at the top of their list. Can you just *imagine*?

The Strategic Planning Society once asked on their LinkedIn site, this seemingly straight-forward question: “*What is a good definition for vision?*” A flurry of responses came from those who held titles like Strategic Planning Manager, Senior Resource Planning Manager, Head of Planning and Control, Senior Manager Strategy Solutions, Strategy Execution Advisor, Managing Partner, CEO, University Professor and so forth and included:

- *The position or status a company aspires to achieve within a reasonable time frame.*
- *The vision is a concise measurable statement that defines the mid to long -term (three to ten years) goals of an organization. The vision should be external and market oriented and should express how the organization wants to be perceived by the world.*
- *Vision - a smart ability to look behind the horizon*
- *The ability to see beyond the operational issues*
- *"Vision" refers to an imagined state of affairs. All else is elaboration.*
- *Vision consists of thinking ahead and ensuring that colleagues address the right issues.*
- *Picture-painting by the Leader: We're going [over there]. We need to be there [by this time during a reporting-period].*

In fact, this question generated in excess of 65 postings, from very smart, accomplished professionals, over a one-month period . . . without any real consensus amongst the 6800 members of The Strategic Planning Society on what a vision really is!

Admittedly, the author of the article I was reading is not the first researcher or consultant to prescribe that to be a great leader you need to develop and communicate a vision. And, while many books on leadership suggests that a leader needs to have a vision (with some 627 books

currently listed under *Visionary Leadership* on Amazon) I think it is all very nice in theory, sounds profoundly intelligent as a concept, but is **absolute BS** in its application for you leading a team of highly talented professionals.

Many may be quick to point to Steve Jobs (even though we are talking here about law firms). This whole visionary leadership thing seems to be synonymous with Jobs, an entrepreneurial visionary whom I greatly admired. He made what he called an obvious change to traditional corporate culture: “*We didn’t hire people to tell them what to do. We hired people to tell us what to do,*” he said in one interview. Vision notwithstanding, he was a terrible leader in his first stint at Apple Computer, by all accounts. He was impatient, high-handed, and “always right”, which unsurprisingly alienated all these people he hired to “*tell him what to do.*” For example, he forced the Lisa computer onto the market against all advice, and it bombed. That lack of leadership skill led to his ouster. Jobs went on to learn some new leadership tricks, softened his hard edges, and did better as a real leader while with Pixar and NeXT computers – which success led him back for a second stint at Apple. I have no doubt that his professional life will be studied for years to come, because he truly was that rare “visionary” who only later EARNED the chance to have “leader” added to it.

In my work over the years, I have had the privilege of training thousands of practice and industry group leaders, as well as brand new managing partners, many from top AmLaw-sized firms and can tell you that privately many of these leaders have admitted to me how overwhelmed they often feel. Advancing technologies and changing client expectations make effective leadership more complicated than ever – and the challenges of competitive disruption have come to define today’s psyche – that feeling of being constantly unnerved and not knowing what’s going to happen next. Now let’s tell them that they NEED to be a Visionary or have a Vision in order to prove their competence.

A LOT OF GARBAGE GETS SPOUTED ABOUT WHAT LEADERSHIP IS.

It never ceases to amaze me the pressure we put on our colleagues and the absolute garbage that gets spouted about what leadership is all about.

Take for example the adage that a true leader is defined by **having followers**. Right? I will then joke with a room-full of practice and industry group leaders, “*Okay, show of hands, how many of you aspire to be a . . . follower?*” And everybody laughs. Why? Because we all know that every law partner sees themselves as a leader and manager. And most of them are, in that they manage their legal files, their client relationships, their associates, their support professionals . . . (hold on, I didn’t say manage effectively).

One response I will hear if I ask some general question of a group of practice leaders, like “*what makes for a good leader?*” . . . is “*being a role model.*” Right? That answer, I’ve discovered is the direct result of our initially selecting the best rainmaker, leading luminary or most senior partner to be the group’s leader. Believe it or not, I have discovered that many of those selected thought that it was some kind of an Award! Or Reward, for their exemplary work. “*Look at me, they’ve finally recognized my talents and chosen me to be the Industry Group’s Leader.*” And so they naturally thought their job was to be a role-model for the others to emulate. To emulate?

Let's think about that for a moment. What, specifically, is a role model? My perception is that it is someone who stands before their group, and basically says, "*Watch me, do as I do, and one day you too will be successful.*" I might be exaggerating, slightly, but the truth is, it is a very passive role – there is no effort to actually reach in and do anything. And unfortunately, that is how many of our earliest group leaders acted. (And I suspect that there are still some of them out there).

Sometimes I believe the problem with the kind of supposed research result that I'm taking issue with here – '*partners want a visionary*', emanates from the kind of question you ask. You know the old saying – garbage in, garbage out!

So to get at this elusive concept of leadership as it applies to autonomous, self-motivated, highly-intelligent lawyers, I will usually ask a group of practice / industry leaders to think back to some individual who stands out in their minds as one of the very best teachers, mentors, leaders that they ever had the opportunity of working with – and not just within the legal profession but perhaps in some non-profit group or political endeavor or community activity they were involved with. "**Now tell me please what specifically did that individual DO?**" You see at heart, I'm a behavioralist. I'm not into academic gobbledegook or some theoretical crap, I just want to know what really works.

What I usually always hear, when I pose that question, is responses like this (and these are all real examples):

The individual I'm thinking of . . .

- *challenged me to do and be my best*
- *took an interest, spent time with me, got to know me and what made me tick*
- *provided subtle mentorship (not obvious)*
- *made me feel that I was an important part of the team*
- *no condescending attitudes; were always respectful in all dealings*
- *really listened whenever I talked; made me feel a part of the project*
- *encouraged me, even if or when I made a mistake*
- *gave me constructive feedback, was always a source of help*
- *was accessible, responsiveness; answered my questions, helpful*
- *consistent; you knew what they expected*
- *loyal in that they "had my back"*
- *gave me opportunities, often even before I felt that I was ready*
- and so on and so forth – I could go on ad nauseum but I'm sure you get the idea.

In other words, a leader is someone who invested the time to really get to know you, became conversant with your strengths and career aspirations and coached or helped you become even MORE successful than you would have been had they not been the group leader. So maybe what we are talking about here is not you needing to develop some vision, but you provoking your colleagues to each envision what they each might be able to achieve. Hey, how about that narrative being included in a leadership job description? BUT never, ever, in my 20 years of conducting this exercise with groups of lawyers have I ever had anyone tell me: "*Oh, for me it was this one individual leader who had this inspiring vision!*"

This experience was confirmed for me by the interviews conducted of 150 managing partners by my good friend and U.K. colleague Rob Lees, co-author of When Professionals Have to Lead. Rob related to me this one example from his findings:

The managing partner of one of the firms we talked to explained how he had come back from Harvard Business School's Leading Professional Service Firms program with renewed energy and a determination to drive the firm forward. So, he outlined his vision of moving the firm from its regional base to becoming a leading national firm to his partners and talked about what they needed to do to get there. But, to his abject disappointment, nothing happened. To the partners, the vision was just too aspirational; achievable only through a merger, which they felt they would be on the wrong side of. Concerned about the lack of action, the managing partner visited all of the offices to talk through the plans and, during these visits, the partners' concerns surfaced.

Meanwhile, in his book Great by Choice, Jim Collins tells us that his findings dismiss several closely held business world beliefs . . . such as the notion that successful leaders are “bold, risk-seeking visionaries.” Rather, Collins concludes that the most successful leaders are “disciplined,” “empirical” and “paranoid,” building on verifiable results and constantly anticipating what could go wrong.

ANYONE REMEMBER MISSION STATEMENTS?

Mission statements first came into vogue in the 1990s. A single-page document filled with more platitudes than you'd find in the average prayer book, spelling out your firm's business mission. No one remembered the darn things, it was business as usual, and the document didn't have the profound impact on the fortunes of firms that their creators had hoped for. The mission statement exercise was quickly forgotten — except at those few firms who chose to have them laminated as cards for everyone to keep in their wallet.

Then we were informed on how every firm needed “a vision” to succeed. It was a new name, but quickly became the same old silly exercise. All your skeptical partners exchange winks and knowing glances. The Executive Committee will have to be indulged one more time. In all cases the result was to be the same — having a vision changed nothing! I am not aware of one single firm (and certainly not among those achieving above-average market performance) that has invested partner time in articulating a mission or a vision statement that has actually been implemented.

And I have for years had the sheer audacity to challenged partners at multiple conferences whenever this topic happens to come up, to please give me just one example; just one, of a law firm anywhere, wherein the firm leader proclaimed a vision and witnessed all of his or her partners get excited, eager to move forward and behave in concert with that articulated revelation. ***“Yeah, take me to the promised land!”***

What I'm saying is that it may be theoretically possible, but I have still yet to find one real live example.

SO, DO WE REALLY NEED A VISION?

What most concerns me is seeing brand new leaders who just naturally struggle with trying to get a handle on the magnitude and scope of having to now lead some group (or an entire firm) being told that the research indicates, or that best practices requires, or reading that they are ineffective – unless they have articulated their vision. That said, please do not misunderstand what I’m trying to say here. Your group members, your colleagues definitely do **need** to have some sense of a shared direction — just please do notice that word “**shared.**”

It takes me back to a very important principle that I learned early in my consulting career. I was blessed to have a senior statesman and founder of a major law firm take a personal interest in what I was doing, such that one day he said to me, “*McKenna, there is only one thing you need know about working with lawyers.*” I suspect I kind of smirked when I replied, “*I’d welcome your counsel.*” He looked my straight in the eye and said, “*burn this into your brain,*

No professional ever gets excited about, enthusiastic, willingly supports, or works to promote – any initiative, any new direction, any change, or any strategy – that they themselves have not been part in formulating!”

So, may I invite you to burn that into your brain. That is why a shared direction needs to be **facilitated** by an effective leader; and why I think that telling leaders that need to articulate some personal leadership vision, is just delusional.

Looked at slightly differently . . . Visionaries tend to narrow their attention onto those phenomena that appear relevant and supportive of their visions. They can, therefore, appear impatient, dismissive and intolerant of any information or ideas that may appear to challenge or question their vision (“don’t confuse me with the facts”).

While having a vision may be nice – in a complex world, visions require a psychological sophistication that many of us mere mortals lack. A true vision contains a paradox in that it is not an expression of truth, nor is it necessarily right, but your vision must be treated as though “it was right.” The thing to consider is that a true vision requires that you have a view of the future that is NOT supported by evidence.

(And with tongue firmly implanted in cheek): I don’t know about you, but my academic education taught me that an individual having visions . . . unsupported by evidence . . . was usually a clear sign of someone who had lost touch with reality!