

The Visionary Leader in a Premodern Organizational Context

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There is a premodern leadership style that is revered by some people and vigorously criticized by others. This premodern style is founded on VISION. A person is assigned this third form of leadership because he or she can articulate a vision of the future that is persuasive and motivating. This person is assigned a leadership role not only because he or she is articulate and persuasive, but also because the people he or she is leading “hunger” for a dream or image of an alternative reality that will either help them build a game plan for getting out of the current reality or will enable them to be distracted from their current reality.

Alexander the Great is a vivid personification of premodern leadership. He exemplifies not only the premodern characteristics of wisdom and courage but also vision—he had everything going for him. Alexander was truly a “visionary” and coupled this vision with the wisdom he had acquired as a student of Aristotle and as the son of Phillip of Macedonia with the courage and competence he displayed as a great warrior. His vision was to conquer and “civilize” the Mideast and Asia. Like many of his fellow-citizens in the Grecian world, Alexander was apparently quite arrogant about the “advanced” state of Greece (when compared to the rest of the world) and quite patronizing with regard to his “responsibility” to make the rest of the world more like Greece. As is the case with many contemporary leaders in the Western World, Alexander offered a vision that was quite biased and xenophobic: “we are the best and will bring all other people, even if by force, to our state of advancement.” Visions are not always beneficial to the world—Hitler being a prime example of a premodern visionary leader who was articulate and compelling in offering his people a vision of genocide and world dominance.

Leadership at the Right Time and Place

While premodern leadership that builds on wisdom usually comes with a prestigious education, and courageous leaders receive training that prepares them to fight against the enemy, the visionary leader is someone who may not have much of an education or much training—but who is in the right place at the right time to offer a vision of the future. In fact, the visionary leader often comes to leadership with minimal preparation. His or her compelling vision often comes with a story of personal triumph over adversity and discrimination. Visionary leaders like Abraham Lincoln or Joan-of-Arc often were born in poverty and are self-taught. Other visionary leaders such as Susan B. Anthony (and the other Seneca Falls advocates for women’s rights) and Martin Luther King (and the other civil rights leaders of the 1960s) grew up in a world that discriminated against them (or at least against other people “of their kind”). Visionary leaders such as Frederick Douglass offer even more compelling story of being born into slavery and escaping to freedom.

The visionary stories often contain moments of personal doubt and spiritual despair. We see this in the inspiring stories of Joan-of-Arc and Mother Teresa. Visionary stories often contain elements not only of doubt and despair, but also of wisdom and courage. Visionary leaders convey stories of sacrifice, tribulation and triumph—having parted the Red Sea or dwelled in the desert so that they might enter into a land of milk and honey. Tragically, in many instances they have led their people to a land of milk and honey, but have not been able to enter this land themselves (Moses, Lincoln, Gandhi, John and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King). This is a key point in understanding the premodern dynamics of visionary leadership: the vision can never be realized (just as the enemy can never be defeated if courageous leadership is to be sustained and the followers can never become too knowledgeable or experienced if leadership of wisdom is to prevail). One way to insure that the vision remains intact is to kill the visionary leader (figuratively or literally). We can sustain the vision of a new Camelot because John Kennedy never had a chance to enact his dream and can be moved by King’s “I have a dream” speech in part because he was not alive to realize this dream.

It is very hard to teach anyone how to be charismatic or to provide anyone with a story that is compelling to other people. The visionary leader is typically someone who has gained their

“education” and “training” through their own distinctive life experiences. They may have received a prestigious education—but this usually happens “in spite of” their background. They often are the poster-boy (or poster-girl) for affirmative action. They may also have been trained as warriors (Colin Powell comes to mind), but the vision they now offer is typically one of peace: they “know” war and wish to have no further part of it.

Articulating the Vision

The key to wholehearted acceptance of and sustained support for a visionary leader resides in the identification of a compelling story from the past that bridges to the future. While this story often involves something about the visionary leader’s own life and struggles, it must also resonate with and align with the stories and personal aspirations of those hearing or reading this story. There is a phrase which usually reads: “think globally, but act locally.” This same sentiment, slightly revised, can apply to visionary stories: “make them personal and local, but be sure that they speak to a much larger constituency.”)

Given that visionary leadership is dependent on the right place and the right time, it is also important that the vision is articulated at the right time and in the right place. While Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address still appeals to us today, it is profound in large part because it was given at a commemoration ceremony for those soldiers who died during the bloody battle at Gettysburg. Lincoln is literally “consecrating” the ground where these young men were buried. Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech was similarly given on a particularly auspicious occasion (a major civil rights march on Washington D.C.) and at a very “holy” or “patriotic” location (facing the Lincoln Memorial). The visionary leader must pick the special time and place when offering a visionary statement. This statement is not meant for the everyday—for the secular or the “profane” (to use Eliade’s term). It is meant for the special day and place—the “sacred” (Eliade’s term).

Where and when does the visionary leader find this special place and time? This is a critical decision. Unfortunately, the visionary statement is often offered during a time when immediate, profane matters need to be addressed. The vision is being offered as a distraction from the immediate problems facing the leader and his or her followers—thus the criticality of place and

time. I would suggest that there are five primary criteria with regard to the nature of an effective statement of vision. These five criteria tell us something about when and where we should offer a vision. I will first briefly identify these criteria and then suggest how these criteria help us identify an appropriate time and place for vision.

First, any statement of vision must be created and sustained by an entire social system—not just its leader(s). Collaboration is just as important when formulating a vision, as it is when assembling an army as a courageous (style two) leader. Second, the vision statement must be offered within a context of appreciation for past accomplishments and present day contributions. All too often the visionary leader (especially if new to this role) will ignore or offer a critical perspective on past achievements rather than honoring these achievements and seeking to learn from them. We must always remember that some day in the near future, we will be the relics of the past and may be overlooked by the next generation. It is not just the wise leader who often feels devalued by the next generation—it is also the visionary leader who holds a vision that is now out-of-date and whose accomplishments on behalf of this vision are no longer fully appreciated.

Third, the statement of vision must be coupled with a statement of mission. Whenever a leader creates a vision of the future, it must be coupled with a clear commitment to something that is not about the future, or even exclusively about the present—it must be coupled with an enduring sense of mission. What do we do as a family, clan, organization, or social system that remains fundamental and unchanged? That is a key to our survival. We must always look toward the future and toward change through the lens of foundations and continuity. What is our “business” and how does our vision for the future relate to this business.

The fourth criterion concerns the relationship between vision and values. How does our vision of the future relate to the fundamental values of this family, clan, organization or social system? What will and what won't we do in order to realize our dream for the future? Martin Luther King not only offered us a dream, he also insisted that this dream be realized through a set of values based on nonviolence. Similarly, Lincoln's statement of gratitude for the sacrifice made at

Gettysburg is based on his firm commitment to preservation of the union. The “ends” (vision) never justify the use of inappropriate or unethical “means” (values).

Fifth, the vision statement should relate to some formally identified sense of purpose: what difference does our family, clan, organization or social system make in the life of people dwelling in this community, country or world. What social purpose are we serving and how does this purpose relate to our vision of the future? Our vision can be self-serving or even profoundly destructive with regard to social purpose (as in the case of Hitler’s vision). It is important that vision be aligned with a fundamental social purpose.

Thus, while a vision statement will change over time (and, as we shall see later, must change over time), the mission, values and social purposes tend not to change or change very slowly. While the vision is the wind in the sails that propels a vessel, the mission, values and social purposes provide the anchor and keel that keep the ship properly aligned (and afloat). Furthermore, even though a compelling vision statement may come out of the mouth of a premodern visionary leader, it ultimately requires collaboration and appreciation if the vision is to be truly owned by those who must enact this vision.

Several conclusions regarding appropriate time and place can be extracted from these five criteria. First, the vision statement should be offered alongside clearly articulated statements regarding mission, values and purposes. These four dimensions of what I label the “intentions” of an organization are tightly interwoven and modifications in one will inevitably impact on the other three. So, one must have his or her “ducks-in-order” with regard to an overall statement of intentions (a “charter” if you will), when articulating a compelling vision. The vision itself should build on many conversations, the sharing of stories (not just the visionary leader’s stories) and the identification of moments of “greatness” in the past history and present realities of the organization. Visions come alive and help guide an organization when they are generated and articulated under these conditions (place and time).

The Challenge of Premodern Visionary Leadership

If a vision is generated that is compelling, what do we do about it? We must do more than applaud the visionary speech-giver. We must do more than walk away, inspired to do good—for at least a day or week. So-called “motivational” speakers provide a welcome respite from the daily grind, but they rarely have long term impact. The neurosciences offer an important clue in this regard. Recent research regarding the hormonal system in the human body points to the important role played not just by adrenaline (which plays a key role in courageous leadership focus on fighting and fleeing from the enemy), but also by oxytocin, a hormone that brings us closer together rather than leads us to fight or flee. Oxytocin is a “bonding” agency. It is critical to the production of love and hope in human beings. It is the hormone that surges in women (and even in men) when a child is about to be born. It is the primary physiological ingredient which turns (to use Martin Buber’s phrase) an “I-It” relationship into an “I-Thou” relationship.

I would propose that oxytocin is also critical to the sustained engagement with a compelling vision. While adrenaline may surge after a stirring (and visionary) speech, it is the bonding power of oxytocin that motivates people to build on a vision through collaboration and community. Thus, the neurosciences are teaching us that premodern leaders of vision must not just excite people—they must also “bond” people to the new vision. In another publication I write about the “triangulation” that is required for a vision to be sustained. By this I mean that it is not just enough for two people to work together—a third element must be present if the working relationship is to be sustained. This third element is a shared vision (linked to a shared mission, set of values and compelling social purpose). The “I-Thou” conception offered by Martin Buber provides us with guidance in this matter. According to Buber (a Jewish theologian), the “I-Thou” exists through God’s grace—God being the third element.

Similarly, the Greek word “agape” refers not just to mankind’s relationship to some deity. It also relates to the ways in which we treat and care for other people on behalf of our religious beliefs. In the 21st Century, we need not focus on the relationship between humankind and a deity. We can focus instead on ways in which relationships are enhanced and sustained (“I-Thou”) when

these relationships are founded on a shared vision—when oxytocin is produced to bind people together and bind people to an organization and its vision (as well as its mission, values and purposes). This is the key to enactment of a vision. It must induce a sense of community and shared commitment—hence can not just be the product of one person’s sense of the future.

Keeping the Vision Alive

If people are bound together, at least in part, through commitment to a shared, compelling vision of the future, then it becomes obvious that the key role to be played by the visionary leader is: **KEEP THE VISION ALIVE**. This usually means not only that the leader periodically reminds his or her colleagues of the vision, but also that the leader facilitates a periodic review of and updating of the vision. The leader of vision is in trouble if the vision either is ignored or if the vision is reached. Thus, there must always be a sense of something undone, of something yet to be done, of something worth doing.

Many years ago, a noted European social historian, Fred Polak, wrote about the decline of social systems that have lost their image of the future. Polak points to a critical factor in the ongoing existence of any social system (or any living system for that matter). It must have something toward which it is moving or toward which it is growing. Organisms are inherently “auto-telic”—meaning that they are self-purposed. They don’t need anything outside themselves to engage their world actively and in an inquisitive manner. This is the fundamental nature of play (common to all mammals) and of curiosity. Without a sense of direction and future possibilities we dry up and find no reason to face the continuing challenge of survival. We also find little reason for producing and preparing a new generation.

A post-nuclear holocaust world is portrayed in the series of Australian movies regarding *Mad Max*. The world is coming to an end. When no viable future is in sight, then (as we see in these movies) there is no attending to children. They must fend for themselves, for we know they have no personal futures. Ironically, there is a powerful story about post-nuclear holocaust in a novel by Cormac McCarthy called *The Road* in which the father continues to protect and sacrifice for his son, even though the world is coming to an end. This extraordinary protagonist somehow finds meaning and purpose – and vision—regarding his son in the midst of despair and death.

Perhaps this is the type of premodern leadership that we need in our challenging world of 21st Century terrorism, nihilism and despair. McCarthy offers us a portrait of leadership that blends courage with vision—and perhaps in some very deep manner even the qualities of wisdom.

The premodern leader who is honored and respected for his or her capacity to convey a compelling vision of the future needs a viable vision. One of the great challenges for the visionary leader emerges when his or her vision (or the vision of the community) has been realized, abandoned or ignored. If there is no longer the need for a vision, then we certainly don't need a visionary leader. We can point to Winston Churchill as a notable example of this decline in collective support for a visionary leadership. During World War II, Churchill not only exhibited courage, he also articulated a compelling vision regarding the future of England (and all of Europe), that helped to increase the resolve of English citizens to fight against the Nazi regime and Hitler's equally as compelling (though horrifying) vision for a new Europe. When the Germans were defeated, England and Churchill not only lost an enemy, they also lost their compelling vision for the future. While England (and all of Western Europe) was certainly better off after World War II was terminated than they were during the war, there was not a new Europe. The United Nations didn't solve all international problems. This was not the war-to-end-all-wars (as was proclaimed at the conclusion of World War I). Many writers have documented the existential despair that followed World War II, when people had to return to a life that had not improved, despite the visionary statements of World War II leaders like Churchill, Roosevelt, DeGaulle—even Stalin.

Organizational Visions

What about the role of premodern vision on a smaller plain—in a group or organization? I would propose that the same challenge exists. The vision must remain viable. Organizations are often in crisis when they achieve some success and have realized a dream. What do we do now that we have completed this five year plan? We have obtained this grant and have initiated our new programs, but nothing has really changed and we are still hustling for more funds. It is critical that a new set of goals be established before the old ones are realized; it is equally as important, however, that achievement of the old goals be honored and celebrated. An organization that simply moves from one five year plan to a second five year plan is just as vulnerable to

exhaustion and disillusionment as an organization that never realizes its dreams (because they have been set too high). We must appreciate the achievement of current goals and must linger for a moment to honor the old dream and vision before moving forward to a new sense of the future.

At times, the old visionary leader must step aside for the new vision—given that he or she has finished the task and awaits a period of rest and reflection back on what has been achieved. At other times, the old visionary leader becomes the new visionary leader and finds renewed energy and commitment while collaborating with others in the formulation of the new vision. As in the case of the old, wise leader and the warrior who has spent many years battling an ancient foe, the visionary leader and his or her followers must decide when “enough-is-enough” and when the mantle of leadership must be passed on to the next generation. This is perhaps the most important decision that a premodern leader can make – whether wise, courageous or visionary. When do I move on and how do I help the next generation succeed? In many instances, this “moving on” will center on the shift to a modern or even postmodern style of leadership.

Gods, Heroes and Visions of the Past

I conclude by proposing that it is not uncommon for us to still live in premodern organizations. At the very least, we are living in the back of our minds and hearts in a world that may no longer exist—if it ever did. This is a world filled with men and women of vision (as well as courage and wisdom). We don't differ in this regard from men and women who lived at much earlier times. The Greeks of antiquity, for instance, believed that their myths were the “realities” of a previous time in their history—when Gods acted upon and in the world and when exceptional men and women (called “heroes”) lived in the world. Then one day, according to many Greek writers (such as Homer and Sophocles), this Golden Age came to an end. The Greeks were left, as ordinary men and women, to live ordinary lives and reflect back through myths and ceremonies on this previous world of Gods and Heroes. It is important—perhaps essential—that we recognize the existence of this same premodern perspective in 21st Century life. We must acknowledge that we, like the Greeks before us, yearn for a certain type of premodern leadership. We find ourselves disappointed in our leaders. They are, after all, only human. They are neither Gods nor Heroes. At other times we are profoundly thankful for and appreciative of these leaders—and, in particular, we are appreciate of the moments when these leaders are truly heroic

as they face (with wisdom, courage and vision) the challenging world of 21st Century complexity, unpredictability and turbulence.
