

An Achievable Vision or an Impossible Dream?

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“To dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe, to bear with unbearable sorrow.” For a variety of reasons, this is my favorite song from the musical “Man of La Mancha.”

When I was a kid, I played Little League baseball. For several years, I was chosen for the league’s all-star team. Most afternoons, you’d find me in a vacant lot with friends playing a pickup game. My dream was to play in the majors. By high school, I had learned that my arm was weak, I was slow on the bases, and my hitting was mediocre. Playing center field for the Atlanta Braves was an impossible dream!

I open with these two references because a leader I’ve been supporting raised an intriguing question. “How does a leader tell the difference between an achievable vision and an impossible dream?”

I love it when leaders want to know more! A previous article offered a simple three-step approach to improvement: 1. acknowledge “what is” 2. imagine “what could be” 3. generate a plan. (The article is on my website--click on the address below and scroll down to “Three Simple Steps to Improvement.”)

This week’s question deals with step 2, imagine “what could be.” How can you tell if your imagination is an “impossible dream” or an “achievable vision”?

Was Thomas Edison’s quest to invent a light source powered by electricity a dream or a vision? Was President John F. Kennedy’s idea in May of 1961 “of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth” an impossible dream or an achievable vision? Was Walt Disney’s concept of a gigantic upscale amusement park a dream or a vision? Were Gandhi’s efforts to obtain independence for India from the United Kingdom based on an impossible dream or an achievable vision?

On the front end, many people considered these crazy ideas to be impossible dreams. Oh, how easy it is to put labels on someone else’s positive expectancy!

As a teenager, Anna Mary Robertson was told to put away the paintbrushes and focus on being a proper farmer’s wife. Fifty years later, Grandma Moses finally put away the farm implements and started her new career, selling her first painting at age 78. Impossible dream or achievable vision?

As a struggling actor, he was repeatedly rejected by New York casting agents. Destitute, he hocked his wife’s jewelry and allegedly sold his dog for \$50. He was confident, however, that his screenwriting abilities would ultimately be recognized. Sylvester Stallone refused to sell the rights to the movie “Rocky” until the producers agreed to let him play the lead role. Achievable vision or impossible dream?

Okay. By now, you probably realize that one person’s impossible dream just might be someone else’s achievable vision. I’ve accumulated dozens of examples of improbable achievements by individuals who seemed to have no technical right to succeed as they did—yet their vision and drive propelled them!

Ah, but achieving an organizational vision requires the “buy-in” of the people involved. If the leader is unable to inspire those doing the work, even the most achievable “what could be” is going nowhere.

On an individual basis, a person need not have answers to all the “How will I do it?” questions. Convinced of the beneficial outcomes, a committed individual will keep moving, converting each stumbling block into a stepping stone. Trial-and-error is the name of the game in individual success.

In an organization, however, skeptics require assurance that the plan to move from current reality to the vision is workable. For this reason, I encourage leaders to involve everyone as early as possible in generating an organizational vision. Without involvement, there is no ownership or commitment.

Once a critical mass is engaged, innovative individuals work to rally later adopters. Enthusiasm becomes contagious. From that point forward, the key is just ensuring that individuals remain aligned. To keep the energy flowing, periodic celebrations of incremental improvement are in order.

Life is not easy for most leaders! But the rewards in terms of collective satisfaction are tremendous!

Dennis Hooper helps leaders improve their organizations’ cultures and build leaders. His articles are on www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives. Contact him at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com.