

Vision vs. Current Reality

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Do you know what you want to create in your organization? Has everyone on your team “bought-in” with intensity? Are they inspired such that they “own” the vision as intently as you do?

One of the most significant responsibilities of a leader is to establish the natural tension between the truth of today’s current reality and the imagination of what is achievable in the future.

“Current reality” is what your team members live in daily. For credibility, leaders must be completely honest about existing circumstances. Denying, ignoring, or pretending about “what is” offers no advantage. On the contrary, there is huge value in using words that clearly describe what the team faces in the here and now! The more accurately you can describe current reality, the better.

Why? Because if you lie about something as obvious as what everybody can see--right now and right in front of them--they presume you will probably also lie about other things. Your team members don’t want a leader they think will stretch or avoid the truth! “Sugar-coating” will kill their trust in you!

Your credibility is on the line each time you talk about current reality. People look for how closely your description lines up with their experiences. They are the experts on “what is” because they live in it daily. It surrounds them, and if the conditions are difficult, unsafe, or dehumanizing in any way, it grinds away at them. Coming to work each day may be tough. If you distort your description, they begin to sense hypocrisy in your words. A lack of trust in you will destroy their commitment to doing anything to improve the situation, and the complaining is certainly soon coming!

Your circumstances are probably not that grim. Still, no matter what the present circumstances are, the vision for what is possible in the future offers hope. Describing a challenging future stimulates energy. Our human nature strives to make circumstances better. When you describe the potential of an improved scenario, people want to align themselves with that concept and help make it happen. They look forward to enjoying the benefits that go along with approaching that future state.

So why do you as a leader have to describe the vision repeatedly? Isn’t a one-time description sufficient? Can’t people remember from month to month what lies out there before us?

No! Do not be deceived! Memories are short. Your team members live with and are reinforced by current reality daily, and the vision is just a creative idea they've not experienced. It’s hard to imagine “what could be” when every day your life is stamped with a “what is” that is lacking in some way.

Further, many people have difficulty imagining “what could be.” They likely have never felt the satisfaction of such a condition, or they may not see a path that could reasonably take them from here to there. Yet if your credibility is high, they will anchor themselves in the vision of what is possible, accepting the tension that stimulates behaviors to move the organization in that direction.

The tension between current reality and the vision will always try to resolve itself. In the absence of your repeated description of the future state (that is, without frequent reminders of what improved conditions are anticipated), people become too accepting of and even anchored in current reality. Whatever vision you may have once expressed will tend to dissipate and eventually disappear.

One of the burdens of leadership is to repeatedly remind folks of where the organization is headed. Though you may have described your vision of what’s possible dozens of times before, just keep inviting others to align their imaginations with “what could be.”

One of the joys of leadership is affirming team members whose behaviors drive the organization toward that future that you and they have collaboratively defined! Though progress occurs incrementally, somebody must keep reminding everybody else of the longer-term big picture. Others can share that role, but it never leaves the responsibility of “the leader.” That’s you, my friend!