

Zooming In and Zooming Out—A Leader's Perspective

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I find www.mapquest.com to be very helpful. I've always liked maps. When I was young and studying old world maps in school, I even thought about being a cartographer.

I especially like the "zoom" feature. I can zero in on the exact street, or I can back away and observe the location of interest in the context of a much broader geography.

Your role as a leader requires a similar zoom in and zoom out capability. Sometimes you need to know the intimate details, and sometimes you'll be the only one who views a situation from its broadest perspective. Perspective--yeah, that's the word. And not only do you require the capabilities, you need the sensitivity to know whether zooming in or zooming out will add value to the situation.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we experienced an unusual date, 10/10/10. I don't recall much excitement over 09/09/09, which we experienced just a year ago. Somehow I doubt 11/11/11, which will occur a year from now, will generate the same level of interest.

The recent series of 10's in the date caused a worldwide revival of interest in a short documentary film generated in 1968 by the husband and wife team of Charles and Ray Eames. In 1998, the Library of Congress selected "Powers of Ten" for preservation in the National Film Registry as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

Many individuals remember seeing the film in high school science classes. The footage shows perspectives of our world that we don't usually consider. If you've never seen the film, or if you'd like to view it again, it's well worth ten minutes of your time. Go to www.powersof10.com and click on "film."

"Perspective" is a leadership skill. When I invite leaders to assess themselves in the many attributes of leadership, perspective is one of the characteristics they evaluate. Here is the description of "perspective" provided in the assessment instrument I use:

- looks toward the broadest possible view of an issue or challenge
- has broad ranging personal and business interests and pursuits
- can easily pose future scenarios
- can think globally
- can discuss multiple aspects and impacts of issues and project them into the future

Most people who find themselves in a position of leadership arrived in that role from a position of functional or technical expertise. Because we are all products of our limited past perspectives, many leaders have a tendency to think too small.

It's doubtful that anyone under your authority, whether you lead a single department or a global corporation, will think in a longer time frame or regard your organization's potential more extensively than you. If you lack a challenging vision, you'll move into the future with little influence or energy. Your organization will be subject to the unanticipated forces that happen to develop over time.

Creative vision and strategy aren't automatic as you increase responsibility. Preparation begins years before you assume greater authority. Broad exposure to a variety of interests and experiences allows you to piece together unusual connections that others may never see.

In addition to zooming out to obtain a macro view of the circumstances and opportunities, you should be aware of when a more detailed micro analysis may be appropriate. For example, if there is a repeating problem that refuses to be resolved, you may have to become involved and ask some questions that stimulate a different approach.

The key is an awareness of what the organization needs and the flexibility to zoom out or zoom in with the perspective that will influence others in the organization to take appropriate actions.

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