

Articulating Your Vision of the Improved “You”

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2011, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on Saturday, March 19, 2011

You've decided that you want to change. And you're not interested in a random change; you intend to make significant improvement in some particular area of your life. How do you do it?

This article describes a specific process I use with my clients. The approach will work for you, too.

My clients experience a substantial increase in their awareness of what's involved in being a more effective leader. Once they have new insight, the desire to improve immediately follows. I insist that they clarify for themselves an articulated vision of their outlook and behaviors a year into the future.

They usually want to improve in many areas. I restrain them, however, to the attributes they believe will give them the greatest leverage in serving and influencing those under their authority. After all, they have a full-time job to perform, even while working on their improvement.

Once they've identified the two or three focus areas for their leadership development plan, I ask them to draft a descriptive vision statement for each area. Their task is to express how they expect to think and perform after they've experimented with new behaviors, sought feedback, and practiced.

I provide the following specific guidance which I've gained from various readings and learned from personal experience.

Make it personal. There are many resources that describe healthy leadership behaviors. They are great referral sources, but each individual faces a unique set of circumstances. I want my clients to “see” themselves performing in their roles, dealing with their colleagues, and obtaining greater results in the areas of their unique responsibilities.

Also, this is a personal vision, not an organizational vision. (If you'd like guidance for articulating an organizational vision, go to my website (see address below), click on Article Archives, and scroll down to “The Power of Visioning.”) With a personal vision, you don't need anyone else's concurrence. (It can certainly help, however, to obtain suggestions and comments from colleagues and your boss!)

Make it passionate. The purpose of making the desired change is to improve both the results and the methods for achieving those results. It may seem obvious, then, that the vision should be written using positive language. The greater the intensity of emotion written into the vision statement, the more powerful the attraction to those improved behaviors.

As soon as you start doing things differently, you'll receive pushback from someone. We all like our own little comfort zones, so your new activities will cause stress for someone. Folks will give you signals that you should go back to your predictable ways.

To overcome your own “status quo” inertia and the resistance of others, your vision of what you could become must be intensely appealing. Fill your personal vision with descriptive, robust words that pull you enthusiastically into the future.

Keep it in present tense. This may feel a little devious to you. I'm sometimes asked, “If I'm thinking about what the future will be, why do I use present tense words?”

Science has provided a lot of insight into how your brain works. A specialized section of your medulla oblongata is called the reticular activating system. It's a collection of unique neurons (brain cells) that serve as a sifter of the sensory stimuli entering the cerebrum, the thinking portion of your brain.

Your body is constantly collecting information about sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. If you had to routinely process all that information, your cerebrum would overload. Your reticular activating system (RAS) serves as a net to filter out the information that's not important to you currently.

Similarly, your RAS brings to your conscious attention anything that you've decided is unusually important, such as the way you want to behave from now on. Scientists have determined that your RAS is extremely literal. If you tell it, "I will be a better listener," your reticular activating system interprets that as a future request and will routinely put off opportunities to listen more intensely.

So, by articulating the vision using the present tense of verbs, you program the RAS to do it now. When you write your vision as "I listen well," your RAS looks for occasions to make that statement true.

My wife and I unexpectedly experienced this phenomenon recently. We've been thinking for several years that we might someday move to Atlanta. A couple of weeks ago, my wife started looking on the internet at real estate in Atlanta. She contacted a realtor and soon we were examining specific houses.

Envisioning our future home is similar to my clients programming their brains for future skills. Once clarity exists, reality quickly follows. We found a house near Piedmont Park. We expect to relocate by June. "Maybe someday" very quickly transformed to "now," simply by establishing clarity.

So, when my clients articulate a clear personal vision using passionate, present tense verbs, their improved behaviors swiftly follow. The same process will work for you!

Dennis Hooper helps leaders improve their influence on future leaders. Send an e-mail to Dennis or call him at 478-988-0237. Past articles are posted on his website, www.buildingfutureleaders.com.