

Visionaries and Vision-Runners

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“There are only two kinds of people in this world--the realists and the dreamers. The realists know where they are going; the dreamers have already been there.”

Robert Orben, author of Speaker’s Handbook of Humor and speechwriter for President Gerald Ford

There are visionary leaders, and there are vision-runner leaders. There are many more vision-runners than visionaries. Yet visionaries, when they are successful, usually garner greater public attention.

If you were alive in May of 1961, you’ll likely remember the surprising and inspiring words of President John F. Kennedy: “I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.”

Following that visionary statement, many vision-runner leaders worked to achieve what seemed impossible at the time. Vision-runners are typically “in the trenches” dealing with the how, the where, and the when and by whom that makes “the what” achievable. They rarely gain public glory, but the accomplishment of inspiring visions would never occur without their leadership.

So, more than anything, this article is about collaboration and inter-dependence.

Let me clarify that a given individual is rarely entirely a dreamer or a realist, totally visionary or vision-runner. Few leaders have the privilege of specializing in only one or the other. Most of us are out there trying our best to accomplish both.

I realize that many of you never considered the distinction between visionary and vision-runner leaders. If you look back at your past history, however, you’ll likely identify more strongly with one or the other.

Although independence is valued in our society, no one is ever successful alone. I recently watched “The Pursuit of Happyness,” the movie describing the homeless years of Chris Gardner. Wikipedia describes Chris as “a self-made millionaire, entrepreneur, motivational speaker, and philanthropist.”

The movie is a powerful portrayal of personal tenacity and fatherly devotion to his son. A casual observer would also say it is a description of commanding independence. However, no one is “self-made.” Watch closely and you’ll see that many individuals contributed to Gardner’s ultimate success.

Even more individuals contributed to the successful landing on the moon in 1969. No leader is truly independent! I cannot overemphasize the powerful benefits and value of effective collaboration!

Visionaries are able to read the environment for opportunities. They push the envelope of ideas, generating initiatives and inspiring commitment. Sound mental images motivate and guide people in how to use their time and make choices. A powerful vision is a rallying call for a departure from the past--no more business as usual. The vision requires that people think, talk, and act differently.

However, even the most inspiring idea generates underlying apprehensions, anxiety, and fear of the unknown. Questions need answers. Obstacles require creative elimination. Bright ideas alone do not achieve desirable outcomes. Vision-runners empower and encourage the people doing the work.

Sometimes partners compete. As an outsider, I can see clearly the wasted energy and time consumed because of the subconscious choices made by each party. The visionary lacks patience or doesn’t heed feedback from those under his or her authority. The vision-runner generates unnecessary roadblocks or refuses to consider enhancements beyond the original idea.

However, it’s a work of art when partners value the skills and perspective of the other individual. Together, they model the vision. People observe what they do and see its consistency with what they say. Team members align with the concepts, and great progress occurs rapidly.

I encourage you to consider whether you are more of a visionary or a vision-runner. Whichever you happen to be, welcome a powerful colleague with a complementary skill and perspective, and start cooperating. I predict that delightful successes will begin to occur in a very short time.

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