

## **Articulating Your Vision of the Improved “You”**

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You've decided that you want to change. You're not interested in a random change; you intend to make a significant improvement in some particularly important 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 skill 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—the habits they intend to build—after they've experimented with new behaviors, sought feedback, and practiced.

I provide the following specific guidance, which I've gained from various readings, learned from personal experience, and successfully used to support leaders since being trained as an executive coach.

**Make it personal.** Many resources describe healthy leadership behaviors. They are great referral sources, but each leader 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.

Remember that you can only control your choices, your thoughts, and your behaviors. It is so very tempting to describe how others will behave and think relative to you once you've grown and made changes, but other people control their choices, behaviors, and thoughts. Your objective in preparing your future vision is to describe what you do and think, not how others respond or react. If your vision involves interactions with others (and it probably will), consider using phrases such as “I invite,” “I ask,” “I model,” “I create,” “I encourage,” and “I respond.”

Also, this is a personal vision, not an organizational vision. (If you'd like guidance for articulating an organizational vision, go to my website ([www.buildingfutureleaders.com](http://www.buildingfutureleaders.com)), 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, your direct reports, your boss, and your coach!)

**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 who will help you achieve (and benefit from) your improved behaviors.

As soon as you start doing things differently, you'll receive pushback from someone. We all like our individualized little comfort zones, so your new activities will cause stress for someone. Don't be surprised if some folks give you signals that you should go back to your previous predictable ways.

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

**Keep it in the 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? I thought I wasn't supposed to lie about current reality!”

Science has provided much insight into how your brain works. A specialized section of your medulla oblongata is called the reticular activating system (RAS). The RAS is 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 through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. If you had to process all that information routinely, your cerebrum would overload. Your reticular activating system 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. In this case, the RAS reminds you of 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 (until some future time) to listen more intensely.

Therefore, 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 intentionally," your RAS looks for occasions to make that statement immediately true.

My wife and I unexpectedly experienced this phenomenon recently. We've been thinking for several years that we might move to Atlanta, near our daughter and son-in-law. 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 online.

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 about a mile from our daughter, her husband, and our new grandson. We expect to relocate by June. Simply by establishing clarity, "maybe someday" very quickly transformed to "now."

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!

**Make it positive.** Our subconscious mind is amazing. When you intentionally think about "thinking," you use your conscious mind, and you willfully control the focus of your attention. For example, when you decide to get in your car and drive somewhere, your hand reaches for the keys to comply with your directions.

Most of the time, however, you are not consciously thinking about the many important things in your life. Fortunately, your subconscious mind is managing your relationship with all those aspects of your life that are not currently occupying your immediate attention.

Your subconscious mind takes its direction from your conscious mind, and in that respect, your conscious mind is more powerful. However, your subconscious mind takes over once your attention focuses elsewhere.

Your subconscious mind is also extremely powerful because it controls most of your attitudes and behaviors most of the time. It's using all of the beliefs and "shoulds" that have been programmed into it (sadly, even those that limit your perspective and achievements!).

Scientific analysis has determined that your reticular activating system--and all the other aspects of your subconscious mind--recognizes only positive direction. That is, when you say, "Don't forget that appointment!" you've just programmed your subconscious mind to forget. It is far more powerful to say to yourself, "Remember that appointment!" You've just programmed your subconscious mind to recall the event at the proper time.

You have years of programming that occurred before you started taking conscious control of your life. "Shoulds" that were instilled in you by your parents and other authority figures still exist in your subconscious. Further, your guilt over past mistakes--and other regrettable events--are still deeply embedded in your subconscious, and they influence your behaviors today (often when you least expect it!). That's why coaches and therapists sometimes help you identify (and perhaps change) your underlying limiting beliefs.

Your behaviors today are driven by your beliefs and values, some of which limit you in ways you don't understand. That's why it's so important that your vision of yourself in the future--in the next few minutes or the next few years--be expressed in positive terms. Give yourself the best possible advantage by describing your vision in positive terms. Your self-talk should be expressed using positive language. That is, skip the references to what you will NOT think, do, and be.

If you are reading this, you have likely been endowed with huge potential. Don't tolerate "good enough" any longer! Imagine a more effective, improved set of leadership skills (and improved confidence), and start serving those who rely on you and your guidance. Your results will be better, those you influence will be grateful, and you'll be operating with a far greater sense of purpose!