

Feedback and the Vision

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If you have interest in the concepts of “feedback” or “visioning,” you can find several articles on each on my website, buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives. Put either word in the search box at the top of the page, and several helpful articles will pop up.

I often suggest to my clients, “Get out there and listen to your folks. They have valuable information about this business, and even about you as their leader. If you ask with a genuine desire to learn and improve, they will keep you from being unintentionally deceived.”

Unintentionally deceived? Those are strong words! Yes, and they are scary.

No one chooses self-deception. However, no one recognizes when he or she is self-deceived, either.

Self-deception is, in my opinion, the single most perplexing condition for a leader. Self-deception can bring you down without even an attack. Your self-deception can devastate the business. Paradoxically, the more confident you are, the greater the potential for self-deception.

You make decisions all the time. Your intent when you make them is good. Your skill at making them is good. You handle multiple responsibilities, and most indications from your environment are that you are performing well. You receive few overt complaints on your behavior and even an occasional compliment.

When I suggest you intentionally ask people for their perspective on how effectively you are serving them, you believe you would be wasting your time and theirs. You genuinely believe you will learn nothing that you don't already know.

This article is my latest approach to convincing you simply to try overtly requesting feedback. As noted above, you'll find dozens of articles on my website dealing with feedback and with vision. This is the first article I've written combining the acts of sharing vision and seeking feedback together.

In “Vision vs. Current Reality,” I wrote, “Why does a leader have to describe the vision repeatedly? Isn't a one-time description sufficient?” In the article, I respond with an emphatic, “No! People's memories are short. They live with current reality every day, and the vision is just an imagination. 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.”

I'm suggesting you go out among your people with a dual mission--to reinforce the organization's vision and to ask “How are we doing--and specifically, how am I doing--in moving toward that vision?”

Figure out how many sub-teams you have in your organization, and generate a plan to touch a different sub-team every week or two—at a minimum, touch every sub-organization two or three times a year.

Here's how you do it. Arrange with a department manager several days in advance to have four team members assembled at a given time and place to meet with you for an hour. (Plan in your schedule for 90 minutes, because once you get started, the energy to continue will be high). Thank the folks for agreeing to meet with you, then describe that the conversation will be broken into two parts.

The first part, the shorter of the two, will be mostly you talking about the future of the business. The second part will be mostly them telling you, from their perspective, how the organization is doing in moving toward that desired future state.

Speak for two or three minutes about current reality, some real-life situations facing this particular department. Then provide about a ten-minute slice of the organization's vision that seems particularly relevant to the people you are addressing. Deliver this with energy. For some of the four, this may be the first time they've heard this directly from you. Even if all have heard it many times, you want to engage these particular folks in a very fresh, powerful way.

At some point, ask someone to repeat what they heard back to you. Expect that there will be a lot of stumbling and mumbling. Be gracious, helping them collectively put the vision in their own words. Talking engages them both in the vision and the next part of the conversation. Thank them for the effort.

Then ask, "So, what are we doing well to move toward that vision? And what could we be doing better? And if any of your thoughts are something I can personally do better, I especially want to know that."

Expect a few moments of silence and a few nervous glances. Someone will likely offer something relatively inconsequential. Welcome it, as your response to that first ventured comment will set the tone for the rest of the conversation. Soon, comments will flow quickly. Make notes of anything where you commit to follow up, especially if you promise to check on something. Be sure you get the names of these four individuals and go out of your way to report to them once you do what you said you would do.

At the end of the session, be gracious in your thanks for their participation and especially their candor. Tell them when you expect to repeat this process again in their department, and encourage them to invite their teammates to participate next time.

As energy winds down, ask the four individuals, "What did we do well in this session?" Then ask, "What could I do better in future sessions?" Listen closely and take notes. Plan to repeat next time whatever went well and look to incorporate in future sessions the improvements that were suggested.

Immediately after the session, make notes of what you recall from the entire conversation. Keep a running log of these feedback and vision sessions. You likely will see patterns developing after you've had a number of these conversations.

The word will get around that the sessions are enjoyable, people learn a lot, and they can speak freely. Over time, people will jockey for the opportunity to talk with you. You'll find that you enjoy vision casting and you'll improve at it over time. Further, you'll learn a lot about the state of your business and about how you affect people. Along with these direct benefits, you'll reduce the risk of self-deception.

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