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Are you getting tired of the ABCs?  We’re almost done!  Patience.  This one is hard.

The kind of vision checkup when we get our eyes examined is not what I am talking about here.  This is about how leaders see into the future and the decisions they make about the direction their organizations should pursue.  It’s the “visionary” quality of leadership that makes all the difference.

Here are a couple of examples of leaders whose vision failed them at critical junctures.

One story goes like this: Thomas J. Watson was the Chairman and CEO of IBM from 1914 to 1956.  A brilliant salesman, he once opined that “**I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.**”  The story may not be true (that he actually said that) but in 1943 the world looked quite different to him.  Some others saw the future more clearly.  Or were they just dreamers?

Never one to be outdone, Ken Olsen, the founder of Digital Equipment Corporation (later acquired by Compaq and in 2002 merged into Hewlett-Packard) said in 1977 “**There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home.**” Of course they wouldn’t when they could have more computing power in their mobile device than NASA had in its computers that landed humans on the moon and brought them home to Earth!

Enough said!

Try this sometime.  Ask a business person what business they’re in.  In my experience there will be a lot of sputtering and stammering.  Not a lot of vision – near or far-sighted.  They need coaching on their elevator speech!

One of the best leaders I ever worked with used to start meetings by asking “What can I do better?”  Over time, people trusted the sincerity of the question and told him.  And to his credit, he followed through. I always thought that was exemplary, even if not visionary.  He was visionary too in the way he crafted the future through that level of trust.  He knew he alone would not succeed.

If you can handle one more anecdote, try this:  “The light bulb was not the result of the continuous improvement of the candle.”  Visionaries like Thomas Edison were able to see further down the road and around a few more turns than mere mortals like me.  A few other names to illustrate the point:  Bill Gates.  Steve Jobs.  Not necessarily the easiest people to work for but visionaries for sure.

I wish I had a formula for finding such people and developing their vision.  Maybe that’s what investment bankers do.  But I do know that they cannot execute on their vision by themselves.  They need to enlist others in the cause and turn **Vision** into **Values**.  They need to be able to communicate the vision and enlist the vigor of others.  They have to be able to translate the vision across cultures and around the globe.  Top-down works for a while.  So does bullying.  As I have written in other articles in this series, it’s the difference between “Do it right now!” and “Do it right, now!”  That pesky comma makes all the difference.  Shared vision and values are better over the long haul.

Think about the visionary leaders in your organization.  What stands out when you think about their skill sets?  What do they do to enlist others in the cause?  How do they succeed and how then does your organization succeed?

Please share your experience with the rest of us.  That’s what all of these articles are about.