Visionary Leadership

Adapted from an AF business seminar presentation by Myron Miller

Vision is a focus on where you are going and what you hope to achieve. Visionary leaders see the need for clear vision and can inspire others to create change. Long ago Solomon wrote, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). While that referred to God speaking through His prophets, it still conveys to us the idea that there is trouble waiting for those who don't have a sense of where they are going. Without vision, people lack purpose and direction, living aimlessly and reactively. Likewise, where there is no visionary leadership, businesses often fail. Businesses need clear vision––a vision that people can own and believe in.

Everyone in business leaves a legacy, whether their business thrives or fails. What kind of legacy do you want to leave? Successful businesses are usually led by people who have vision and purpose. These visionary leaders cast a vision for the future. They embed meaning into their work. They have the ability to influence and inspire people.

When you were back in grade school, your teacher may have had you write down what you wanted to be when you grew up. When you were in first and second grade, you probably had no limit to your aspirations—you could aspire to be whatever you thought would make you happy. When you reached adulthood, you might still have been trying to decide what you were going to do with your life. Even at that stage in life, you tended to look through rose-colored glasses. You probably started working and got married. You envisioned having a well-paying job. You expected that your spouse would treat you well and that your children would all be well-behaved and healthy. You certainly didn't ever plan on failing or going broke. It's probably a good thing you were so optimistic. Many people would probably despair if they knew early on in life the challenges they will eventually face.

When people look at life through these rose-colored glasses, they think everything is going to be fine. For most, however, reality hits someday. It takes vision to persevere even when setbacks and disappointments come. It takes confidence that the vision is right and that the reward of realizing it will make all the difficulty worthwhile. Further, it takes faith to remember that God has a plan for our lives beyond what we can see ourselves. Even what we perceive as setbacks can be used by God to help lift our own vision higher and move us toward it. Job wrote from the midst of loss, "He knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."[1]

The Need for Vision

Vision provides motivation for doing what you do each day. Without a clearly defined vision guiding you like a compass, you will lack direction and purpose. You won't know whether or not you've been successful or how to

[1] Job 23:10

achieve your goals. If you're expecting to go to Heaven or somewhere else important on earth, you must know the route to get there.

We need to have a vision in all aspects of our lives: our families, churches, schools, and vocations. Without a vision, it's difficult to get inspired. Waking up each morning becomes a drudgery. It's been said that if you love what you do, you'll never work another day in your life. If you don't know what you're hoping to do—what makes you satisfied and happy—you probably won't be inspired. If you're not inspired, the people around you definitely aren't going to be.

The Need for Proper Motives

Why did you start a business? Some people do it to get rich and be successful. Some do it because they envision a better tomorrow.

Back in the mid-1900s, most people farmed. They didn't live a life of Pepsi, potato chips, and vacations. Farming was a way of life or survival. It's what almost everybody did. Today farming is different. Many farmers have made a conscious decision to farm because they value the lifestyle more than they value getting rich. They can't take off from chores whenever they want to. Farming for them is a sacrifice. This type of sacrifice, however, deepens their commitment to their vision. They're creating an environment of interaction with one another and living better lives because of it.

Just like those farmers, your business also needs to be undergirded by proper motives. When you are willing to sacrifice for the sake of your vision, you will inspire others to do likewise. When other people feel involved and believe in your vision, they will buy in and make sacrifices too. Sacrificing in order to accomplish a particular vision will deepen one's commitment to that vision.

We believe that a well-operated business is a testimony in the world for how God wants people to live. Conducting our lives in businesses as subjects of God's kingdom illustrates His teachings to all those we come into contact with. To see God's will more fully realized in our own businesses is a compelling vision, a proper motive, and a worthy commitment for us.

Creating Change

There's a big difference between dreaming and making things happen. Dreaming is the lifeblood of many prospering organizations. We need to have those dreams before we can have vision. Some people, however, are only dreamers. They just sit around, watch things happen, or maybe copy other people's dream. They aren't an inspiration to the business.

Having a clear vision is what first brings about change. A clear vision is a dream in work clothes. If you don't develop your dreams and act on them, they don't become a vision. Nothing happens. Many people would love to be like the Wright brothers—people who have a dream and can bring it to fruition. But going beyond a dream to a clear vision is the first step in creating change and progress.

Not everyone, however, is gifted with clear vision. Some people are gifted with the ability to see needs and, instead of creating change, they help others adapt to change. They aren't the ones who invent or design airplanes, but they will notice that airplanes need landing strips, so they'll make airports. These people are definitely a great asset to visionaries. Both have important and necessary roles.

Establishing Clear Vision

Zig Ziglar once said, "If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time." The truth is that you typically get what you aim for. In order to establish a clear vision, you must do the following:

Own It. If your spouse wants you to lose thirty pounds, it might not happen. You might not be willing to get up early every morning for a three-mile run just because someone else wants you to be thinner. It has to become your own vision; you have to desire it yourself. If it's what you really want to do, then you'll sacrifice more to accomplish it.

What's important to one person, though, may mean nothing to someone else. Each person defines success differently. The story is told of a man who took his yacht out on the bay a couple times a week for a pleasure ride. After months of seeing a fisherman in a little boat, the yacht owner pulled up alongside this fisherman one day and said, "Sir, I've noticed you're out here a lot and that you catch a lot of fish. With your ability, you should do it for a living."

The fisherman was a little perplexed and asked, "Well, why would I do that?"

The man in the yacht explained, "You could support your family. In time, you could train others to fish and get a whole fleet of boats. Eventually you could amass enough

money that you wouldn't have to work. You could then do anything you wanted to do."

The fisherman thought a little bit and then said, "But, sir, that's exactly what I'm doing now."

Everybody has their own dreams—something that's important to them. And sometimes we can go the long way around to get something that we could have had quite easily otherwise.

Remain Focused. Once you know what your vision is, keep your eye on the ball. Professional wide receivers are talented football players who get paid millions of dollars to catch footballs—and do it well. They rarely drop a ball, but when they do, it's probably because of a lack of focus. Either they fear the pain of getting hit by a 300-pounder after they catch the ball, or they lose concentration and focus on the end zone before they've even caught the ball. Loss of focus is costly. Keep your business vision in focus at all times.

Share It. Don't assume others know and understand your business vision. Share it and reinforce it relentlessly. The essence of developing a successful vision is not only being able to envision a possible future, but it's being able to articulate your vision in a way that's both compelling and inclusive. Sharing your vision effectively happens only if you live out what you preach. Walk your talk, and you'll get buy-in. When everyone shares the same vision, life is breathed into the lungs of an organization.

If you can't articulate your business vision clearly, your employees won't buy into it. They'll veer off to the side like a distracted horse that isn't sure where it is going. But when that horse hits the road for home, it's a different horse. With ears pointed straight forward, it knows where it's going. It doesn't look left or right and isn't distracted by other places it has been before. Why? Because the horse has a vision. He's focused on where he's going.

Get Feedback. As a leader, you may be prone to make all the decisions in a business. You might think that it's not important for those under you to know what's going on. Leaders, however, could often save themselves a lot of heartache if they would get feedback from people in departments a couple levels under them. Invite feedback about the vision of the company or other plans. You have blind spots and can get a different perspective from those around you. Don't just get feedback from people who agree with you. If everyone thinks like you do, then you don't need their input. Cherish the dissension and let it be constructive.

Get the Right People. If you're hoping to be successful in the vision that you've established, you need the right people. You may have good products, but so do your competitors. Having the right people in your business is often what sets your business apart from others.

Some people just "mark time," a military term for marching on the spot but not going anywhere. These people pass their time in routine activities, waiting until an interesting opportunity shows up. Other people, however, are inspiring and take initiative in doing things. They energize people around them and create a positive work atmosphere.

Surround yourself with people that will make you and your company look good. If you hire the right people, your business will probably do the right thing. Having inspiring leadership plays a huge role in this.

The story of three bricklayers illustrates this principle of people being inspired. Upon being asked what they were each doing, the first bricklayer replied, "I'm laying bricks. It's backbreaking work, but I need a job."

The second bricklayer said, "I'm building a wall. This is a good job. It supports my family, and I don't mind doing it."

The third bricklayer said, "We're building a cathedral on top of that hill that will stand as a testament to all mankind." The third bricklayer must have been inspired by someone. He saw the end result—the bigger purpose behind what he was doing.

Creating a Culture of Engagement

Culture is a shared way of doing things. It is how a group of people act and how they decide how to deal with issues. It is what people perceive to be the correct way to think, feel, and act. Even though these beliefs and behavioral expectations may not always be the best way to do a business, they are still passed on to new members. It's like the two middle-aged sisters preparing a turkey for Thanksgiving dinner. When the turkey's tail was cut off before being put in the broiler, the one sister asked, "Why do we always cut the tail off the turkey?"

The other sister replied, "I don't know. Mom just always did it that way."

They asked Mom why she always cut the tail off the turkey, and she said, "So it would fit into the broiler."

Sometimes people do things just because that's the way it has always been done.

In your business, the culture will influence the success or failure of your vision. The way things are normally done will trump strategy every single day of the week. You can lay out the best plans and ideas, but unless you have that culture attuned to your strategy, your strategy will probably fail.

In order to create a culture of engagement, you should:

Encourage Involvement. Create a culture in which decisions may be respectfully challenged. You don't want people compromising for the sake of social cohesion. You need to get buy-in, not just people bobbing their heads and agreeing with everything. Engage people in the decision-making process and you will get positive buy-in to your vision. Benjamin Franklin said years ago, "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn." Instead of letting solely culture dictate what happens in your business, strive to create a culture of engagement in your business. When this happens, everyone shares in the business's successes and failures.

Be Transparent. Covering your blind spots or brushing over problems in your business culture robs your business of the opportunity to improve. Hiding a bad strategy or flaws of the business vision is not being humble. It is indicative of a leader puffing himself up and letting his big ego rule.

Don't Take the Credit. People like to be recognized for who they are and what they contribute. They like to be missed after they leave. However, don't purposefully make yourself be missed by not sharing information about how to do something so that when you leave, others will notice what you did. It is better to be good than it is to look good. Humble leaders are never going to sacrifice long-term value for short-term gain. It's amazing what can be accomplished if no one insists on taking the credit.

Visionary leaders set clear goals and establish appropriate metrics that accurately measure how they and their employees are doing. Visionary leaders see things differently. They can envision the need for change and create that change. Their example of sacrifice and commitment motivates others to buy in to the vision.

As a business leader, what is your ultimate goal? Are you making good decisions that benefit others, or are you trying to protect yourself? Your daily decisions must be consistent with your vision. The path you're on must lead you to where you want to go. Our ultimate vision is to bring glory to God, both personally and in our businesses.[2]

[2] Proverbs 3:6, "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."

AF Stewardship Resources

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