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GLOBAL LEADERSHIP AND PERSONAL POWER

JEFFREY GANDZ

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IVEY BUSINESS JOURNAL
179 JOHN ST., SUITE 501
TORONTO, ON M5T 1X4

TEL: 416/598-7775
FAX: 416/598-0669
EMAIL: ibj@ivey.uwo.ca

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HEADSTART

Global leadership and personal power

BY JEFFREY GANDZ

We know leadership when we see it and can usually explain why it has been asserted after the fact. However, we are very poor at predicting its development. The reason is simple: Great leaders—I use the word “great” to avoid the moral dimensions involved in discussing “good” leaders—require more than vision to see their visions enacted and their aspirations fulfilled. They require the personal passion that drives them to realize their vision and the power to enact it.

Leaders are visionaries. They are able, as my long-time colleague Dick Hodgson used to say, “to lift their eyes from the edge of the rut to the horizon” or “to see and show the way.” Often, others do not see the vision they see at the time they see it: Churchill saw the menace of National Socialism long before most other political leaders; Gorbachev saw prospects in glasnost where most did not; Steve Jobs saw the potential power of the PC, and Bill Gates saw the power of a standardized graphical utility interface (Windows). Also, David McTaggart, a former executive director of Greenpeace International, saw the potential degradation to our environment through non-sustainable development; Jack Welch saw the gains that General Electric would accrue through speed, simplicity, self-confidence, and the boundary-less organization; Alfred Sloane realized the power of corporate organization, and Einstein saw the wonder in relativity and beyond.

But for every Churchill, Gorbachev, Welch or Sloane, there were a dozen John or Jane Does who saw the same thing. Most were never known or, if they were, were soon forgotten. Many visionaries are not leaders and never will be. They have a vision but they lack the motivation to do anything significant to make it happen. They are not passionate enough to take the risks, make the effort, deal with the frustrations in making their dreams come true. And many visionaries have invested huge amounts of personal effort and passion but have never managed to garner the power to make them come true. And history rewards only those who had the power to make it happen.

Which brings us to the question: “Who will be the leaders of the future?” and, I suppose, the prescriptive question: “What do I have to do to get my vision enacted?” My argument is that you have to get and retain power. Without it, visions are mere dreams and efforts to enact them will be frustrated.

I have observed that great leaders possess four particular powers. They are the power to:

- (a) Communicate their visions to others
- (b) Overcome resistance to change
- (c) Mobilize resources in the required direction
- (d) Manage their own ambitions so that they don't self-destruct in the process of leading.

Communication skills are a critical element of what we call “charisma.” Sometimes these skills involve being able to wow an audience face to face, and sometimes they can inspire small groups of key people to help enact the vision. Increasingly, however, this skill requires developing presentations or pitches in the form of slide presentations, Internet proposals, and new media such as Net meetings and satellite conferences. They are less likely to be seen in long, dense, written analyses or the types of business cases that have been taught in business schools in the last couple of decades. The quality of analysis and logic must still be there, but the presentation skills will be quite different and have a much higher impact.

Capturing the essence of a vision in a short, concise statement—almost a slogan or series of slogans—is a skill that must be developed. GE's Welch is a master of this skill and phrases such as “Work-Out,” “Speed, Simplicity and Self-Confidence,” “the Boundary-Less organization” and “aggressive-patience.” He has moved the corporation miles ahead so that it is one of the few “old-line” companies that have managed to project the vitality of the newer dot-com companies. Closer to home, Michael McCain of Maple Leaf Foods has been investing huge amounts of his own and other executives' time to develop and espouse a clear set of leadership values through the organization, focusing on face-to-face fireside chats during sessions of the Maple Leaf Leadership Academy.

The messages in these communications must be consistent. People used to say that in advertising, management got bored with the message long before most people had even heard it. So it is with corporate messages. It's a noisy world out there and messages have to be repeated and promoted with high impact before they get through. And they should not be changed too often less they become the “message du jour”...and receive little attention from anyone.

Leaders need the power to overcome resistance to change. They do this either by aligning followers with the vision or by removing them totally from positions where they can block change. Resistance to change has its basis in several possibilities. People may:

- a) Not agree that the change makes sense
- b) Personally lose as a result of the change
- c) Fear that they won't be able to cope with the change
- d) Lack the resources or capacity to undertake the change process
- e) Believe that the organizational reward system favours the old ways of doing things rather than the new.

Time was, organizations could be patient when dealing with resistance to change. They would simply fashion solutions that would gradually change direction while respecting those who resisted. That's no longer the case. One casualty of "Business at the Speed of Thought" is the slow, incremental approach to change and to dealing with those who resist it. Globally competitive companies simply cannot afford to lose the focused energy associated with this. Today, corporate leaders are more likely to act according to Machiavellian principles rather than those of the human relations movement.

Many dot-coms are successful because their leaders have the power to mobilize resources to support the vision. Most important, they have the ability to recruit people and align them with the vision of the organization. Often, new recruits are offered potentially lucrative stock options and the promise of achieving interesting visions without the bureaucracy of the large organization and its inherent impediments to change. It is not only new, younger workforce entrants who are attracted to these firms. Increasingly, we see veterans of established Dow Jones companies jumping ship for these newer kinds of operations. They're attracted by the potential to become wealthy and the opportunity to achieve their goals in a specific time.

Many leadership scholars dwell extensively on the congruence of the leader's vision with the aspirations of the followers. There is obviously truth in this observation and those leaders who have been able to capture and retain the aspirations of the masses have indeed been great. Such "servant" or "follower-based" leadership has characterized populist world leaders such as Gandhi, Peron, Allende, and Reagan, as well as corporate leaders such as Dupree,

Jobs and Disney.

But it is also true that leaders may wish to achieve A and do so by offering their followers B or C or D as the price of buying their followership. You don't have to buy into the leader's dream to follow him or her. Indeed, most armies supporting great leaders, from Alexander to Tamerlane to Genghis Khan were mercenaries—in it for rape and pillage. Much corporate loyalty today—insofar as it exists at all—is rooted firmly in the value of the stock options rather than the benefits of the gizmo.

The final element of leadership is self-control...the ability to use power effectively without being consumed by it, and so isolating yourself and eventually self-destructing. The more that leaders use power to overcome opposition, the more they are subject to criticism and the more they insulate themselves from that criticism. The consequence is that they cease to listen and reject all feedback. They just don't get it when things are going wrong. This may be the greatest tragedy of all...to be so close to achieving a vision and to lose it because the leader

could not exercise self-control.

Which brings me to the prescription. If you have a vision and want to see it enacted, do the following:

- Work on articulating that vision through carefully crafted, high-impact messages promulgated through every medium at your disposal. Never miss an opportunity to address the audiences that will support you and to communicate with those whom you might convince. Make this a conscious, planned effort. Specifically, reduce the temptation to overload the communications channels with multiple messages at one time, especially those that might confuse people's understanding of the vision
- Strive to gain control over key reward and punishment mechanisms that will allow you to motivate people to share and achieve your vision and neutralize or remove those whose resistance cannot be modified through communication alone. Often, this means waiting until you have positional power within the organization before openly articulating the vision. Sometimes it

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means using one's coalition-formulation and alliance-making skills with those who do have the power

- Do not shirk from using power to remove people who are blocking your progress in achieving your vision. It's tough enough to move an organization in a direction without having to negotiate the minefield of the disaffected. The time spent in overcoming resistance to change is time the competition can use to frustrate your achievements
- While exercising power, be sensitive to the possibility that you may be wrong! Continue to listen, engage your critics and keep your antennae up. Sam Steinberg,

whose "laws of business" have guided many of today's corporate leaders, once said: "When three people tell you you're drunk, lie down." I don't agree with this formulation exactly—the bolder your vision, the more people will think that you're nuts—but it does indicate a continued need for sensitivity to criticism. In this respect particularly, a good, tough-minded board of directors may well be the best asset that a CEO can have, alongside a VP of Human Resources who continues to gather and monitor feedback from the organization. ■■■

JEFFREY GANDZ IS A PROFESSOR OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS, RICHARD IVEY SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, LONDON, ONT.

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