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Academic Leadership Journal

WHICH ANT ARE YOU?

By Jim Evans

Bill Keene's

Family Circus is one of the world's most beloved newspaper comics. Each day, the artist explores the joys and challenges of family life and, on occasion, teaches a few basic lessons along the way.

Recently, the cartoon featured small son Billy peering intently at a long, single-file line of ants stretching down the sidewalk. "That first ant better know where he's going," he observed to his sister.

How's that for a basic lesson in leadership?

The first ant better know where he's going.

Keene comes straight to the point. Leadership, like any journey, begins with a destination. Where do you want to go? Or where do you want to be? After you've answered those questions, then you work on the "how" and "when" parts of the equation. How do we get there? When should we start? Those are tactical issues. They're not really relevant until you've answered the destination question.

What we're describing here is vision. Vision is a much misunderstood and overused word that is imprecise and invites redefinition nearly every time it is used. Business leaders talk about the need for visionary thinking and planning. Religious leaders call down the blessing of vision on themselves and others. Political leaders treat it as a buzzword and frequently don't have a clue what they mean by "the vision thing."

There's a restaurant in Phoenix where my wife and I occasionally have dinner. It's a Greek place run by a flamboyant Greek family. One of the dessert items is something about the size of a small piece of cake. George, the owner, calls it the "lemon thing." That's how you order it. The "lemon thing." It's not on the menu and he won't tell you what it is. It's flaky, sticky and tastes like you just bit into a lemon. Hence, the "lemon thing."

If I ever really knew what it was, I'd probably be disappointed.

That's not true with the "vision thing." I want to know what the vision thing is. We require a more precise definition.

Let's go back to your childhood for a moment.

How many times did a favorite aunt or uncle or grandparent lean over, cluck you under the chin and ask you what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Remember your response?

"I want to be a fireman. Or a policeman. Or a railroad engineer.

Or a soldier. Or a jet pilot. I don't remember anybody ever saying they wanted to be a CEO, but, hey, that's how it goes. Occasionally, we wanted to do what dad did, even when we weren't really sure exactly what that was.

That was vision. You were looking ahead into the future. You generated a mental snapshot of a moment in time far ahead. You saw yourself doing what you wanted to be doing. That's vision. A vision is a target, a destination that beckons us on, that challenges us to achieve, that becomes a goal we strive for.

Now, honestly, I doubt many of you are firemen or policemen or even doing what dad did, today. That doesn't lessen the strength of vision as a powerful motivator in how we choose to live our lives or in the impact of what it can do.

Consider a few of the great visions of the past and think about the impact they've had on our world:

Caesar had a vision of a Holy Roman Empire. It drove him to conquer the known world.

Columbus had a vision of a new trade route to the Orient. And just look at the trouble that generated!

Many of our own ancestors had visions of a better life, often far, far away. Their vision built a nation.

Henry Ford had a vision of an affordable car. Of course, he only envisioned it in black, but it was still a mighty step forward.

Motorola had a vision of what was going to happen to the

consumer electronics business – and they got out of it.

John Kennedy had a vision of a man on the moon. Today, we shuttle back and forth in space on a scheduled basis.

The visions of single individuals or large groups have reshaped the world and continue to do so every day in both big and little ways.

Let me share a vision statement by a man you will know. I'm going to leave out his name and the company for a moment and see if you can match the man and his vision, and judge its impact on us today.

“The idea of this place will be a simple one. It will be a place for people to find happiness and knowledge. It will be a place for parents and children to spend pleasant times in one another's company,' a place for teachers and pupils to discover greater ways of understanding and education. Here the older generation can recapture the nostalgia of days gone by, and the younger generation can savor the challenge of the future. It will be based upon and dedicated to the ideals, the dreams and hard facts that have created America. And we will be uniquely equipped to dramatize these dreams and facts and send them forth as a source of courage and inspiration to all the world. This place will be filled with accomplishments, the joys and hopes of the world we live in. And it will remind us and show us how to make those wonders part of our own lives.”

Got it?

Of course you do. That was an animator with a cartoon mouse watching over his shoulder articulating his vision for Disneyland, Walt Disney. The power and success of his vision is validated every single day around the world. Think about that vision for a moment, remembering just what it is – a target that beckons the visionary, a mental snapshot of moment in the future. Walt Disney succeeded in hitting his target with an accuracy that is absolutely stunning. And he added this corollary: “Disneyland will never be completed, as long as there is imagination left in the world.”

How's that for a long-term vision?

Okay. You're saying to yourself, “But that's Walt Disney! He's supposed to be a dreamer. That's not for us!”

Wrong. Let's explore why this business of visions and snapshots and targets is important to every one of us.

For many business executives, vision is still a very abstract Concept – one they have difficulty grasping because it is so abstract. Let me

move it quickly from the abstract theory to bottom line concrete.

In 1995, Industry Week magazine declared a book called Built to Last as the number one business book for the year. Its authors, James Collins and Jerry Porras, examined 18 visionary corporations – corporations with clearly defined visions of their future. Disney was one of those companies. Others included 3M, Wal-Mart, Boeing and Sony.

Built to Last is out in an updated edition today and its still a compelling study of the power of vision in the workplace. As part of their study, the authors tried to correlate corporate vision and profitability.

Suppose you took one dollar, they said, and you invested it in a general market stock fund on January 1, 1926. And suppose you took another dollar and invested it in a comparison company stock fund. And suppose you took a third dollar and invested it in a visionary company.

If you left your investment alone – didn't touch a thing – until December 31, 1990, here's what would have happened:

Your one dollar in the general stock market would now be worth \$415. Not bad. Your one dollar investment in a comparison company stock fund would be a very nice \$955. But your one dollar invested in a visionary company would be worth – are you sitting down? – \$6,356!

Visionary companies are more than just successful. They are more than just enduring. They are an elite breed of institution that is more than successful and more than enduring. They are the best of the best in their industries.

They have done more than just generate long-term profitability. They have woven themselves into the very fabric of a consumer society. Try to imagine your day without, say, Scotch Tape, Post-It Notes, Ford cars, the Boeing 747, Ivory Soap and Tide detergent, American Express cards, Band-Aids, Hewlett-Packard laser printers, Motorola cell phones and, well, the list goes on. Each item is a part of a company that was built with vision as part of the foundation.

Let me go back to Walt Disney again for just a moment. Disney sums up one of the most important things these diverse but highly successful organizations all have in common: They have vision and it's grounded in reality. That takes it out of the realm of dreams, which are fantasy.

Visions become do-able when they are grounded in reality. Your objectives and goals become attainable.

There is something else inherent in the word “vision.” By its very definition, it means motion, a pattern of movement from one place to another, from one level to another.

The greatest enemy of vision is the status quo. If you are satisfied with where you are, you aren't dreaming about where you can be.

You've already reached your destination. That's the first step to failure and oblivion.

As markets change, established leaders are often those most blinded by their past successes. None of the companies that dominated the thriving ice-harvesting market in the nineteenth century converted to the refrigeration business, for example.

The giant retailer, Sears, almost didn't make it into this century because they didn't pay attention to changes in who was doing the shopping in America. “Come see the softer side of Sears” was their nearly last-minute answer and they sought to appeal to women shoppers. And, in the classic case of change in the 20th century, Detroit refused to listen to Edward Demming who was telling American automobile manufacturers that the American people wanted cars that would not only look good but run well, too. When the manufacturers failed to listen, Demming took his ideas to Japan and for the next decade the Japanese owned the American car market.

I have an intense dislike for status quo management. I dislike status quo management because I believe it is an excuse for incompetence. By sanctioning status quo management, we are sanctioning incompetence.

Of course, it's easy to do. We just walk away from the situation and shake our heads. Incompetence is inevitable, after all. It's “just the way things are.”

You can't let that happen. It can't be ?just the way things are.?

You can't be a visionary company – and you, personally, can't be a visionary leader – if you are surrounded by incompetence. Or if you are incompetent.

A visionary leader is dedicated to education and training. A visionary leader is dedicated to communications. A visionary leader confronts incompetence by selecting the right people, giving them the right training and keeping them informed.

A visionary leader is a leader who drives change. The drive for change is an almost compulsive thing. We drive for progress. We strive to improve. We can see beyond what we are to what we can become.

A few minutes ago, I mentioned Motorola. They live by the motto “Be in motion for motion’s sake.” That drive – that vision – moved them from a small company producing battery eliminators in the 1920s to building satellites that circle the globe.

Robert Galvin, the son of Motorola’s founder, described their drive for progress in a different way. He called it “renewal.”

Let me tell you a little about “renewal” and vision at Motorola.

Bob Galvin was named president of Motorola in 1956. A few years later, he tells the story of visiting a Motorola dealer and heard that dealer explain that the real power “was in the hands of the buyer.”

Galvin wrote that “When I heard him say that, all of the frustrations that we were seeing in the consumer appliance business clarified.” He resolved to get out of that business altogether. By 1974, Motorola radios and other consumer appliances were history. In their place were semi-conductors and the leading edge of the personal computer business.

Bob Galvin’s vision moved a 40-year-old manufacturing company into new ground. His vision created a new customer base and a new corporate culture and environment. It was – in his words – a total renewal of his company.

The status quo is unacceptable to a visionary leader.

Incidentally, there is an important point to remember. Not all visionaries are leaders. Some are just dreamers. The way to tell the difference is to look behind them. If no one is following them, you’re looking at a dreamer. If there are people behind them, that’s a leader.

Remember Billy and the line of ants?

Incidentally, before you start looking for that visionary leader in your organization, let me suggest strongly that visionary leaders are pretty hard to find. And if you also demand that they be competent, creative managers, I’m betting you don’t have one on your team.

But – and here is the heart of it all – you probably do have good, solid managers. And you probably do have some visionary dreamers. And you may even have a few real leaders.

By putting them together, you can create teams that possess all the skills to move toward your vision. By doing the things each does best as a member of a team, we create visionary leadership that is

grounded in reality. We move beyond the status quo and we shape the future. It takes real vision to do that.

Of course, if you and your organization are content to be the second or third or fortieth or three hundredth ant, well, you don't need to do any of this. Just follow along and see where the other guy's vision takes you.

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