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I've Got Vision and

THE REST OF THE WORLD WEARS BLINDERS....

Jim Evans

Vision is a fuzzy sort of word, imprecise and with a slightly checkered past. People, frankly, get a little nervous around it. I get a little nervous around it.

Vision probably first entered your vocabulary even before you could read. The characters in fairy tales were always having visions. Cartoon characters had visions. People and things that were very strange and not at all like you and me had visions.

And now that we're older, characters on television shows like the X-Files are always having visions. Characters in films about witches and such have visions. And again, people and things that are very strange and not at all like us have visions. So we're entitled to be a little nervous around the word when we use it today in a very real, very down-to-earth business environment. And you're also entitled to ask just why we're bringing the word up at all.

What does vision have to do with the hard, practical work of the moment?

Vision is a much misunderstood and overused word. As I said a moment ago, it is imprecise. And it 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 it.

It hasn't been that long ago that the elected leader of one of the world's great nations dismissed it in public interviews as "the vision thing." He knew he needed the "vision thing" and that others would recognize that fact but a more concrete definition eluded him. In the end, perhaps it was a lack of the "vision thing" that brought a long and dignified career to a close.

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 are 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. And I want to talk today about leaders and vision and the vital role vision is playing in the race for a dominant place in the global economy—but I can’t do that if we can’t be more precise in our definition of the “vision thing.”

Let’s go back to the hilltop of your childhood for just 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. Sometimes, 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 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 read you a vision statement by a man you will know. I'm going to leave out the name of the man 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. We 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 are 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 bottomline 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 institutions that are 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. Incidentally, authors Collins and Porras include the Marriott organization in their list of 18 visionary companies. That shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone in the hospitality industry.

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 doable 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.

I have an intense dislike for status quo management. If you've been reading the hospitality industry trade magazines during the last two years, you already know how I feel about it. We're changing the status quo at Best Western. I invite you to come stay with us and take a good look for yourself. Pardon the brief commercial message from my sponsor!

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 to circle the globe.

Robert Galvin, the son of Motorola's founder, describes their drive for progress in a different way. He calls it "renewal."

"Renewal is the driving thrust of this company," he says. "Only those incultured with an elusive idea of renewal, which obliges new, creative ideas and an unstinting dedication to committing to the risk and promise of those ideas, will thrive."

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 explains 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. And I believe that any challenges they are facing today will be addressed with the same visionary thinking.

Simply put, 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, I believe, is to look behind them. If you don't see anyone following them, you're looking at a dreamer. If there are people behind them, that's a leader.

Now, before you start looking for that visionary leader in your organization, let me suggest strongly to you that visionary leaders are pretty hard to find. And if you also demand that they be competent, creative managers, well...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, we create teams that possess all the skills to move toward our vision. By doing the things each of us 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.

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