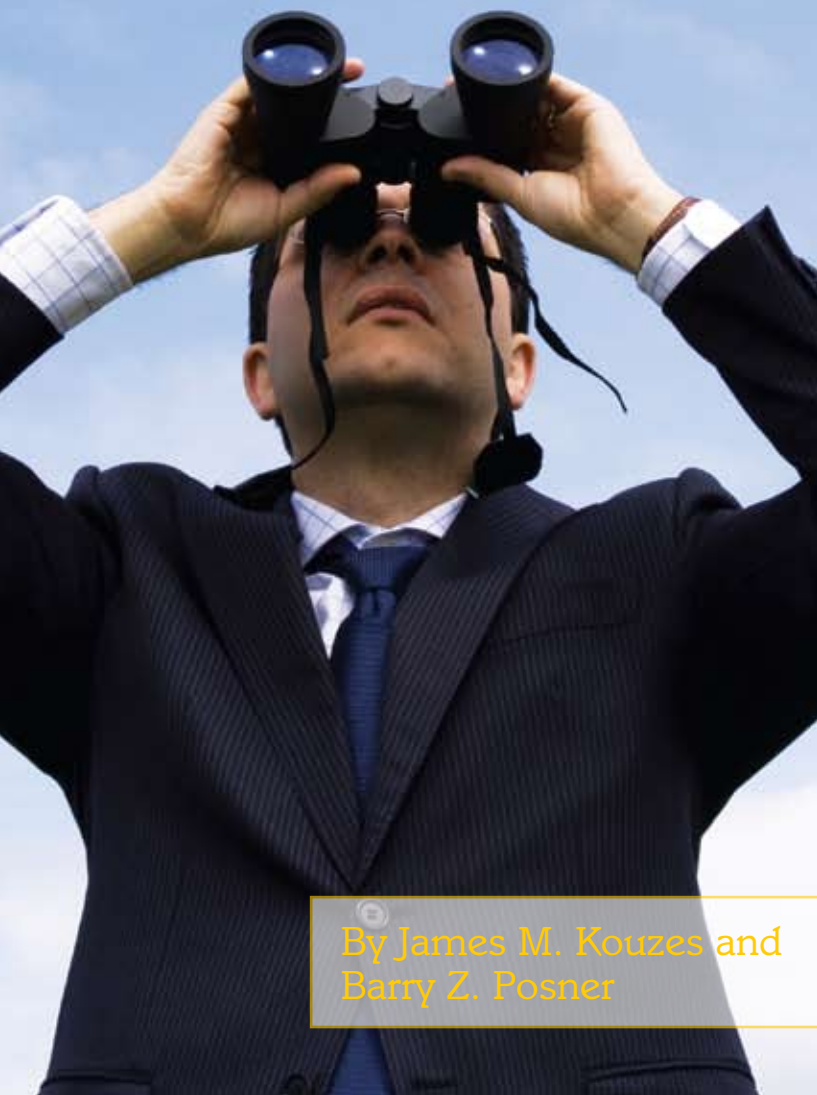


It's Not
Just the

Leader's Vision



By James M. Kouzes and
Barry Z. Posner

At some point during all this talk over the years about the importance of being future-oriented, leaders got the sense that they were the ones that had to be the visionaries. Often with the encouragement of a lot of leadership developers, including us, leaders came to assume that if others expected them to be forward-looking, then they had to go off all alone into the wilderness, climb to the top of some mountain, sit in the lotus position, wait for a revelation, and then go out and announce to the world what they foresee. Leaders have assumed that it's their vision that matters, and if it's their vision then *they* have to create it.

Wrong! This is *not* what constituents expect. Yes, leaders are expected to be forward-looking, but they aren't expected to be prescient or clairvoyant. Exemplary leadership is not about uttering divinely inspired revelations. It's not about being a prophet.

What people really want to hear is not the leader's vision. They want to hear about *their own* aspirations. They want to hear how their dreams will come true and their hopes will be fulfilled. They want to see themselves in the picture of the future. The very best leaders understand that their key task is inspiring a *shared* vision, not selling their own idiosyncratic view of the world. Buddy Blanton, a principal program manager at Rockwell Collins Display Systems, learned this lesson firsthand. He got his team together one morning to give him feedback on his leadership practices. He specifically wanted to learn how he could be more effective in creating a shared vision. What they told him helped him understand that it's the process and not just the vision that's critical in getting people all on the same page.

One of the team members that I most respect spoke first. She is very good at telling it like it is, but in a constructive manner. She provided me the following feedback: "You have all of the right skills," she said. "You have global vision and understanding. You are a good, sincere listener. You are optimistic, and you command the respect and trust of your team and your colleagues. You are open and candid, and you are never shy about saying what needs to be said to team members." Then she gave me this advice, "You would benefit by helping us, as a team, to understand how you got to your vision. We want to walk with you while you create the goals and vision so we all get to the end vision together."

Another team member said that sharing this road map would help him to feel more able to take the initiative to resolve issues independently. A couple of other team members stated that this communication would help them to understand the realism of the goals. Other team members said that they would like to be a part of the vision-building process so they could learn how to better build visions for their team.



Jim Kouzes was a keynote speaker at APPA 2008: The Rise to Greatness

I looked at the group. It was clear that they were in agreement that they wanted to be a part of the vision sharing and development process. We launched into a discussion on our vision for the program, and each person contributed to the discussion. I asked them if it would be useful if we got together every two weeks to discuss and build our program vision, similar to what we did that day. The feedback was a resounding Yes.

The vast majority of us are just like Buddy's team members. We want to walk *with* our leaders. We want to dream *with* them. We want to invent *with* them. We want to be involved in creating *our* own futures. This doesn't mean you have to do exactly what Buddy did, but it does mean that you have to stop taking the view that vision comes from the top down. You have to stop seeing it as a monologue, and you have to start engaging others in a collective dialogue about the future.

YOU HAVE TO SEE WHAT OTHERS SEE

To be able to describe a compelling image of the future, you have to be able to grasp what *others* want and need. To appeal to others and to show them how their interests will be served, you have to know their hopes, dreams, motives, and interests.

That means you have to know your constituents, and you have to speak to them in language they will find engaging. If you're trying to mobilize people to move in a particular direction, then you've got to talk about that future destination in ways that your audience will find appealing.

The kind of communication needed to enlist others in a common vision requires understanding constituents at a much deeper level than we normally find comfortable. It requires understanding others' strongest yearnings and their deepest fears. It requires a profound awareness of their joys and their sorrows. It requires intimacy, familiarity, and empathy. It requires experiencing life as they experience it.

Being able to do this is not magic, nor is it rocket science. It really just calls for listening very, very closely to what other people want.

Now at this point you may be saying to yourself, "All well and good, but what about breakthrough innovations. Aren't leaders supposed to focus on the next new thing? Nobody ever said they wanted an airplane or telephone or personal computer!" True, but people did say they wanted to travel faster to more distant places, connect more easily with their friends and family, and work more productively.

We'd submit that these innovations were not and are not the result of hermits who come up with ideas in isolation. They are, in fact, the result of superb and attentive listening. They are the result of being closely attuned to the environment. They are the result of a greater appreciation of people's aspirations.

What breakthrough innovators and exemplary leaders understand is that *all* of us want a tomorrow that is better than today. We don't necessarily all want exactly the same thing, but whatever we want, we want it to be an improvement. The critical skill is in discovering just what "new and improved" means to others.

If you're going to stir the souls of your constituents, if you are going to lift them to a higher level of performance, then here's what you need to know: It's not the leader's vision, it's the people's vision that matters most. ☺

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