

“The magic is inside you. There ain’t no crystal ball.”

Dolly Parton

As we’ve said countless time, leadership is different things to different people in many different ways and at different times. But there is one single quality that consistently differentiates high-potential leaders in an organization...

it’s their ‘crystal ball’ thinking - their ability to be forward-looking and to ‘see’ , envision and focus on the future.

After researching thousands of people on ideal leadership qualities, two of my favorite leadership gurus - Barry Posner and Jim Kouzes - found that the ability to look forward is second only to honesty as the most admired leadership trait.

According to Posner and Kouzes, on average, 70 percent of workers worldwide select “forward-looking” as a key leadership competency. So, think about the leaders you have or do follow and admire – chances are the really great ones are visionaries who serve as guides into the future.

Kouzes and Posner also tell us that as we age, gain more experience, and move up the organizational hierarchy, our desire for a forward-looking leader increases exponentially. While only about one-third of undergraduate college students ranked “forward-looking” among their most important leadership attributes, more than 90 percent of senior executives had added it to their lists.

The challenge of being a forward-looking visionary escalates with each managerial level. Front-line supervisors are expected to anticipate events about three months ahead. Mid-level managers have timelines for more complex projects and need to look three to five years into the future. Those in the executive suite must focus on goals that are often 10+ years away.

But just knowing the importance of being forward-looking is often not enough incentive to make future planning a major priority. Top executives spend only about 3 percent of their time thinking about and getting others on board with the critical issues that will shape their business 10 or more years down the road.

So how do we get ourselves into our ‘crystal ball’ space to carve out time each week to peer into the distance and imagine our future?

Put you on your calendar

Make an appointment with yourself each week – every day if you can – just to THINK. And make this appointment as important as a meeting with your most critical client – it is. Even if

it's just 10 minutes, spending this time with YOU on a regular basis will be enough for you to start developing a good **habit of thought** of looking into the future. Use this time to Think and Learn about what's going on in your industry; with current or potential customers; with the future of your products and services; with the development of your people and the sustainability of your organization. Get online or actually sit down and turn the pages ... read a magazine, book or newspaper article!

Sparking the light in the crystal ball...

So much of the time, we are caught in the vortex of getting IT DONE NOW... so much so that we get so hunkered down on tactics, accomplishing the day-to-day tasks and making the most pragmatic decisions, that we don't realize how this is grinding us down - everyone down - to a point where the big picture fades or gets lost altogether. To be truly effective leaders, we must remember that we can only make a real difference by focusing on the future and helping people see their role in building that future.

People always need to be reminded of *why* they are doing what they do — and *why it matters*. This is way more than just cheer leading and encouraging high-performance; it's about really connecting with people to be sure they are living the goal and the accomplishment *why it matters*.

Build YOUR Crystal Ball

OK – so start 'seeing' **it** – inside, outside and into the future! Expand your **vision**; hone your **leadership** skills; turn up the heat on your positive **impact**. In *The Truth About Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 2010), Posner and Kouzes urge leaders to spend time 'in' the future through:

1. Insight
2. Outsight
3. Foresight

Insight: Explore Your Past

Think about where you have been and connect your past experiences and values with your current work and vision. Look for repeating themes in your life — the recurring messages that become life lessons. Here are some questions to explore:

- What are the recurring themes in your life?
- To which activity and/or topic do you return again and again?
- What story do you tell and retell?

Search your past to reveal the theme. It will probably form the basis of your core values and higher purpose. When you know more about yourself, your dreams and your purpose, it will be easier to keep this information in mind each time you visualize the future.

Outsight: Imagine the Possibilities

Spend more time reading, thinking and talking about long-term possibilities. Develop the discipline to spend more time studying and shaping the future.

Establish a “future committee” dedicated to collecting ideas, articles, information and resources about trends affecting your organization. Track publications, both off- and online. Circulate these ideas to stimulate discussions and innovative thinking.

Improve your understanding of the world around you, not just in your industry. A game-changing product in an unrelated field could impact your customers and their need for your services.

Foresight: Survival of the Optimists

As we all know, there is a dramatic difference in performance between people who react to roadblocks with a sense of futility and pessimism and those who react with determination and optimism.

Those of us who are optimistic about life and work are far more likely to be successful than those who view a current event through the pessimist’s lens. Being optimistic does not mean being ‘Pollyannaish” or ignoring reality or the hardships required to get great results... it’s about defining a business reality, yet defying a negative verdict. By being optimists, we give people the hope, energy, strength and celebration needed to carry on.

Time to dust off your crystal ball and let the light in to illuminate your future!