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Professional Leadership Results, Inc.

Helping you align your people with your vision



Pick a Port and Chart the Course:

Yes! You Need a Vision

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

My dad, a retired Air Force Lt. Colonel, loves to tell me about how a significant percentage of words we have for describing most anything derive from nautical terminology. He's read every word Patrick O'Brian wrote (think: *Master and Commander*) and one of his favorite books is *When a Loose Canon Flogs the Dead Horse There's the Devil to Pay: Seafaring Words in Everyday Speech*. He could've easily chosen a career on the water as in the skies. Sometimes he muses of being a tugboat captain.

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He learned to sail on Long Island Sound where his grandfather would come from Iowa and gather up coal washed up on the shores from

the barges to take back to the house where his son and grandsons lived. When I was 7, and he was home from Vietnam, he taught me to sail, too, on Lake Champlain in upstate New York. He reminded me to watch the tattle-tails flapping against the sails to determine wind direction and to pick precisely one spot on the horizon and aim for it. Sometimes, a very subtle correction in the tiller moved us closer to our destination, sometimes we had to *come about* or change our tack, in order to adjust to the environment. We still ultimately pointed the bow in the direction we wanted to go.

I'm sure I don't need to drag this metaphor out and make you crazy with your responsibilities as ship's captains. I'm sure I don't need to remind you that as everyone boards the boat that is your company, organization, or team, they're all looking at you to tell them where the destination is. They think you know. They believe you are supposed to tell them. And if they've showed up with their duffle bags full of talents and tools specific to their roles and responsibilities, in the beginning especially, they can't wait to hear what adventures you have in store for them. They want you to wax on about the exciting ports of call and destinations to be determined. You need to tell them, and don't assume, since they got on the boat with you in the first place, they know where you're going. And don't waste your time thinking that they *should* know—sometimes they don't because they cannot read your mind and it's your job to pick the port and chart the course.

Ultimately, in an organization, everything that happens should align with the vision. Every act and decision should lead to the ultimate goal, whatever is set by the leaders of the organization. And, if you're a for-profit company or corporation, don't make the mistake of thinking that the vision is entirely related to profits—it's not. People do not get excited, get committed, and remain loyal simply for profits of an organization—they get excited when they believe their work and contributions are valued, rewarded and important. By clearly defining your vision and helping your employees know their place in it, you're more likely to meet the destination you desire.

Here are some tips for thinking about visioning work:

1. Pick a Port: Create a Really Clear Picture

This answers the 'what?' question: Your vision or strategy is the framework within which the organization exists. It is the *ideal*—it is the dream of success as you define it. It's important to articulate this not only because you want everyone and every action aligned with it, but also because you want everyone to know what is *not* part of it. Ask yourself these questions: *what would it look like if we were really successful? How will we know we've met the mission of our organization in terms of finances, people and operations?* Here's one to really get you thinking: *if I were to leave my organization and set up a highly competitive organization down the street, what would that look like?*

2. Chart the Course: Map out How You Will Reach Your Destination

This answers the 'how?' question: Assess your current state—where you are now—and your desired state—your vision & strategy—in order to identify the gap between the two. How will you reach your destination? What environmental concerns might affect your journey, i.e. the market, trends, regulations, current resources & people, etc.? Make decisions based upon priorities aligned with your vision and organizational values that will get you to your destination in the way you want.

3. Set Sail: Implement Your Journey

This answers the 'what first?' question: Once you have a clear vision and you've created a plan for how you will reach it, you need to get moving! No one reached the New World by continuously re-vamping committees and reorganizing Balanced Scorecards at the dock. Eventually, you need to set the rigging, let loose the lines and raise the sails. You can't feel the wind in your hair or the sun on your face until you point the boat out of the harbor and toward the horizon. And you'll get there faster, safer, with better use of your resources, if you've communicated with the crew to watch those tattle tails, respond to the changing winds, and keep the bow pointed where you want it to go.

My dad is also famous for recognizing a journey well spent—even to this day, when we arrive back at the dock and the boat is safely in the slip, or when he used to borrow a little Cessna from a friend and fly it up the middle of California to the house where my mother and he lived, he'd touch down, turn off the engines, and say in his best pirate voice, "Ah-ha! We've cheated death again, mates!" My mother rolls her eyes, but my sister and I still giggle about this. It's difficult for me to even fathom (see, there's another one!) navigation on sea or sky—there seems to be so much room for error and mistake. There are no roads or paths already taken. My dad can navigate by the stars and knows how to use a sextant, compass and all that other paraphernalia at the "nav table" on his boat.

One Last Thing: remember that any journey you begin as a leader should ultimately begin with you. Setting your own, personal vision will set the model and tone for everyone else. You need to do your own visioning, your own clarifying of what the ultimate is for you. It's so simple, but we often overlook it—what's your ideal life look like? how might you design your ultimate day, week, or career path? You need to chart your own course and set sail so that as you ease yourself into the slip at the end of the long haul, you can muster up your own pirate voice to celebrate with your mates. ❖

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