

Inspirational Leadership and the role of a vision¹

By Thomas Walenta, PMP, PMI Fellow

In October 2008 I was happy enough to attend the PMI Symposium in Denver and listen to its keynote speaker Colin Powell. He conveyed several messages about leadership and one stuck with me in particular because it shows very well the difference between a leader and a manager, a team vision and project objectives. He also told the audience that he considers himself to be a project manager and did projects in all his professional life as a military leader, when he was initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and closing, as well as building teams.

Inspiration

Colin Powell explained to the audience that is is not enough to motivate the team members, you have to inspire them. When they are inspired, they try – together with you as the leader – to make the vision come true. They want to reach it for themselves, not just do what they are told to do. They see challenges and find ways to overcome them. They do not ask the leader what to do next; they suggest next steps, options for problems and support each other. Inspiration means powerful influence on intellect and emotions of people and could refer to religious influence by prophets or preachers but also to artistic creativity.

As Colin Powell stated, motivation is a weaker form of influencing, by giving an incentive or a reason for doing something. Incentives work well as a leadership tool, but only for a short time and they also might be perceived as unbalanced with the service expected.

Decision making

In some projects, there will be situations where the path to success is not easy to see, benefits and risks have to be judged and balanced, and here is where the leader still is required to support by making decisions. In some cultures, decisions are made by the leader while in other cultures the leader just looks at proposals made by the team and challenges them. Decision making by the leader takes away some burden and responsibility from the team and will result in a faster progress.

This style of decision making is often seen in the western world and it is considered a best practice. Usually it works if the culture accepts explicit directions.

On the other hand, although with a longer decision making process, if the team has to come up with one opinion, decisions will be more sustainable, stable and implementation will be quicker.

¹ Versions of this article were previously published by the PMI Pune India Chapter in 2011 and the PMI Moscow Russia Chapter in 2014 in their respective chapter newsletters

Visions without a Leader

Think about the 'Arab Spring' events 2010 to 2012 in Northern Africa, supported by team communications through Twitter and Texting, thousands and millions of people managed to bring forward a quick change to their country, sharing a vision of freedom of choice (e.g. related to elections, occupation, family) and without suppression. These projects were started without a sponsor and implemented without a leader creating and maintaining a vision. In Egypt, some candidates for leadership even refused to take that role and responsibility, in Libya there were several spokespersons and focal points, but none of them drove the project, they were supporting followers of the vision. It was just enough to share a strong vision, which was relevant to the lives of many.

Other examples for visions without a Leader are catastrophes – they create a strong and relevant vision for the affected people. Often it is observed that people are helping each other more than in normal circumstances, everyone finds a meaningful role by themselves, and priorities are quite clear to everyone. In these examples, there is less leadership, but there is a vision.

Leaders without a vision

Some say, a vision is not needed for a leader in every case. Well, maybe without an explicit vision, there is a joint feeling in the team, not described and formulated but felt by everybody. From that, is it the case that leadership (and sponsorship) is required when a vision is not so obvious for the team and automatically accepted by all? Warfare, business projects and even social projects follow ideas of sponsors which for some reason are capable to not only create a vision but also convey it. Not always, these visions directly support the personal goals and capabilities of the team members. Then, leadership is absolutely required to formulate, communicate and maintain a vision and convince the team members that they follow it again and again. This should inspire the team and keep them onboard for the full course of the project, otherwise much effort is needed to permanently keep the team on track, by shorttime motivation, forcing or threatening. Inspiration in this context means: Infuse an idea and make it the wish of each member to follow it.

Visions and Value Systems

A worrying fact is that this works for 'good causes' and for 'bad causes'. What is perceived good and bad depends on the cultural context, which is based on shared values, built and accepted over mostly long periods of time. Crusades were considered a good cause by the crusaders but certainly as a threat by the Arabs. Business projects are seen as a good cause if they support a good strategic plan of the business organization, although competition might think otherwise.

Values and Cultures

Value systems of countries, ethnic groups, families, companies are differing. While there are some shared human values (are UN human rights a shared value everywhere?), depending on history and generational memory, specific group values

exist and are long-term frameworks for living and working. Hofstede(*) has analyzed cultural differences between national groups. These cultural differences help to grasp the differences in value systems across countries.

A vision is sharable if it does not contradict with the value systems of the team members. It works best if it is aligned with the values and resonates with the feelings and beliefs of the team.

What does it need to be a good leader?

PMI's PMBOK Guide Fifth Edition lists 11 social competencies for a project manager: leadership, team building, motivation, communication, influencing, decision making, political and cultural awareness, negotiation, trust building, conflict management and coaching. Leadership is described as the ability to get things done thru others which could be seen as one person, the leader wants something being done and he is capable to make others do it. This means the leader has power and is using it. The vision can be the main vehicle to make others do something.

What makes a good vision?

Is it clearly stating tangible and measurable goals? Is it unambiguous? Is it objective? Maybe not! Good visions may include a compelling story about the future to achieve, capturing the emotions. This might be achieved by storytelling. An image of the future, easy to remember and to envision should be build. Key terms help – like in branding of a company or product. For a business project, the vision should be achievable and not too far stretched. For other purposes, a vision could be something that can only be reached in generations or even never, but if it is strong enough, it could drive people to work to achieve steps towards it (like making the world a better place for children, find a cure for cancer).

President Kennedy's vision was shortly bringing a man to the moon and back to earth within the decade of the 60s. It is regarded as an excellent vision, nobody knew how to do it in the beginning but the vision was made a reality within that period (some are questioning that, but this is another story). Any team member in government, at NASA and in the whole country was inspired.

Consider a business vision of being the most profitable company in an industry within the next 5 years. How does company profit resonate with the personal values and targets of the employees? Yes, profit for the company means safer jobs in general, higher reputation and more dividends for stock holders. On the other hand, it means cost cuts, more selectivity and job losses for the not- so-productive. To inspire employees to follow that vision is a hard sell.

On the other hand, a business vision of becoming the most green company in the next 5 years might resonate better, because corporate social responsibility, environmental awareness are closely covered by current value systems of developed countries now and also directly relate to the lives of everyone and their families.

Steps to create a vision

So, do you want to become a good leader using visions? What should you do?

Understand the cultural context and values.

Understand the specific project goals, and their context like a strategic plan.

From that, create a vision statement and image that resonate with the values to be a good cause.

Test it.

- Launch the vision. Consider launching a new product or a rocket. This is not just accomplished by sending an email or making an all-hands call.
- Use a feedback loop to control and fine-tune the effect of the vision on the team members – all over the project lifetime

Conclusion

Leadership needs many skills; one of the most important is to influence people. The power of a vision may help a leader to achieve that influence and inspire the team. Within a functioning team there is always a joint understanding and feeling, so a vision exists, is it explicitly created by the leader or implicitly developed thru the circumstances like during crises. Building and sharing and maintaining vision with a team is inspiration. Look for examples for visions that worked. Visions have to align and resonate with the value system, which is the long-term description of why people are doing something.

So be aware of the value system and proactively work on the vision for your project and you will harvest what you have sown.

(*) Ref. Geert Hofstede, <http://www.geerthofstede.nl>

About the Author



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Thomas Walenta, PMP, PMI Fellow, was working as Project and Program Manager for IBM from 1983-2014. Most recently he was responsible for a program encompassing all business of IBM with a global client in the EMEA region, with teams in India, Japan and across Europe. He led the PMI Frankfurt Chapter from 1998 to 2005, increasing membership from 111 to 750 and annual budget to 100K Euro.

Thomas had a variety of volunteer positions for PMI, among them being final juror of the PMI Project of the Year award, member of the PMI Board nomination committee, auditor for PMI's Registered Education Provider Program, writer/reviewer of PMP Exam questions and significant contributor to PMI's first standards about Program Management and Portfolio Management.

In 2005, he was elected by PMI membership to serve a 3 year term on the PMI Board from 2006 to 2008. Being a speaker on global project management events in Tokyo, Moscow, São Paulo and across Europe, Thomas extended his professional network significantly and is regarded as an experienced and skillful advisor and mentor.

Thomas is serving as a member of PMI's Ethics Review Committee since 2011. He can be contacted via email at thwalenta@online.de.