

1 Creating the Vision

Setting Expansive Goals

Our country is a special place, because we Americans have always been sustained, through good times and bad, by a noble vision—a vision not only of what the world around us is today but what we as a free people can make it be tomorrow.

—Ronald Reagan^{*}

^{*} *Source:* Address before a joint session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 25, 1983.

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When Ronald Reagan was sworn in as president of the United States in January 1981, there was widespread malaise domestically. The nation suffered from high inflation, scarce jobs, and low morale. Yet Ronald Reagan immediately took office and began to talk about a new dawn, morning in America, better days ahead, and the proverbial shining city on a hill.

In reality, the country was no different on Ronald Reagan's inauguration day than it had been the day prior. Yet President Reagan proposed a new, ambitious vision, and so America's perception of its own future was entirely, and immediately, different. The images of reclaimed greatness he envisioned for the country made others believe that restoration was possible, not only for the future, but that change was already taking place. America wanted desperately to believe in itself again and in the promise of its future. Through words initially, then subsequently backed up by policy and action, Ronald Reagan made that vision for America a reality.

He was a man of vision and knew how to articulate that vision in compelling, inspiring ways. Ronald Reagan, known as the "Great Communicator," was once quoted as saying, "Most often it's not how handsomely or eloquently you say something, but the fact that your words mean something." He knew that selecting the right words was important, but backing up words with actions was essential. He was successful because he created a vision, articulated the role everyone would play in it, and showed how they would benefit from being part of it.

When the nation faced challenges, Ronald Reagan always refocused on the bigger picture and kept working toward the overall goals and vision. His themes and messages were consistent and clear. Rather than trying to tackle a dozen problems, he focused primarily on two: revitalizing the economy and bringing an end to Communism. He tied those themes into everything he did and everything he talked about, and he kept America focused on those goals, articulating how they fit into his overall vision. As he did, he reminded us of the greatness of which we were all a part, and subsequently, he moved our nation and our world forward, both economically and through the expansion of freedom, realizing both primary goals he had envisioned.

Ronald Reagan motivated the American people to embrace and support his vision for America by inspiring them to share in his desire for renewed pride, patriotism, and prosperity. He connected each one of us to something bigger than ourselves and cultivated a drive and desire to sacrifice as needed and serve and support whenever asked. That created devotion, loyalty, and commitment to an inspired, shared vision.

Ronald Reagan's life and legacy personified vision, both in individual relationships and on the national and world stage. Clarity, consistency, and a contagious optimism filled his words and were validated and reinforced by his actions, both on and off camera.

Painting the Target

The American dream lives—not only in the hearts and minds of our own countrymen but in the hearts and minds of millions of the world's people in both free and oppressed societies who

look to us for leadership. As long as that dream lives, as long as we continue to defend it, America has a future, and all mankind has reason to hope.

—Ronald Reagan *

I had the privilege and opportunity of a lifetime to work for one of the greatest leaders of our era: Ronald Reagan. Not only was it a personal honor, but it built a foundation for the rest of my life, which gave me a vision of what real leadership looks like—what it should look like and how it is lived out in both large and small ways.

Even when I was a young person, my life was affected deeply by the expansive and inspiring vision of Ronald Reagan. While I was growing up, my parents watched the evening news every night as well as shows that regularly discussed the important issues facing America. I remember being fascinated by the debates and arguments of two unique political viewpoints.

The more I listened, the more I began to analyze not only the message itself but the messengers as well. Some messengers were able to articulate what they believed more succinctly than others. Some were skilled orators, and others would lose arguments I thought they could easily have won. Then in 1980, listening to these differing messages, I was introduced to a man who was running for president of the United States. He looked professional. He looked presidential. He talked to me—not above me or below me—but directly to me, and I hung on his every word.

* *Source:* Remarks at the Annual Washington Conference of the American Legion, February 22, 1983.

His genuine love for God and country was evident. To me, a new hero was born, a lifelong, substantive hero who represented hope and embodied all that is good about America and the future. The sports stars and superheroes of my childhood were being replaced by a political icon and new personal hero: Ronald Reagan.

I was intrigued by Ronald Reagan and felt invited, included, and needed—as if I were a critical part of his vision for restoring America’s greatness. Ronald Reagan’s vision was not one just for his benefit; it was for America and the American people—all Americans, even me!

He demonstrated that real visionary leadership is inclusive, not exclusive. Visionary leaders look to build coalitions and connectivity, not isolate themselves from others. Even though at this point in my life I had not yet met Ronald Reagan, I already felt connected to him and to the vision he was articulating. I wanted to be part of it. I believed in it and was willing to become an active participant in promoting the ideas and solutions for America that he was proposing.

I have also had the opportunity to learn from some of the top business leaders in the country, and they have shown me firsthand how effective leaders with vision, those who honestly desire to lead a cohesive, enthusiastic team, can be. Although there are a select few who may achieve success through a condescending leadership style in a punitive culture of fear and directives, the most revered and beloved leaders are usually remembered not only for what they accomplished but also for who they were and how they made those around them feel.

Fortunately, for those of us in the business arena, success in creating an inspiring, compelling vision and a positive corporate

culture for a company is not necessarily tied to the product or limited by the actual job itself. Employees of Zappos.com, Chick-fil-A, and In-N-Out Burger can't wait to get to work thanks to the positive corporate culture that exists in those companies. Yet the work itself is fulfilling online orders, making chicken sandwiches, and flipping burgers—jobs we wouldn't typically associate with great personal satisfaction. The employees' enthusiasm is the result of a great, compelling vision and inspiring leadership at the corporate level. People want to be part of something bigger than themselves—and these companies, and countless others, have captured that desire and fueled their success upon it.

Although the application and implementation will be different for each and every company, the goal is the same: To paint a target of success for your company, and even your family, and set your sights on that goal without distraction or diversion.

One good allegory about painting a target for your vision is the story of a world-class Olympic archer. He had multiple Olympic and World Championships and was almost without competition or equal. Like any great champion, he desperately wanted to be challenged, needed to be challenged, and yet rarely was.

One day driving through the countryside, he comes over a hill and sees a barn littered with hundreds of arrows dead set in the center of hundreds of targets. Instead of feeling threatened, he is thrilled and thinks to himself, "Have I finally met someone who can teach me something and provide me with a real challenge?"

He pulls the car off the road and up the driveway to the farmhouse. He knocks on the door, and the farmer answers. He asks, "Is this your barn?"

“Yes it is,” the farmer replies.

“Do you shoot?” asks the archer.

“Yes I do. It’s a passion of mine,” the farmer replies.

“Then I must have the opportunity to shoot with you,” the archer enthusiastically responds.

The farmer says, “I would love it—I never get any visitors out here.”

They go out to the barn and set up their equipment nearby. The farmer goes first: He pulls back his bow, fires randomly at the barn, then goes and grabs a can of red paint and starts painting a target perfectly around the arrow right where it haphazardly landed!

The true archer watches, deflated in disbelief, knowing that real accomplishment in archery comes only from painting a challenging target first and then carefully taking aim to test your skill. This may be just a story, but unfortunately, many people are just like that farmer and will look at where they started, compare it to where they wound up, and then proclaim that the latter is precisely where they intended to go.

Honestly ask yourself, “Am I randomly shooting with my family? With my personal life? With my professional life? With my business and with other pursuits? Or am I truly painting a target first?”

Without first articulating a clear and inspiring vision, the work becomes just a tedious set of tasks. As a leader, within your company, or within your family, you have to have a reason to get out of bed in the morning and go to the office or go about your day—and so do those around you. Without a clear vision, what are others around you thinking about? For example, on a typical

day in a typical workplace, let's say it's 9:30 AM and, likely, people are already thinking about lunch. After lunch, they are thinking about 5:00, and after work, they are thinking about how quickly Friday can come. With clear and motivating vision, those around you are much more likely to stay on task, be committed to results, and pour in their best effort and personal creativity as well—all day and all week long. Someone has to paint the vision first; without it you may survive, but you will never really thrive.

So since we know that people are naturally distracted, here is your opportunity to lead. What is your five-day plan, five-month plan, five-year plan? As a leader, you need to paint the target for which everyone aims and shoots—both individually and collectively as a team.

With my first company, Red, White & Blue Vending, we started with just two machines and quickly built it into a company valued in the millions. We went through 5 five-year plans in five years! It wasn't that we weren't setting ambitious enough goals; it was a result of the unexpected synergy that occurred by having a motivated, dedicated group of employees. Those employees created exponentially more together than they ever could have individually. What a wonderful surprise to experience the power of vision and teamwork, which I had witnessed firsthand from President Reagan and his outstanding staff, and apply it with success in my very first solo business venture!

As a direct result of hard work and commitment to the vision, the team not only achieved each goal, but surpassed them—time and time again! And we were selling candy bars, chips, and sodas. Yet we were all on the same track, moving forward in the same direction. And as a result, we were able to accomplish great things together, regardless of the product line or industry.

When we hit each milestone, gifts were given, parties were thrown, and those who had been instrumental in the achievement of those goals were recognized and rewarded. And at that very celebration, a new vision and new plan were outlined and each person's unique and valuable role in it was defined. Their reward was named, and they were clearly and immediately shown how the vision was both beneficial for them personally and attainable as a team.

This was no different from what Ronald Reagan did time and time again with the American people, which is why I have spent my entire adult life trying to emulate him—to create a compelling vision for myself and those around me, just as Ronald Reagan did for himself, for the American people and the entire world.

Vision in Action

At the root of everything that we're trying to accomplish is the belief that America has a mission. We are a nation of freedom, living under God, believing all citizens must have the opportunity to grow, create wealth, and build a better life for those who follow. If we live up to those moral values, we can keep the American dream alive for our children and our grandchildren, and America will remain mankind's best hope.

—Ronald Reagan *

So what is *your* vision? Whether you are leading your family or leading a company or organization, you are being watched.

* *Source:* Remarks at a White House ceremony celebrating Hispanic Heritage Week, September 15, 1982.

Others want to know what your vision for the future is—because it affects them. If you asked those who you are closest to you what your vision is, would they be able to articulate it? Those around you are listening for the way in which you articulate vision, analyzing whether they think you can fulfill it, and deciding what role they could or should play in it. They are gauging your level of passion or enthusiasm, and based on that, they will determine the level of energy or effort they want to exert in helping fulfill it.

If your leadership history is full of successes, others will be more eager and willing to follow with enthusiasm. Your family, your coworkers, or anyone you lead will rarely be more enthusiastic or more committed to your vision than you are. So create an ambitious and expansive vision, and be ready to promote and advance your ideas with sustained energy, passion, and excitement.

If you are known for having lots of great ideas but not much follow-through, it will be much more challenging to motivate and inspire those around you—but not impossible. It may take a series of small successes to create trust and prove you are capable of maintaining a positive track record. Others will notice your effort, see your consistent achievement, and eventually want to be part of it. It will be contagious if it is sincere—and if the plan of implementation is thorough enough and motivating enough.

Without vision, you drift at the mercies of a constantly changing environment, pursuing day-to-day business with nothing more than a repeated series of activities. Your work becomes like walking on a treadmill, which requires a great expenditure of energy, yet results in absolutely no actual forward progress.

Your vision is what, where, and how you see yourself, your team, or your company in the near, middle, and distant future. It has purpose and structure—a plan and a timeline. It is the main force of motivation. It is what you focus on and rely on when times get tough.

A leader with vision sees the present realistically, as it is, while mapping out a stronger and better future. When written down, communicated constantly and consistently, and shared passionately, a vision unifies a group of people and drives them collectively and effectively toward a common goal. When building a vision, anything is possible—so build it big! Start by identifying your current *what*, *where*, and *how*. You cannot draw a map to your future without a clear definition of where you are. Next, you need to identify exactly what you want to achieve. The clearer the concept you have, the stronger your vision. Give priority to goals that have true substantial meaning and purpose, or your vision will not survive the first series of obstacles.

Once you know what you want to accomplish, you need to focus your vision by writing out specific incremental steps to take that eventually will culminate in the fulfillment of the overall vision. For each goal, identify the who, how, and when of its completion. Vague goals will never be realized. If the vision is important enough to you, you will find a way. If it is not important enough, you will find excuses. Vision is key, but without a plan for implementation, it will forever remain unattainable.

Next, you need to be able to quantify or measure your vision so that you will know when it has been achieved. Milestones let you measure your progress along the way, and they let you know when to celebrate and reward those who have made realization of

the vision possible. It is vital to constantly set new goals to strive for, but it also is essential to celebrate achievement and accomplishment whenever appropriate along the way. People want to feel valued and appreciated—and this is your chance to recognize them accordingly.

Visualize the target for which you are aiming. Everything you do and every action you take should hone your skills, perfect your aim, and get you closer to hitting your target, ultimately turning your vision into reality.

Of course, the future is not one fixed point, and many constantly changing factors and variables can help—or hinder—attainment of your goals. Even in the most carefully constructed plans, there are no absolutes or guarantees. Flexibility and adaptability—essentially the ability to grow and change, even sometimes uncomfortably so—must be woven into the fabric of your personal life and into your company or organization. Where there is no room for change, there will be no room for growth. Do not let a changing landscape discourage you or become an excuse for mediocrity or laziness. Failing to plan is, in essence, a plan to fail.

If our goal is to *Lead Like Reagan*, we must create a compelling vision as he did, setting goals and timelines for action and accomplishment that are ambitious, yet attainable.



Creating the Vision

Do you see how the power of one man's vision had the capacity to change an entire country—and then the world? President

Reagan's visionary leadership and optimism for the future not only gave Americans confidence in his capacity to bring about positive change but, of equal or perhaps even greater importance, he inspired Americans to believe in themselves and to dare to dream—and dream boldly—once again. Ronald Reagan led with expansive vision and an optimistic view of the future, a great model for us to follow. He proved that with visionary leadership, anything is possible.

I challenge you to create your vision, take action to fulfill it, enlist support, and take aim, confidently knowing where the target is and having a plan, the skills, and the team to reach it.

Although everyone's exact vision is uniquely different, the power to turn vision into reality is exactly the same.

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