

How can ordinary people demonstrate extraordinary leadership

I'm very fond of Star Trek. I love its vision of humanity at peace, the dream of a world without hunger or poverty. I have to force myself not to salute when I hear its mission statement.

But perhaps what makes the Trek series really work for its fans are its leaders, its great captains. James T. Kirk, JeanLuc Picard, Kathryn Janeway and others. It is easy to imagine following them. They have courage. They have passion. They have confidence. And they have vision. Vision is the life-blood of great enterprises. Or is it?

There are three assumptions about the future that expert entrepreneurs have learned to thwart. In the last two columns I tackled two of them and in this one I will take up the third before getting into the entrepreneurial method in more detail in future columns.

In my first column I wrote about the advantages of giving up the quest for predictability and in my second, I urged you to develop a taste for uncertainty. Giving up the quest for predictability frees us from acting as if we are characters in someone else's story and a taste for uncertainty saves us from behaving as if we already know the end of the story.

I have emphasized the words 'as if' because there is an alternate, 'even if' mode of thinking that forms the basis of the entrepreneurial method. Here, I would like you to consider how we could go about creating complex enterprises even if we aren't heroic leaders imbued with special traits like vision. In other words, how can ordinary people demonstrate extraordinary leadership?

One clue is to recall how great crises such as wars and political movements often produce great leaders. Nobody would have looked at M. K. Gandhi before he went to South Africa and mistaken him for a great leader. He was a terrible public speaker. He didn't look very heroic. He had all sorts of hang-ups.

Yet, when the political situation offered a possible response, Gandhi-ji stepped up to the plate and the world changed. In retrospect, we may tell Gandhi-ji's story as that of a hero who pursued a clear vision, persuaded millions of people, and magically pulled one miracle after another from his khadi cap. But the truth is much more useful. He was a human being faced with having to change the world without fully understanding it.

Gandhi-ji experimented with the truth to find what would work in a situation and what wouldn't. He didn't set goals or spell out his vision in advance. He let them emerge out of actions and the developing situation. He was flexible, he was stubborn. He moved boldly, he hesitated. He knew what he wanted, he didn't know what he wanted. He inspired people, he drove people crazy. He didn't try to lead others; he mostly tried to lead himself.

Now, this is all rather strange. Intuitively, we would expect that clarity of vision and the ability to set clear goals are necessary to accomplish anything worthwhile. Yet it is interesting to consider where these seemingly visionary leaders get their visions from.

Was the vision already fully formed before they took action or did the vision emerge from their actions and interactions with other people and the environments in which they acted? Did they learn their lines ahead of time as stage actors do or did they improvise and play off of the rest of the cast and audience?

James March, perhaps the world's foremost expert on leadership, studied Napoleon's Russian campaign and concluded, 'Rather than living in worlds in which the causes of outcomes are clear and the definitions of success and failure are unproblematic, leaders live in worlds in which causality is unclear and the evaluation of outcomes is ambiguous...

Rather than living in a world in which there is a tight coupling between problems and solutions, between information and action, leaders live in a world in which those linkages are elusive.' In short, they're a lot like us.

Experienced entrepreneurs aren't always clear about their vision of the future, and even when they are, they understand the merits in not being overly committed to that one vision.

As the poet Roethke put it, 'I learn by going where I have to go.' Yet the picture of the visionary leader who can chart a clear course in the fog and steadfastly steer her vehicle to the promised land is a seductive one that is difficult to resist. Consider Steve Jobs, the iconic exemplar of the visionary pioneer. His epic fights with Apple's board, the anecdotes about his passion for minimal designs, his cool presentations, and of course his role in Apple's renaissance are now the stuff of legend.

Yet recent biographies of Jobs reveal a picture of a complex man, who borrowed as much as he innovated, who invested in people, who made as many mistakes as he had successes. For instance, Apple introduced an average of eight unsuccessful products to every major success it had over the years, a failure rate on par with most new product launches in most established companies.

Bill Gates, who couldn't be more different from Jobs, built an equally successful company based on a very different technological vision (or some might even irreverently call a lack of it). Yet each man's vision, so to speak, was sufficient but not necessary for building a successful enterprise in digital computing. You don't have to act as if you are Napoleon Bonaparte or Attila the Hun or Gandhi-ji or Kiran Mazumdar Shaw. It suffices to be you.

If you have a vision, hooray! If you don't have a vision, hooray!

In my next column, we will begin examining in detail how you can take who you are and the fully or partially formed vision you begin with to fabricate enduring enterprises. Even if we are not Captain Picard, you and I can take the helm of the starship Enterprise: Engage!

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