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Focus on the Future: How to Be More Forward- Looking

What single quality differentiates high-potential leaders from ordinary contributors in an organization?

It's their ability to be forward-looking and focus on the future. To become a better leader or distinguish yourself as someone primed for promotion, you'll want to develop your capacity to envision the future.

Focusing on the future sets leaders apart. The capacity to imagine and articulate exciting future possibilities is a defining competency — perhaps the most important one, next to honesty.

In *The Leadership Code* (Harvard School of Business Press, 2009), Dave Ulrich, Norm Smallwood and Kate Sweetman reviewed leadership theory and distilled leadership competencies into five overarching roles:

- ▶ **1. Strategist** — Leaders shape the future.
- ▶ **2. Executor** — Leaders make things happen.
- ▶ **3. Talent manager** — Leaders engage today's talent.
- ▶ **4. Human capital developer** — Leaders build the next generation.
- ▶ **5. Personal proficiency** — Leaders invest in their own development.

While leadership has evolved over time, these five areas of focus have remained constant as key functions of effective leaders, across all industries. Leaders must be able to answer the question, "Where are we going?"

We look to our leaders to envision a future, figure out where the organization must go to succeed, evaluate ideas for pragmatism and determine if they fit the company's core mission. Leaders focus on how people, money, resources and organizational capabilities will work together to move from the present to a desired future.

To become a strategist, your thinking must be future-oriented. You'll need to



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become intensely curious about trends, both inside and outside your organization's field. You'll need a systematic way of staying informed and tracking changes. This requires you to engage everyone in the organization and collect new ideas from various sources. Invite everyone to participate in creating a better future.

What People Want from Leaders

Leadership professors Barry Posner and Jim Kouzes, after surveying thousands of people on ideal leadership qualities, reveal that the ability to look forward is second only to honesty as the most admired trait.

On average, 70 percent of workers worldwide select "forward-looking" as a key leadership competency. Think about the leaders you've followed or admired. The great ones are visionaries who serve as custodians of the future. You want to partner with leaders who can create a better future.

As we age, gain more experience and move up the organizational hierarchy, our desire for a forward-looking leader increases, according to Posner and Kouzes. 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.

Some leaders are naturally future-oriented; many others excel as executors or talent managers. Still others shine at getting things done and making things happen; others bring out the best in people.

While achieving great results with people is always rewarding, it's not enough for promotion to higher levels of responsibility and leadership. To take that step, you must expand your ability to communicate a vision for the future. Forward-looking leaders can spot opportunities in their day-to-day work, and they excel at anticipatory thinking.

How Far Can You See?

Do you look beyond what's in front of you — especially when daily tasks take up so much time and energy?

How do you become future-oriented and still handle day-to-day challenges?

While the ability to focus on the future separates leaders from the rank-and-file, many of us fail to understand and appreciate its importance. We devote almost no time to developing this vital quality, which then becomes a huge barrier to future success.

The challenge of being forward-looking escalates with each managerial level. Front-line supervisors are expected to antici-

pate 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 suites must focus on goals that are often 10+ years away.

How to Develop Future Focus

How do you develop your capacity to be future-focused?

Carve out some time each week to peer into the distance and imagine what may be out there.

Start with 30 minutes a day, using the time to learn about what's going on in your industry, with customers, with the potential future of your products and services. You can read magazines, books and/or online research.

Top executives estimate they 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. It's simply not enough time.

Sparkling Energy for What Really Matters

Here's the problem: In tough economic times, everyone hunkers down on tactics. They focus on survival and results. Decisions become pragmatic. After a while, however, this short-term approach grinds us down, and we lose sight of the big picture.

In today's difficult times, people need to be reminded of why they are doing what they do — and why it matters. This is when leaders can step up and make a difference. Leadership is more than encouraging high-performance; it's about reminding people of what they are trying to build and why it matters.

In many ways, leadership supplies oxygen to keep the fires going. When people are mired in day-to-day work details, they can lose their bearings. An effective leader makes a difference by helping people see their role in building a better future.

3 Ways to Grow Your Future-Focus

There are three ways to expand your ability to become more future-oriented and hone your leadership effectiveness. In *The Truth About Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 2010), Posner and Kouzes urge readers to spend time learning about the future through:

- ▶ 1. Insight
- ▶ 2. Outsight
- ▶ 3. Foresight

Insight: Explore Your Past

This exercise that follows will help you connect your past experiences and values with your current work. When you look backward, you can see farther ahead and imagine future possibilities.

Look for repeating themes in your life — the recurring messages that keep reminding you of what matters most. For younger leaders, there's less past to recall; however, it's still important to use the richness of your life experiences to uncover ideals.

Here are some questions to explore:

- ▶ Identify the recurring theme in your life.
- ▶ To which topic do you return again and again?
- ▶ What story do you keep telling and retelling?

Search your past to find 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

To be a credible leader, you need to spend more time reading, thinking and talking about long-term possibilities. Develop the discipline to spend more time studying 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.

For example, The World Future Society recommends examination of six distinct business-trend categories:

- ▶ 1. Demographics
- ▶ 2. Economics
- ▶ 3. Government
- ▶ 4. Environment
- ▶ 5. Society
- ▶ 6. Technology

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. No one can afford to be short-term-oriented in a globally connected marketplace.

Foresight: Survival of the Optimists

“Optimists have a sixth sense for possibilities that realists can't or won't see.” ~ Warren Bennis, leadership professor

There is a dramatic difference between people who react to roadblocks with a sense of futility and pessimism and those who react with determination and optimism. Psychologist Martin Seligman has validated that the most successful business leaders are inspired by a sense of optimism.

Those who learn to be 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 doesn't mean ignoring reality or the hardships required to get great results. Leaders can define a business reality, yet defy a negative verdict. By being optimists, leaders give people the hope, energy and strength needed to carry on.

The more you understand reality, the more prepared you are to endure hardships and adversity. Optimism, and a vision for what's possible, supplies the energy to keep going, persist through challenges and come out on the other side.

One of the best ways to expand your potential leadership abilities is to work with an executive coach, who can help you see what you don't yet see. An experienced coach will stimulate your thinking and conversations about what's possible.

You Can See Forever

To become a better leader, or to be seen as a high-potential leader, spend more time in the future. At some point, a future focus will permeate your thinking and saturate your communications.

Everything you do and say will remind people of the future you want to create —for yourself, your colleagues, your customers and the organization. You will draw upon your past experiences, your core values and your guiding purpose.

You will become well-read about trends as you study the future and talk with other people about the exciting possibilities. There's no doubt that we live in interesting times, and game-changing ideas, products and services are popping up all the time.

Being part of the future allows you to contribute to its creation. You can't do that without taking time to develop your capacity to be future-focused. And you can't become future-focused without discipline and action.