

## Listening for the Future

In coaching executives to formulate a compelling vision for their company or division, I am sometimes faced with self-doubting statements such as, "I'm not really a visionary leader" or "Even if I had a vision, I'm not good at selling it."

Instead of allowing such views to be show-stoppers, let me explore with you a different angle based on our discussion last time of a postmodern approach. Recall that I ended Issue #3 with the following claim:

"Because our social context can change, meanings can change — and the world as we see it and live it through language can change. This provides a leader with a vital opening to defining current reality."

Can this also be an opening for designing a future? My answer is a resounding "Yes!" even when you alone may not have a burning personal vision.

Managers wedded to the mind-set of modernism use a rational, risk-management technique to select amongst a collection of futures based on and projected from the past. In stark contrast, the postmodern leader linguistically constructs an entirely new future through declaring a possibility into existence — a possibility that may have never existed prior to its being uttered.

The context within which this new possibility is kept alive and is finally realized is generated and maintained in the artful conversations on-goingly designed by the leader and recurrently embraced and enhanced by the followers.

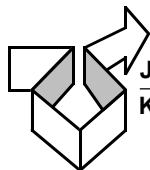
From this perspective a "vision" is not some static picture described compellingly by a silver-tongued spin-doctor nor a cleverly drawn cartoon with colorful arrows and boxes displayed in corporate hand-outs. Rather, a vision is a living conversation that is shared and grown in a community of speakers who breathe life into it on a daily basis through reflection and dialogue. The postmodern leader is the initial steward and on-going servant of this conversation.

To be such a servant requires an extremely rare skill: what I call "quiescent listening." This kind of listening can only happen where the noisy background of one's own opinions, ideas, prejudices, inclinations, demands, judgments, and concerns is completely quieted. The tranquil surrender of this way of being permits one to be fully open and available to the speaker.

The quality of listening I allude to is beautifully captured in the following quotation from one of Anne Rice's (1976, pp. 281-282) evocative novels:

"I was at a loss suddenly; but conscious all the while of how Armand listened; that he listened in the way that we dream of others listening, his face seeming to reflect on everything said. He did not start forward to seize on my slightest pause, to assert an understanding of something before the thought was finished, or to argue with a swift, irresistible impulse — the things which often make dialogue impossible."

SMART LETTER



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# SMARTLETTER

When a postmodern leader listens to his or her people, the listening is not directed so much at actively discovering “information” as it is focused on gently uncovering “concerns.” To feel safe to express such concerns, followers need the deep personal acknowledgement that quiescent listening from a leader represents. Such listening sends the wordless message that the speaker and their concerns matter.

Your people are world-experts in their own concerns—what’s important to them as individuals. When a leader can hear such concerns and respond to them with an encompassing vision that takes care of those concerns, people become enrolled in forwarding the conversation with deep commitment rather than surface compliance.

There is no need to “sell” people on the vision or to achieve “buy in.” Both of these are automatically taken care of when the vision is grounded in what deeply matters to followers.

## Vital Questions for Reflection

1. Is your listening a dream or a nightmare for your followers?
2. What are the top five concerns of your people?

(NB: Not what should their concerns be according to you, but what are they as they define them?)

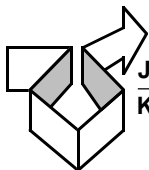
3. How well does your current vision directly address your followers concerns?

## Recommended Reading

Anne Rice. *Interview with a Vampire*. New York: Balantine Books, 1976.

Deborah Tannen. *That’s Not What I Meant!* New York: Balantine Books, 1986.

Deborah Tannen. *You Just Don’t Understand*. New York: Balantine Books, 1990.



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