

Leadership Success Always Starts With Vision

(<http://www.forbes.com/2009/07/29/personal-success-vision-leadership-managing-ccl.html>)

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I recently had the pleasure of meeting a group of outstanding college students not far from my home in North Carolina. These young women and men are entering the workforce—or attempting to—in an extraordinarily difficult time. Jobs are scarce, and these students are savvy enough not to be too picky about their opportunities over the next year or two. But I also got the inspiring sense that they are not giving up on their dreams. And that, in my experience, is always the first major step toward leadership success.

A few months ago, [I wrote in this space](#) that leadership success always starts with vision. John F. Kennedy famously dreamed of putting a man on the moon. Eleanor Roosevelt envisioned a world of equal opportunity for women and minorities. Wendy Kopp was still a college student when she dreamed of making American schools better by creating a cadre of young, enthusiastic teachers. Compelling visions can truly change the world. But staying invested in them can be extremely difficult when hard times arrive.

In the severe downturn the global economy is caught in right now, just the daily work of keeping your organization going can become all-consuming. Resources are tighter, changes in strategy are required and painful decisions, often involving layoffs, need to be made. But as uncertain and cloudy as the time is now, the recession will eventually end. When it does, will you be poised to take advantage of new opportunities? Do you have a vision that will inspire your colleagues and your customers?

I've been privileged to work with many great leaders throughout my career and tried hard to learn exactly what it is that makes them so effective. It usually comes down to a few fundamentals. Vision is always one of them. Great leaders give real thought to the values, ideas and activities they're most passionate about—and those are the things they pursue, rather than money or prestige or options forced on them by someone else. The visions these leaders have can be—and, in fact, should be—challenging to put into action. They realize them only by setting realistic, demanding goals and then going after them relentlessly, with the help of other talented men and women who are equally committed and engaged.

Indeed, when it comes to living out a vision, persistence matters just as much as inspiration. I'm fortunate to have four young grandchildren. Whenever my wife and I spend time with them, we enjoy listening as they talk about their dreams of what they'll do when they grow up. We all have those dreams at that age. But as we get older, people start to talk us out of them. Even today, American girls are often advised, for example, that math and science may be too difficult for them. By the time many of us have reached high school, or even well before, we're already focused on our limitations.

It doesn't have to be that way. Wendy Kopp offers a powerful case study in how to develop a compelling vision and fulfill it through great persistence. While many of her college classmates were embarking on lucrative careers in law, medicine or finance, she followed her passion and instincts along a different path. She wanted to make a difference in struggling schools, and she wanted to get her generation more involved with education and poverty. Kopp's novel solution: a national teaching corps. When she dreamed up Teach for America, in the late 1980s, as a senior project at Princeton University, her odds for success looked slim. Indeed, she recalls how even her own academic adviser called the idea "quite

evidently deranged.” Why would the nation’s top college graduates give up a couple years of their lives to teach in the nation’s worst schools, when they could be traveling or climbing the career ladder in big, exciting cities?

Kopp recognized the challenges. But she had formed a lasting vision and wouldn’t let go so easily. She raised \$2.5 million in start-up funds, assembled a staff and launched a grass-roots campaign to recruit teachers. Her journey since then has not always been smooth. Still, she’s kept her eyes on her ultimate goal: creating a better future for Americans through better education. The record shows she’s getting results. Kopp’s remarkable career started with a clear, invigorating vision. What’s yours?

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This article is the fourth in a series from the Center for Creative Leadership; read the first one, “The Three Fundamentals of Effective Leadership,” [here](#); the second, “Change Your Mind Before You Change Your Company,” [here](#); and the third, “Nowadays, Leadership Means Being More Human,” [here](#).