

# A Talk with Steve Walmsley

**C**orporate North America is changing. The demands on leadership are more far ranging and complex than ever before. Today *Visionaries* talks to Steve Walmsley, the president of Walmsley & Co., a management consulting firm based in Toronto. Walmsley & Co. helps corporations introduce complex change and development initiatives. They work closely with banks, technology companies and other organizations to help them pilot long-term projects focused on reshaping corporate culture. In this interview, Steve Walmsley shares his thinking on vision, leadership and the enterprise.

## How would you define vision?

Over the past 10 years, the classic definition and understanding of vision has changed. Historically, people tended to speak of vision as something a CEO "had." But today, it's helpful to see vision as something more fluid, less static, and less stand-alone. Sometimes the most powerful visions are more about being "visionary" and engaging others than about making a statement. Vision needs to be connected and real and dynamic. It needs to be relevant to the present. It needs to build from enterprise goals, new customer needs, front line learning and adaptation. It's about seeing and describing the future. It's about feeling the future and then acting on it with heart and hands – when it really lives, you can see organizations with spirited performance. It's not a formula—especially in today's marketplace.

## What are some of the factors affecting leadership in this market?

Overall shifts in business are having a significant impact on how leaders lead and what their employees expect from them. These factors include:

- Surviving with the "tech wreck" post 9-11 economy
- Dealing with ethical and business morality news events and problems and how people are really challenging the motives and actions of senior executives
- Increased expectations surrounding the issues of community and belonging – especially at work
- Addressing the fact that many firms/people are frozen/uncertain/burned out
- Harnessing pent up energy for new growth

## How do you help corporate leaders address the issue of vision?

The most important thing a leader can do is to think about listening, before influencing. This is a critical issue. Too many leaders listen only long enough to identify how to influence, rather than listen to hear and integrate new insight or develop depth of meaning. Creating meaning is important for a work community. Richard Branson of Virgin Corporation has said, "If people are proud of the company they work for, if they respect it and are listened to, the company will thrive." He's absolutely correct. He engages in active and unconventional practices to meet with front line staff and experience and hear the company and its customers from different perspectives.

We help C-level executives learn to "let go" of vision to allow others to contribute to it and own it. We help them set clear boundaries – and to target results. This means clearly defining what they absolutely do and do not do at their organization and then let the details get filled in. We talk to them about the importance of "modeling" and demonstrating the vision, putting it into action so people see and feel it.

We use a simple diamond model. At the top are vision and direction. At the bottom is the "home base" – the results. On the left are the quantitative goals and objectives. These are the pieces that every organization seeks and measures – volume of sales, pure productivity, revenue, and profit. On the right are the things that are often out of balance – the qualitative elements that are often avoided because they are dismissed as "soft." These include people, communication, team effectiveness, as well as processes that engage the customers and clients. We then work to capture insights when can that can be turned into advantage.

## Day to day, it sounds like implementing vision requires a special kind of leadership, almost a discipline.

Make no doubt about it: implementing vision in today's market is all about making tough choices and going beyond simple answers to be more effective. We help C-level executives focus on simplifying vision and integrating it into their day-to-day routines. People need to see vision in action. They need to see the

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commitment to the future demonstrated and operational. This means leaders need to demonstrate direction and passion in their everyday behavior. They need to model their commitment to excellence and consistency. They need to show commitment to people and teams - inside and across their firm's boundaries. At the end of the day, they need to focus on results, growth, and celebration.

## Where do the concepts of trust and measuring risk in terms of vision come in?

People want their leadership to consult and engage with them. They know a leader needs to take a bet, take risks for the company. Again, it's about:

- Leading from your heart and gut before you lead with the balance sheet
- Growing into new businesses and new capabilities, not "going into them"
- Knowing that persistence and rigorous execution make more great businesses than all the "newsworthy" stories about charismatic leaders
- Acting for the best, planning for the worst - becoming an optimistic realist

Sometimes it looks as if these action statements are too simple or not important. Beware: there are many places where people look like they are performing but they have quit and stayed. This is much more expensive in the short term and much more damaging strategically than if they quit and leave. No leaders can do it well all, all the time. There are many leadership situations where this approach needs to be complemented with the ability to be decisive and incisive and hold an unpopular decision tenaciously. But by laying the groundwork, the situations where a leader needs to be unilateral will be understood, and the leader will be surprised by the support he or she will gain, often without question.

## How is the fast access to information affecting the implementation of vision?

It's having an enormous impact. First, it's forcing CEOs to be less singularly driven. Having fast access to information enables individuals within the group to act quickly. Information may be finally "enabling" but the question is: are we ready to finally empower people? Many organizations are using technology in exceptional ways: harnessing high technology for high touch, demonstrating real relationships, and making judgments in real-time to drive excellence in service and in sales. And at the same time, with so much information access, team members can and should meaningfully challenge corporate directives that appear uninformed. That's why it's so important that leadership listen and communicate so that their people are always empowered to act and communicate versus inclined to shut down and rebel.

## How can leaders take these calls to action and make them more practical, make them their own?

A lot of money has been spent on the science of leadership. It is an important area of study, but over the years it has become too complex and limiting. Too much money and time is spent on developing models of leadership competencies based on external techniques. It's important that leadership work focuses on clearly identifying the:

- Three or four ways an individual leader can best use their strengths
- Areas of the business where they need to communicate with and lead actively
- Key things they need to do consistently and continuously so that people get the message and can act on it.

By embracing these simple concepts, leaders strengthen their corporate culture and unleash enterprise potential. ■