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01 How to be a visionary

Originally published: 05/02/21
Written By Mike Straw, CEO

McKinsey & Co has identified 'Visionary' as key to leaders' make-up, but can you learn to be visionary?

To be an effective leader of the agile businesses likely to be more successful in today's uncertain and high-velocity markets, McKinsey & Co has identified four facets to the leader's role. They must be visionaries, architects, coaches and catalysts all at the same time. This VACC model is powerful, it resonates with many of our clients and we subscribe to it wholeheartedly. Indeed, we often find ourselves working alongside McKinsey to implement these behaviours.

But how can a leader become more visionary? Can it be practised or is it innate? Can you decide to be a visionary? And, if so, what steps can you take to do so? The answer to all of the above is yes. There are those who are naturally visionaries – we can all identify with our own examples. But they are most likely to be unconsciously applying concepts which others can consciously adopt. Working with leaders and teams of all sizes and across all sectors we have distilled some core thinking that helps them implement McKinsey's model.

I have lots of ideas – am I a visionary?

First, it is important to understand what makes a visionary. Conventional wisdom would suggest that it is someone who has a vision, an idea or maybe lots of ideas. Someone who acts on gut feel to instinctively lead others by a force of character and deep self-belief. It can also be tied up in the articulation of corporate goals and mission, or even the inspirational sentences written

of office walls. But many people can have ideas, and it is relatively easy to craft a slogan or even a strategy. Having an idea itself, however good, does not make you a visionary.

A visionary is also more than a manager who sets stretch targets. It may be a good idea to set a goal of achieving 125% of this year's targets for sales, productivity or whatever other metric you measure. But this is not visionary – it is just eking out more of the same by doing the same things faster, harder or for longer.

Our definition of visionary is an individual who can clearly see a new future beyond what the organisation believes is currently possible. They can see a breakthrough – a higher possibility than one allowed by conventional thinking and approaches. The ideas they have will dramatically move the business onto a different path and create an entirely new context for the business. What separates a visionary from a maverick or purveyor of pipedreams is their ability to focus in on and challenge the assumptions which are preventing them from existing in this new future.

What are the practical steps to becoming a visionary?

Visionaries must first learn to identify the context they and their organisations operate in and be able to consciously step outside of it. Context is decisive. It unconsciously governs the assumptions and decisions individuals and organisations make. It defines what is seen as possible and impossible. So, the first step for a visionary leader, counter-intuitively, is to be fully aware of the current

context governing their organisation.

Being fully engaged, and on-board with an organisation is often seen as fundamental to leadership. But to be visionary, leaders must embody the paradoxical state of being both fully in and fully out of the organisation. They are always curious and always questioning – why do we do it this way; why can't we change that? Only when they are able to step outside of the context will they fully appreciate it and see beyond the self-limiting assumptions that every business adopts.

Always listening

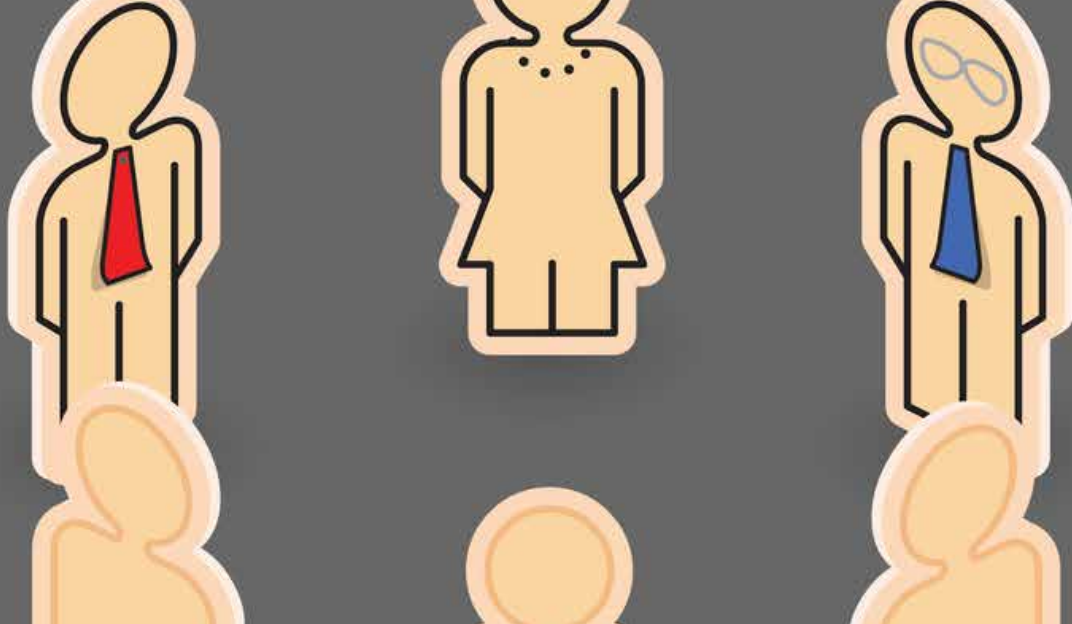
Challenging your assumptions and those of the wider teams and organisation, opens the door to visionary ideas. But visionaries are also empathic. They understand why others do not, or cannot, see the future in the way they do. They listen closely and talk into the little voices in the heads of those around them to help reveal their context too. They must be present in the organisation to ignite conversations and inspire who teams to take on the vision. This is what McKinsey means when it suggests that visionary ideas emerge from the organisation rather than in the boardroom. Ideas are important, but the visionary leader establishes the new context in which they can propagate and grow.

Bold declarations

Finally, the visionary leader must declare the vision. They have to publicly own the vision and be seen to inhabit the future it reveals. Declarations cannot be half-hearted, quiet or private, they need to exist on the grand stage for all to see. This complete commitment to the vision sets the direction for the whole organisation, overcomes the assumptions and the context that seek to limit it, and is the critical first step in enrolling others to support and follow the vision.

Becoming Visionary

It is possible to become a visionary. Learning the techniques of breakthrough thinking that allows you to identify and challenge the assumptions that hold back organisations and individuals is the foundation for visionary ideas. But it can't be faked. Leaders must authentically live in the future context that they declare as their vision and exhibit their authority to do so. Moreover, it is just the first step. They need to exhibit all the other facets of leadership to design and build the organisation and culture to establish this new context. They need to be able to coach those around them to not only believe but to live the vision alongside them, and finally to catalyse the actions necessary to fulfil it. I'll return to these other elements of leadership in later blogs, but please get in touch if you'd like to discuss how to implement these practical steps to becoming visionary in your business.



02 Stop being so efficient and schedule more pointless meetings.

Originally published: 08/12/20
Written By Sara Moore, Senior Partner

The COVID crisis has shattered many assumptions about how we can work and be productive. Leaders' fears about the effectiveness of working from home have, in most cases, been proven unfounded. Many are finding themselves far more productive than ever, rattling through tasks and attending short, sharp, focused video and telephone conference calls.

But leaders and individuals should be aware of the lustre of productivity hiding what is being lost. Rather than uniformly celebrating the minutes and hours saved by not commuting, chatting in the corridor or around the fringes of meetings, we need to be aware of the value of that 'wasted' time.

A little more conversation

Too much conversation for action, tightly focused on agenda points or action lists, squeezes out critical conversations for possibility. If time and latitude are not given to freeform exploratory conversations, then we could well be creating a curiosity deficit that will harm growth and innovation down the line.

We can all think of instances when a brief conversation, grabbed in a lobby or as meeting guests assemble, has sparked an idea, kindled curiosity and led to an entirely new direction. It takes many sparks to light the fires of innovation that drive transformation. Smooth, productive, online meetings lack the rough edges where enough of those sparks can be struck. As participants log seamlessly in and out, they miss the casual banter and off-topic chat that nurtures curiosity. Dead space between remote meetings is now more often than not

only snippets of time, enough time to clear a few emails, which is wonderfully productive, but we've lost transition time. Commutes, international travel, popping out to buy lunch, moving between meeting rooms on office campuses were all opportunities to think, randomly chat or reach out to people.

Create some sparks

Leaders need to act to model and encourage these conversations for possibility in the current online environment. It's hard, and their natural inclination may be to forge on, instil action-orientated cultures and deliver results – all of which is important. But they must also recognise that new ideas, possibilities and breakthroughs all start in conversations that need time and space to grow. Now more than ever, it is important that they are proactive in creating not only the time to think, but the spaces in which conversations for possibility can spark.

It is almost impossible to schedule time to be creative, or to arrange meetings to be innovative, the human brain just does not work like that. But leaders need to dial into the needs of teams and understand where individuals derive their energy and inspiration. For some, it could be as simple as allowing 'off-agenda' chat to develop at times during meetings, or deliberately adding some extra time at the start or end of a meeting. 'Pointless' meetings with no agenda can serve to create platforms for teams to share thoughts or ideas naturally. Others may welcome permission to spend time 'off-task' simply thinking and tapping into inner sources of energy and creativity.

Three steps for leaders

At a minimum leaders should consider three approaches to cultivating conversations for possibility in online meetings.

1. Allow your teams to schedule time for themselves to think. Make sure they recognise that you value the time they spend outside of meetings and delivering actions.
2. Include time for conversation in all meetings. Don't guillotine conversations for possibility by rigidly sticking to action items and agendas.
3. Schedule the occasional 'pointless meeting' with no agenda and encourage people to share thoughts, ideas and even (appropriate) gossip. It is from these casual encounters that some of the best ideas arise.

Most importantly, leaders need to be conscious of the ideas they build and reinforce in people's heads. If teams perceive that meetings are only for agenda and action-orientated conversation, they will close down their own curiosity and interest in thinking beyond the business as usual. This will lead not only to innovation deficits but to erosion of morale and commitment to wider visions.

Use tech consciously

Finally, a sensitivity to the limitations of technology is also required. Today's video call and meeting technologies have made remote working a far more effective proposition. But many find it harder to interject than they would in real-life engagements, and meetings can easily become broadcasts or bilateral conversations. It can be harder for ideas to bounce between people as they do in vibrant real-world meetings. Leaders need to take more care than ever to fully include and encourage participation from everyone.

As and when the current pandemic fades and people have the opportunity to return to the office and more 'normal' meetings, leaders will face new choices. The lure of productivity gains may encourage them to over-emphasise the value of remote and online working.

But either way, leaders should not underestimate the value of the pointless meeting, whether virtual or in-person, in fostering conversations for possibility that may drive the next wave of innovation and growth in your organisation.



03 The assumption revolution.

Originally published: 17/04/20
Written By Dan Elvery, Head of Marketing

How to keep smashing assumptions and delivering breakthroughs after the pandemic.

Breakthroughs are everywhere

As the world battles Coronavirus, we're all being forced to think and act differently. The result: breakthroughs are happening everywhere.

When faced with an emergency, we become vividly aware of anything standing in our way and can rapidly adopt a 'whatever it takes' mindset. This is much like the businesses emerging as breakthrough champions in this crisis: adapting their production lines, mobilising their workforce, performing despite the physical barriers. Businesses are challenging long-held assumptions of what they do and how they work to respond with whatever it takes. They are being forced to notice their limiters and smash-up the rule book. How then can we capture this adaptive, creative way of thinking and bottle it for the future? To sustain a breakthrough mindset and transform the way organisations think and work, for decades to come.

Thinking on autopilot

When we join a new company, we can see everything with fresh eyes. We have an 'outsiders' perspective of the bureaucracy, the leadership, the backward ways of working that have crept in and become normal! We can see the limiters that people and the organisation have placed upon themselves over time. But rather than call these out, we put energy into becoming one of

the gang; in to learning the rules. Before long, we lose our fresh perspective and buy-in to 'the way it is around here'. We start to think on autopilot and stop being aware of, or challenging, our assumptions. It's easily done and is part of the natural drift that makes us human.

Smashing assumptions, changing the world

The assumptions we hear most often in businesses are akin to: the process change is too big, there isn't a budget, the leadership wouldn't approve it, it's out of my remit. Bottom line; it's not possible. But Covid-19 has called on businesses to willingly challenge their own rules and change their behaviours to match. Take Formula 1; just a month ago no one would have foreseen competitors coming together to share technology and insights...least of all; them! That would surely undermine their business' missions and break every rule of competition, right? That's before you even challenge the assumption that they're experts in cars, not medical equipment. But Formula 1 companies are collaborating for the first time, and are adapting their knowledge and production lines to make ventilators. From cars to ventilators, from competitors to collaborators. The pandemic was declared just a few weeks ago and since then decades-old assumptions have been smashed to make way for extraordinary breakthroughs.

Going through the process

We've also seen liberating breakthroughs in large scale process change. New systems and pathways that usually

take many months, if not years to plan.

Highly regulated industries have switched their paper-based contracting processes to digital DocuSign technology. Teams switching to fully remote working within 24 hours, without any time for testing and with amazing success. Manufacturers re-purposing their production lines to entirely different products. New technologies and processes have been implemented within a matter of hours or days, without the opportunity to over-analyse or let the fear of change slow us down. When there is no other choice but to innovate, the freedom to be ambitious and smash our assumptions about the way things work, comes naturally. It's already becoming normal to hear these extraordinary stories, but thinking back to January; these sudden, transformational changes were inconceivable. And to go a step further, if you were told these breakthroughs will happen in just four weeks most peoples response would be some version of: "that is crazy", "I'll believe it when I see it", or "what are you smoking?!"

A transformational new habit

With so many breakthroughs happening in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, leaders must seize their learnings and build new habits for the long term. An emergency will often yield breakthroughs, but causing breakthroughs by design is an obtainable practice at any time. Assumptions are our unwritten truths or rules that we don't even know we've got. Access to uncovering them is through our 'little voice'; the voice inside your head that has a view on... everything! And when you tune into your little voice (try it!) you start to hear the echoes of what you do and don't believe is possible. These are the window into your assumptions and it's these that we need to challenge and test for facts.

Take the process change from paper to digital contract signing. The assumptions might have been: it's not secure enough, people won't know how to use the technology, it'll weaken Procurement's control of the process, it'll take weeks of training and IT's time to get everyone setup. None of these assumptions were facts. When we test and realise this, we have a choice to take action; if we're committed to it, it's possible. And it's this commitment that's being demonstrated by so many industries, companies and leaders throughout the pandemic.

But like a diet, it only takes a few bad weekends for everything to fall over and go back to normal. As with any new habit, we need practices around us to sustain the shift to keep challenging our assumptions.

4 Steps to keep smashing your assumptions

1. Make the commitment; you don't want to go back!

Make challenging your thinking a new-normal by tuning into your 'little voice' and testing your assumptions.

2. Notice what's changed during the pandemic, and codify it so it is repeatable.

If it's now ok (and better?) when: meetings are shorter, people work at home, rules are changed, then it can keep working in the future. So capture what's great and keep it going! This is essential as the mind deletes, generalises and distorts – so spend some time reflecting and capturing the magic!

3. Beware of the gravitation pull of the systems, processes and behaviours that are in service of the 'old world'.

These can pull us back to the conventional thinking and assumptions that have us play small and reinforce the status quo. Don't be left saying 'how did we get back here.'

4. Put in measures that hold you to account to sustain the new learnings.

Be it a poster on the wall, a weekly touch base with a colleague or a shared list of breakthrough commitments amongst your team. Put something in place that exists outside of yourself to keep you challenging assumptions and going for breakthroughs.

When the pandemic is over and life gets really busy again, let's not lose the breakthrough thinking and action so many are experiencing right now. The willingness and agility to build a hospital in 9 days, the bold collaboration of competitors, all of us tearing up the rule book and just going for it! When we commit to something amazing, anything is possible and we can smash through assumptions of old in a heartbeat. Let this be the new normal.



04 Staying fully charged.

Originally published: 02/04/20

Written By Dan Elvery, Head of Marketing

At this most critical moment, it's essential that we're 'fully charged' and at our most powerful so that we really perform when it counts. Whether you're a leader of teams, departments or an entire organisation. A team or family member, or working alone. We need to find ways to thrive and be energised in the face of uncertainty and adversity. Channelling our energy to be fully charged like a mobile phone with everything available to us. And not getting worn down to 'low power mode', with only our essential functions intact.

For many of us the world as we know it has changed, or at least is paused for now. Some are facing much less or no work at all, whilst others are more stretched than ever. For many the workload is business as usual, having adjusted to virtual technologies and re-organised timescales and projects, but it still feels strangely quiet from behind closed doors.

Our usual re-charge sources are gone for now

It is certainly a time of extremes. In our living memory we won't have seen the likes of mass isolation, radical business transformation, community engagement, government intervention on anything like the scale that we're experiencing now. Staying motivated, focused, progressing (and well!) can be really challenging with all of this going on around us, whatever our circumstances. And it's normal to find ourselves at some point feeling overwhelmed, anxious, lonely, frustrated or uncertain in response to the pandemic. What is so starkly different about this situation, is our usual strategies for coping and re-charging are in the most part on pause too. A daily

visit to the gym, a meal out with friends, watching the game on Saturday, a weekend away: none of which are possible at this moment in time.

Right now, leaders and individuals need a new set of strategies to stay fully charged, powerful and present. A set of thinking habits that mean we can embrace what's happening, accept it and find the courage to stay committed and thriving, even from our own living rooms!

1. It's ok to be anxious

The coronavirus pandemic has pushed many unexpected organisations, leaders and individuals into a threatened and at times fearful place. Without knowing what exactly is coming next or when this will end, it's understandable that for some the uncertainty is overwhelming.

Whilst no one likes feeling anxious, anxiety is a natural and primitive response warning us that we're under threat. In fact, some 60-70% of the thoughts in an average adult brain are negative, for the sake of protecting us from danger.

Leading through anxiety

As leaders we need to embrace and role model that anxiety rippling around our teams and organisations is a normal and healthy response to the scale of what's going on. Particularly as we begin adapting to our new surroundings.

In order to keep ourselves and our teams fully charged, we need to consider that Corona related anxiety is something we can live alongside without it paralysing us.

We can be anxious and still do a great job. Accepting that anxiety is going to be here for some if not all of us is an opening to bring it to the fore and to make it ok. Not to let it fester, distract and overwhelm our thinking. But to acknowledge it, share it, and then grant ourselves permission to enjoy and embrace what we can do right now without feeling pressured to 'be ok'. Giving people time to share their concerns means they can move on to a more productive headspace and give time to being focused too.

Tips for leading through anxiety:

Discuss it. And make it OK to discuss it.

Invite people to discuss anxiety openly within your teams. Empower them to share concerns as a way of airing them and not being dominated by them, without fear of looking weak or negative.

Listen don't fix.

Listen, and acknowledge that people's anxiety is real and reasonable. Help them to feel heard and understood by not jumping straight to fixing the problem.

Open up.

Ask questions to help one another work through your thinking and consider any possibilities that might help. Showing your own vulnerability can also help people open up and speak freely

2. Let go and embrace the present

The second habit of staying fully charged is letting go of control so that you can be really present to the here and now. As humans, we all share the same illusion that we are in some way controlling the world around us. That there's a way 'things should be'. We buy in to this sense of control so that life feels safe, predictable and organised.

The illusion of control

For leaders, not appearing in control is often likened to incompetence or lack of direction. But in truth, none of us knows what's actually going to happen tomorrow and nor have we ever known. The pandemic we're facing makes us feel like we're more out of control than normal because so much in our lives has changed. The way 'things should be' have been undermined: our freedoms, our health, our livelihoods. Our perception of what life is like is being challenged and it somehow doesn't seem fair. This can make us feel despondent and as though our goals, projects and ambitions are somewhat insignificant or irrelevant.

Letting go

It may feel bleak to some of you reading this, as the structures and order that were holding your goals in place have been swiped from beneath you. That the control you thought you had is now gone. The good news is, this needn't be the end of your goals or your energy!

To 'let go' of control we need the realisation that we have never actually been in control in the first place. What we're experiencing when we think we or someone else is in control is actually commitment. The commitment to achieve something, to lead something, to enjoy something, to see something through. People see commitment and assume that a leader is in control. But in fact they're just taking responsibility and showing the determination it takes to lead and succeed. And commitment doesn't require any set of circumstances to make it possible, commitment is entirely in your hands.

Committed acceptance

The sense of losing control can be demoralising and frightening. We might become chaotic, disengaged or simply grind to a halt. But when we profoundly accept that we were never in control in the first place, a new option becomes available to us. We can get completely committed to what really matters, here and now. In the face of the pandemic, we can stop trying to control the longer term and get really focused and energised about what we need to do today, or this week, to thrive and make a difference. When we let go and focus only on the present and what's directly in front of us, we are freed-up and empowered to take positive action. Every day is a fresh start and an opportunity.

Tips for letting go and being present:

Make and share commitments.

We can't control what's happening around us, but we can control how we respond. Rather than focusing on what 'shouldn't be', focus on being a great leader by making and sharing commitments.

Understand its okay to act in the here and now.

Ask yourself, what can I achieve today that will make a difference? To your project, to your team, for yourself or for your community? Keep your planning short term to stay focused, energised and high impact.

3. Make time work for you

The final ingredient in staying fully charged in the face of the coronavirus pandemic is time. Something we've all complained there's a lack of for what feels like forever! Time itself, like control, hasn't actually changed at all: there have always been 24 hours in a day. But what has changed drastically is our perception of it. How we can spend our time has been transformed almost overnight and for a lot of us it's not unlike being imprisoned in our homes. But it also throws down an opportunity that could come just once in our lifetime.

Seek opportunity

Because there are constraints on where we can go, we have the perception of more time. And the perception of more time brings with it a wonderful freedom to reinvent how we spend it. To innovate, to learn, to rest, to reflect, to connect, to be compassionate, to exercise, to teach, to help others in society. To consciously spend time and take time. To appreciate and maximise the

time we have got as others around us so tragically lose theirs. We finally have the opportunity to stop and think and to spend our time wisely.

So spend it wisely...! Commit to that online course you'd been thinking about for ages, have longer chats with your friends and family, play with your kids, notice the view, be healthy, decorate the house and most of all, invest time in YOU. In the same breath, organisations and leaders are faced with the same choices of how to turn the current constraints into an opportunity. There might be time to design, innovate, re-organise and reflect.

There's no doubt of the huge amount of uncertainty and sacrifice happening for people, leaders, teams and businesses all around the world. But we must seize the gift of time, seek opportunities and be generous with how we spend it.

Tips for seeking opportunity:

Use 'downtime' at work to make Breakthroughs happen.

Consider what actions or initiatives would make the biggest difference to your team and your business performance. Prioritise these in any 'down time' at work to make the most of this opportunity.

Ask your future-self what you wished you'd have done.

Imagine yourself when the whole pandemic is over and all the constraints are lifted. What would you most wish you had spent your time doing? What would have made the most difference? and what story would you want to tell? Then, do it!

No one knows how long Covid-19 is going to impact our daily lives or our businesses. But whilst it is here, breakthroughs are going to be happening every day. Be it in the speed of developing a vaccine, manufacturing agility, digital communication and the way we lead through adversity, to name a few. As leaders and individuals we need to find ways to stay 'fully charged' so that we can maximise what's possible both as people and organisations. Making the sum of our learnings, achievements and kindnesses a tribute to those that we will so sadly lose along the way.



05 Unlearn your Winning Moves.

Originally published: 21/01/21
Written By Mike Straw, CEO

The recent crisis on the high street has illustrated how change in today's business environment can quickly catch-up with, and catch-out, even established leaders. The need for transformation in all industries is constantly reiterated – yet actually transforming has proven consistently difficult. Over time all organisations develop their own game plans for success. They know what works for them, and increasingly rely on these approaches to win. When things start to change the natural reaction is to double down on what has made them successful in the past. Individuals are the same. Each of us has a personal set of winning moves that have helped us get where we are today. But, to go beyond what we see as possible now, either as an individual or as an organisation, we need to unlearn our winning moves in order to adopt new ones.

If it ain't broke...

Of course, it is very hard, almost impossible to put aside the strategies, behaviours and approaches that have been successful so far. We call them 'Winning Moves' because throughout our lives they have been effective in getting us the things we want. Why change things that have been working for so long? For businesses this is often articulated as the risk of adopting innovative approaches versus the stability of proven markets, products and channels. For individuals it is different. Our 'Winning Moves' are not a defined strategy or playbook, but a complex arrangement of beliefs, actions and behaviours that are deeply embedded in the way we are.

For most of us our Winning Moves are unconscious. We

have built them for ourselves bit by bit throughout our lives, through trial and error and experience. They are part of who we are and our ways of being. When we encounter situations we instinctively listen and look for how we can deploy our winning moves and remain consistent with our view of how the world should work. For the most part this has been a highly effective way to succeed. But as Chess Grandmaster Garry Kasparov once remarked, the temptation to stick with the status quo leads to stagnation.

"When you are already doing well the temptation to stick with the status quo can be overwhelming, leading to stagnation."

- Garry Kasparov, Chess Grandmaster

The groove becomes first a rut and finally a grave

The challenge is that whilst we are in our 'groove' we are blind to the alternative possibilities that exist. As John Paul Getty said. "The groove becomes first a rut and finally a grave." This is the lesson that many formerly successful businesses are learning too late, as the world around them undermines and ultimately destroys the

circumstances in which their strategies worked. Internet shopping and next day delivery radically transformed the retail environment long before the COVID pandemic shuttered bricks and mortar stores.

that were not on your initial list of candidates," and lead to new success.

Unlearn your own winning moves

Corporate examples are easy to see, but Winning Moves are just as powerful for individuals and represent the same risk. We unconsciously develop a commitment to our winning moves that might not always serve us as circumstances change. Our natural response when faced with change, or situations where things seem not to be working out is to defend and focus in on what we know to have worked in the past. But this leads to stress as the gap between expected results and reality grows. The successful leader, just like the successful business, uses times of change to step-outside of their way of being to reassess what will lead to success in the future.

The ability to unlearn what has made you successful to date is fundamental to the breakthrough thinking that allows leaders to envision and deliver new futures that others deem impossible. Understanding and acknowledging that you have a set of winning moves which shape your thinking and behaviour is the first step. They are not wrong, and they have served you well, but holding too tightly to them prevents you from seeing new moves that could work better.

Listen for the questions you always ask

To reveal our unconscious winning moves it is helpful to question the questions we usually ask. The little voice in our heads is always prompting us to ask the questions that open the door to our winning moves. Challenging ourselves to look beyond these can help us step outside of these routines and identify new approaches. Imagine a new CEO joining the organisation of you – how would they look at your winning moves, and what would they change? What is the conventional wisdom they would challenge and what new ideas could they bring from outside?

It will be difficult and intellectually demanding, but consciously becoming aware of your preferred winning moves delivers new choices. Things which have been accepted as impossible can become achievable. New potentials can be created and new futures envisaged when leaders free themselves from the constraints of established winning moves. The exhaustion and stress of constantly striving to fit a changing world into the static framework of what has worked before is replaced by energy and the possibility of new ways of being.

The temptation for any leader facing times of change is to focus back on what they know has worked. But unlearning what has made you successful so far and stepping outside of the tried and trusted, will lead to what Gary Kasparov calls, "Beautiful or paradoxical moves





CENSORED

06 Stay quiet, stay safe for a pay cheque.

Originally published: 29/01/21
Written By Mike Straw, CEO

Honest feedback is essential for breakthrough performance – but creating cultures that encourage it is tricky.

Don't bring me problems...

My door is always open – how many times have we all heard that from leaders? Today's leaders are at pains to show how they are open to honest feedback and to hearing the truth about how things are going. But, in reality creating a culture in which everyone feels they can speak honestly to leadership is hard. After all, speaking the truth to someone who has power over your livelihood is not easy – especially if you might upset them. Being open to feedback and creating the psychological safety that encourages honest communication is essential for breakthrough cultures – how can leaders develop it?

Setbacks happen

It starts with acknowledging that setbacks are inevitable. It is crazy to think that every project will go off without a hitch, but all too often the unconscious approach is to communicate a vision of how things are going to be, gain commitment to an approach, and regard any obstacles as problems or failures. Against this backdrop it is hard for individuals to speak up and be straight about challenges they see.

Leaders should instead actively communicate that setbacks are expected and understood to be a natural and indeed vital element of any progress. They need to

create the business case for looking for and calling out breakdowns as the basis of a culture of honesty.

The choice of language is important. Talking about problems triggers emotional responses – something has gone wrong, things are not as they should be, something, or someone, is to blame. This negatively charged language makes people feel uncomfortable and has a deep psychosomatic impact on individuals which make it much less likely that they will speak out. It also makes it harder to disentangle what is fact from what is an individual's interpretation of a situation. Anxiety and stress caused by things 'going wrong' constrain capacity for imagination and rational consideration of what's actually happening.

Breakdowns are opportunities

Breakdowns, by contrast, are simply opportunities to look at facts and to discuss and innovate ways to overcome setbacks.

Leaders are not best placed to understand the intricacies of day-to-day execution of projects; teams working on the frontlines will have a better view of what's really going on. By stepping back and relinquishing control leaders can orchestrate breakdown discussions that provide space to explore options. Facts can be unpacked, debated and understood. These become rewarding discussions that teams want to participate in as research and development opportunities that move projects forward. They also deepen commitment to the overall vision as individuals are empowered to contribute to solutions that get things back on track rather than

looking to leaders to 'fix' issues.

Breakdowns are an opportunity for leaders to tune into the current limits of their existing thinking. These boundaries of the mind are simply borders where your imagination can spring off of to get creative with your solution finding. Without these borders it's harder to be creative, so embrace the discovery of breakdowns.

Bring out your dead

At Achieve Breakthrough, we're regularly hired to get high-stakes projects that have veered off course back on track. By the time we arrive, relationships between different stakeholder groups may be somewhat frayed, with a culture of blame-laying, hiding mistakes and problems, and a purely transactional (not collaborative) spirit bedding in. An exercise we find that works well to quickly bring teams back together is to re-cast people's relationships to problems as inevitable setbacks and then to have an open "bring out your dead" dialogue. This is a moment of radical candour where everyone knows they are now physiologically safe to share their "Little Voices" – in particular the "problems" they see that have or could happen, mistakes they are hiding, and judgements they are holding. In this moment we encourage people to speak freely what are perhaps just interpretations about a situation – in a spirit of clearing the decks to move forwards.

First impressions count

A leader's initial reaction to a setback is critical in building open and supportive cultures. The natural inclination of many is to deal with the issue and quickly find answers. "Don't worry about that," "I'm on it," or "I've already considered it" are common knee-jerk reactions. But this type of response will close down conversation and disempower teams. They can feel that their concerns are either not legitimate, unwelcome or not taken seriously.

Individuals may use the language of problems, and feedback may be critical of the leader and their vision. To create truly psychologically safe spaces, is the leader's job to move beyond these reactions to listen and help their teams re-frame their concerns as breakdowns. Coaching, questioning and focusing conversations on facts are the essential practices needed to do this. Delivered well and consistently, they will build an open and honest culture of collaboration that is profoundly empowering for all.

Mastering emotions

Underpinning all of this is the leader's own emotional maturity. Mastering your own reactions to feedback is essential. You cannot expect people to be open and honest if your initial reaction is defensive or evasive, and certainly not if it is aggressive. Core to this is understanding who you are being in the conversation. Whilst feedback may seem personal, in reality it is aimed at some aspect of the organisation, the project or the

vision. Yes, it is your vision, and your commitment, but by decoupling you, the leader of the organisation, from you, the individual, you can remove the emotion and consider the facts of the situation. By giving up control to equip and empower the team to resolve breakdowns not only will you build a more straight-talking culture, but you will deepen individuals' personal commitment to the vision.

None of this is easy, and it takes practice, but consistently applying these basic approaches will build stronger, more honest and committed teams. Remember:

- Always invite feedback but resist the urge to respond immediately and 'fix' things
- Language matters - talk about breakdowns not problems, focus on failures. Expect and welcome them as opportunities to create new approaches
- Step back and coach teams to unpack facts and collaborate on best next steps
- Be conscious of who you are being in the conversation – be confident in your own emotional maturity and ability to decouple the personal from the corporate.
- People are not machines - stand in your people's shoes, see the world through their eyes and understand their context. Bring compassion and humility and be proud of them for having the courage to call breakdowns. Even if they feel personally painful to hear.



07 Leading your business to thrive, not just survive, in the wake of Covid-19

Originally published: 12/03/20

Written By Dan Elvery, Head of Marketing

Covid-19 wasn't in our forecasts for 2020, but for businesses and communities it's essential that leaders show up quickly with the vision, ambition and preparedness to thrive, not just survive, in its wake.

Stem the virus, not possibility

Some of the best leaders in history are known as such because of their ability to lead in the face of adversity. Bringing confidence, motivation and vision to otherwise unpredictable and worrying situations. These breakthrough leaders are able to stand for possibility, agility and innovation; being bold in what is possible vs. avoidance of failure. Looking for unconventional solutions by believing in possibility instead of focusing only on damage control.

Covid-19 has certainly given us all something to run away from in the short term and many businesses will be giving lots of their time to damage limitation. But having something to run towards will motivate, inspire and rally your teams to challenge convention and start generating 'what's possible' despite limiting circumstances. Maintaining your longer term 2020 strategies and targets will show steady leadership and give confidence to your teams. Coronavirus is a force to reckon with but for businesses, upholding longer term goals is essential for focus and morale despite the short term disruption we're all facing. And the more leaders that stay resolute to their 2020 goals, the less speculative impact the virus will have.

Tips for leading with high possibility:

- Maintain your visions for 2020. Keep speaking your biggest vision and ambition for 2020 grounded in the future, when the Covid-19 disruption is over. We're certainly going through some turbulence but remaining steady and focused on the bigger picture is essential in order to maintain performance and belief.
- Rallying cry. A stirring rallying cry can equip people mentally, bring them together and drive the people engine forward as they feel a sense of ownership and team spirit. 'We will...'. This is a short-term approach to galvanise teams, focus efforts and generate bursts of high productivity in a positive and ambitious way.
- Get Creative. What's possible vs. what's predictable: challenge yourself and your team to be unconventional in finding solutions and ideas. Look for new collaborations and partnerships. When faced with setbacks seek to explore, discover and innovate vs. accept defeat.
- Understand the difference between preparedness and catastrophising. Work with your team to get prepared for different outcomes and situations by actively scenario planning different circumstances. But clearly hold these in your mind as "possible" scenarios, not factual eventualities, to avoid catastrophising and creating self-fulfilling prophecies. However, if you're a leader that always looks for positivity and a high possibility mentality from your team, avoid hearing their valid concerns as catastrophising, but as an opportunity to be prepared. In short, be prepared, try not to catastrophise, but don't act in denial either.

Manage the mood

It's not just Covid-19 that's contagious, the mood around it is just as catching! For organisations, stemming a feeling of panic or loss of control is crucial to allow enough head space for people to think and act clearly despite changing goal-posts. For leaders, being transparent, real-time and, above-all, confident, is key. Sticking to the facts and communicating often will give reassurance and clarity. Keeping the mood focused, practical and calm so people can keep working towards goals and creating new possibilities.

Listening to concerns and what people need to keep working is also essential to keep your team productive and thriving. Be open to what's needed and get flexible; Covid-19 will inevitably pass in time and so being adaptive and open-minded will lead others to stay focused and committed.

Tips for managing the mood:

- Communicate, communicate, communicate. Keep people updated even if there are gaps in what is certain, be honest, open and reassuring.
- Listen. Hear people's concerns and requests.
- Be flexible. Be willing to make practical changes that keep everyone engaged and able to do their jobs in the short term. Showing up as flexible and understanding will keep the mood optimistic, safe and human.
- Talk about mood. Tackle the hearsay head-on and declare the mood you want in the business. Using phrases like 'Let's keep the mood calm, focused and sensible' will set the tone of your thinking and dissipate fears of knee-jerk decisions or panic at the top.

The reality's virtual

There will be breakthroughs in remote and virtual working as a result of Covid-19 owed simply to the fact that everyone's going to give it a try. It's easier and more accessible than ever to work remotely, using virtual technology to keep us talking and joined up. Getting your team together or keeping an event in the diary is absolutely possible given the technology available to us today. Not only does this allow for business continuity whilst travel bans or isolation are in force, it's also a great communication tool for keeping everyone up to date in real-time. Using virtual meeting rooms, video conferencing and Webinars make almost any type of meeting or classroom experience possible. Leaders and businesses who embrace the role of technology and discover what's really possible will continue to thrive and might even do business differently as a result in future.



1 + 1 = ?

08 What is Breakthrough Collaboration?

Originally published: 20/11/20
Written By Mike Straw, CEO

In our fast changing world, business leaders need to look beyond the conventional. Today we're kicking off a series of articles on the subject of Breakthrough Collaboration and business partnerships, to explore how we can respond with innovation and speed in this new world.

Collaboration is happening across countless organisations all the time, surely? The systems are set in place, the software, the contracts... We've got inter-departmental projects and those long-standing relationships with clients and business partners. And doesn't almost every business claim to have a collaborative approach these days?

The trouble is: businesses aren't machines. They're made up of people who all bring their own mindsets to the table. The kind of collaboration that leads to breakthrough rarely happens just because the parts are in the right place or because people appear to be working together. Breakthrough Collaboration requires much more intentionality.

Our misconceptions of collaboration

When did a collaborative project last bring out the best version of who you are? Trusted to give it your all, you were open to learn, you were determined not to let the side down and it was no chore for you to completely immerse yourself in the whole project with all of your being. Do you ever wish you could find your way back to that feeling? Well, it's no wonder. You were tasting a little

of true collaboration.

The reality is that, while we could argue over definitions, usually what we call collaboration is more like cooperation. Or possibly coordination.

Often the balance of power sits with one of the parties. This is cooperation, when most of the ideas, innovations and insights stem from one side of the relationship, even if this is never defined or spoken about. And it probably won't be. Because in this situation, people don't usually feel free to speak their minds.

When we feel there's a possibility of losing a business opportunity, or a promotion or the approval of another leader, we channel our words through a filtration system labelled, 'Is it safe to say?' Even when we're invited to shape the conversation, we are more likely to decorate the discussion than mould its direction.

Occasionally businesses achieve coordination, which is an improvement. Parties knock the power between them like players in a tennis match, taking it in turns to show their expertise and have their say.

But with coordination - if we can stretch the tennis metaphor a little further - everything is played in spotless whites. There's still an air of polite civility to the whole affair and, whether we intend to or not, we're standing on opposite sides of the court, guided by different strategic agendas. We hit ideas this way and that, finding it hard to build momentum, still a little afraid of losing to the other side.

Collaboration with a capital C

In Breakthrough Collaboration, the sense of possibility eclipses our sense of preservation. Instead of tiptoeing politely around one another, all parties enter the fray together to find where the magic might be.

Because they're not wasting their energy worrying about what the other side is doing, or getting hung up on their own reputation, everyone can innovate, speak straight and take action fast. They're incubating breakthroughs

In this kind of collaboration there is no balance of power. Parties aren't working at a ratio of 30:70 or 60:40. They're not even taking it in turns to defer to one another. Instead they're bringing their full capabilities to bear. It's been said that the whole is greater than the sum of our parts. And when we tap into Breakthrough Collaboration, this becomes exponentially true.

Committing to breakthrough

Leaders and businesses are always working together. But when the size of the relationship is greater than the size of our hangups and reservations, our egos and the little voice in our head, then we are working as one.

That doesn't mean we agree on everything, which is more than likely a sign that true collaboration isn't happening. Agreement isn't really the point. The greater concern is the alignment of agendas.

But not just any objective will do. The target needs to be breakthrough. One where many great minds can join together and figure out possibilities that they wouldn't have thought of before.

Because if you're not committed to breakthrough then what will motivate you to get uncomfortable? What will inspire you to challenge assumptions? To step beyond what you know and have done in the past? Collaboration is too difficult to maintain unless the desire for breakthrough is driving it.

What Breakthrough Collaboration feels like

How do you recognise Breakthrough Collaboration when it's in effect? Well, the results will begin to show after a while. But you can recognise it at an earlier stage.

Pause for a second and remember the last time you worked with a leader who wholeheartedly trusted you. Someone who totally empowered you with a project or a team or a role.

Do you have that experience in your mind? Right, now remember how that made you feel.

If you're anything like the hundreds of leaders we have worked with, you likely felt inspired to bring your A game, the best version of yourself, to the project.

Knowing people trust you will have made you want to be worthy of that trust, so you engaged with the project with everything you had. And no doubt greater results followed.

This is what Breakthrough Collaboration feels like. It's far more than a process. It's living and breathing. It's tempered by a mindset of breakthrough - and driven by an unwavering commitment to it. The results are innovation, speed and an outcome that exceeds your predictions. And you can make it happen, if you're willing to get uncomfortable.

Breakthrough Collaboration doesn't happen by default. You can't create it with a perfect system but you can hone the breakthrough mindset that fuels it. Check out our partnership and collaboration services or get in touch to explore how we can help you ignite your ambitions.



09 Diversity and performance: Why they are inseparable

Originally published: 11/02/21
Written By Mike Straw, CEO

Diversity and inclusion are at long last coming to the forefront of the agenda for organisations. But while this is good news in its own right, it would be a mistake to think that D&I is only a question of ethics. There is also a business case.

The question of diversity doesn't only belong in a D&I meeting or department. If we're serious about making an impact, breaking new ground or developing high performing teams, then diversity needs to stay in the spotlight. Because when we shift from talking about diversity to talking about team performance, we're not talking about two separate issues.

Re-examining the superchickens

Back in 2015, Margaret Heffenan made widely-known the findings of William Muir, an evolutionary biologist at Purdue University, who studied the productivity of chickens.

If you're not familiar with the story behind the research, here's a quick recap. He left an average flock alone for six generations and they turned out just fine - plump, with a steadily increasing production of eggs.

Muir also tried to create a superflock bred from only the most productive chickens. But after leaving them alone for six generations, there were only three featherless chickens left, the rest had been killed off. Their competitiveness had turned to hostility and waste.

While measuring human productivity isn't as simple as counting eggs, many organisations have resonated with

this story over the years. The message was simple: a model built on superstars and competition will collapse upon itself. It's also to some extent the fate that awaits the non-diverse team. If we prioritise productivity over diversity, we may end up with neither.

The anatomy of a high performing team

Heffenan offered an alternative, pointing to the work of researchers at MIT who made two separate studies of 699 people, each working in teams of two to five to complete a variety of simple and complex tasks.

The MIT researchers found that performance wasn't the product of a combined high individual intelligence. Instead, the highest performing teams were distinguished by their social sensitivity, their equality of conversational turn-taking and, strikingly, the number of women in the group.

While the researchers came to no conclusions as to why high performing teams had a high proportion of women, it makes a case for diversity. Maybe women tend to be more empathetic with or connected to people who have a different perspective to them. Even if you can't draw such a direct correlation between them, these collaborative qualities need to be our priority if we want to perform.

Our context is decisive

It should go without saying but you can't benefit from a

variety of perspectives if you only listen to yourself. The catch is: this is what many leaders do without realising. Their intuition and understanding is guided by their own frames of reference and their own experience of the world. So while we might invite the input of others, if we don't get present to our own internal reality, we won't let them affect our blind spots.

We start every client project with context. We hope to leave clients with more empathy just by making them aware of their influences. Our aim is to loosen their relationship to their frame of reference so that they see the value of what lies outside it.

The creativity of innovators is often channelled towards what could make life better for them. It's not necessarily selfish, it's simply that they're finding solutions to the problems they see and experience. But if anything is outside that experience, it can create issues for accessibility.

So what would happen if we hired more disabled people to design our phones, for example? Chances are, it would make the product better, with features that take more people into account. Diversity invites inclusive design and thinking, which is the kind of innovation we desperately need.

Widening your selection of winning moves

You can't artificially create diversity with flexibility of thought. But once a diverse collection of leaders are in the room, once they are at the decision table with you, then empathy is essential. With this in mind, we explore communication preferences with many of our clients, helping leaders to realise that they don't listen and respond in the same way as others.

Here's the thing. Everyone listens out for different elements in a conversation to respond to. And placed in a room with others, everyone has their own set of winning moves that makes them successful. But the minute that becomes your sole mode of operating, you can get stuck.

One senior executive we coach tells people freely that one of their winning moves is to show up as the most compelling person in the room. It's helped them to win sales opportunities, to inspire leaders and to prompt others to show up as their best selves too. But they also acknowledge that they have to be careful not to stay in that mode too long. At other times, a different approach is needed and maybe someone else's winning move needs to take centre stage.

A diverse team will not only have a wider, truer perspective, it will have a wider selection of winning moves too. Which can only increase the team's agility, enabling them to perform well in a variety of circumstances.

Businesses aren't machines. It's always been the people

that matter more than the business functions we build - and diversity is about people at the end of the day. It's connection and empathy and a diversity of people that will raise our performance beyond what we've known.



10 Tackling under-performance: It's not just you, it's me.

Originally published: 08/03/17
Written By Isabel Elvery, COO

Got someone in the team who isn't performing? Not sure how to turn their performance around? It's something we can all get better at managing, and it starts with us.

It's all about you

Before you can tackle someone else's performance, you have to get yourself in check first. This means testing your own opinions of the person in question. Have you already written them off? Deep down do you believe they will never really improve? Even if you have your doubts, you need to authentically commit to them performing well, and believe that improvement is genuinely possible. Without this, their poor performance becomes an inevitable, self-fulfilling prophecy. You've already decided they're no good, therefore all you can see is 'no good'. Before you know it, anything genuinely excellent they do is put down to luck or fluke. In this state of affairs, their performance has no way at all of improving, your perspective of them simply won't allow it, regardless of what they actually do.

Secondly, you have to get wise to your preferences. You have them, but you may not know it. These include preferences towards working styles, punctuality (or lack thereof), tidiness, extroversion, introversion, whether they go to the gym...the list is endless. These, often unconscious, preferences, have us pre-conditioned to assess performance in our own unique, and personal way. We translate these personal preferences into our version of 'professional'. For example; a messy desk =

poor performer. Sounds trivial but ask yourself whether they would be just as poor a performer if they were working for someone else – the right manager. Is their poor performance just a 'you' thing? or are they factually lacking competence? In other words, would it be possible for someone else to bring out the best in them? And if they could, couldn't you? Who then is responsible for ensuring that performance is great? In short, it's whoever is willing to be responsible for it.

Who's responsible?

Is it really possible to be responsible for someone else's performance? Not just the management of it, but the performance itself? As responsibility is a state of mind, and a choice, it is absolutely possible to be responsible for someone else's performance. The question then is how committed you are to them performing in the first place. If your life depended on their performance, you would certainly make sure they knew what to do, had all the feedback, coaching, demonstration necessary and you'd be quick off the mark to correct things if something went awry. You would be brutal but dedicated in your feedback. You would do whatever it took. It is then the strength of your commitment that determines how responsible you will be for someone else's performance. If you're really committed to them succeeding, you'll make sure of it. If you aren't, you won't.

This can feel uncomfortable, even unfair on managers looking at team members who appear less capable than they would like. It raises the expectation that managers or colleagues must be willing to put their personal preferences aside and go the extra mile for

one another. Sometimes sacrificing their own comfort to have a potentially challenging conversation. Or giving more time and energy to developing someone than they'd planned to. Whilst this might sound unreasonable, the alternative is both underperformance and all the wasted time talking about it, working around it; all effort spent avoiding tackling it. Not only this but without learning to commit to the performance of others fully, managers will only ever get the best out of certain people; the ones they have a natural synergy with. The rest will need to go elsewhere to really flourish and the managers themselves won't become skilled in unlocking potential.

For some of you, tackling it head on hasn't been the problem. It's the apparent lack of improvement once you've given your brutally honest feedback, sometimes several times over..! In summary, for some the honest conversation about poor performance is missing altogether, for others it has been had but proved ineffective.

It's all about them

When feedback doesn't work, what's missing is the right context. No feedback was ever effective, and genuinely enlightening for the recipient, unless it was contextualised in the world as they saw it. The feedback must be made relevant to something the recipient wants to achieve. Not just something you want them to achieve. Why this is so important is two-fold. Firstly; un-contextualised feedback sounds like raw criticism and will be discarded with likely offence or disregard. Secondly; nothing will change!

What you say needs to be framed inside the things that the recipient cares about, making it possible for them to hear you, and do something about it. For example, you may be wanting someone to speed up and work more efficiently. Try saying this to someone who's terrified of making a mistake. Without handling their fear of errors, it will be almost impossible for them to change, what's more they'll feel pressured to just 'hurry up' despite it feeling completely counter-intuitive to do so. Getting in the world of your 'poor performer'; understanding their motivations, commitments and concerns is critical to delivering feedback that actually lands. Framing it inside their world and their thinking allows them to interact with your feedback fully and make changes that make sense to them. Not just you.

Embrace the challenge

Managing poor performance doesn't have to become a drawn out, unpleasant and unfruitful experience. By taking full responsibility for the performance of others you can dive in, unlock potential and develop your own management ability in the process. Challenge and own your views of others. Question; what are they actually doing that I view as underperformance? Is it just my opinion or is there something really tangible and real going on? Give them feedback they can really hear and use. Frame it in their context and be specific

and practical about what you want them to change. From here, be ready to discuss their concerns and be committed to helping them overcome the barriers that they see. Even if you don't see the same ones.

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