

The Four Practices of a Visionary Leader

By John C. Maxwell

In February 1895, brothers Louis and Auguste Lumiere patented the cinematograph, an all-in-one film camera, projector, and printer. With the use of their invention, the two Frenchmen created the concept of a motion picture. Their public screening in March 1895 was history's first. Later on that year the Lumieres reached another milestone, as a showing of their work became the earliest instance of an audience paying admission to watch a film.

Initially the brothers made a splash, producing thousands of short films in a span of less than two years. Their footage, shot at a variety of exotic locations, is widely considered to be the forebear of the modern documentary. However, despite their pioneering work in cinematography, the brothers failed to foresee the broad appeal of motion pictures. Within five years, the Lumieres had given up filmmaking to return to their previous work developing still photographs. "The cinema is an invention without a future," Louis Lumiere allegedly remarked.

For all of their inventiveness, the Lumiere's demonstrated a surprising lack of vision. Shortly after they stopped making films, the movie industry exploded. Crowds have been flocking to the theaters ever since. According to the Motion Picture Association of America, U.S. box offices took in 9.79 billion dollars in 2008.

The Lumieres missed out on the benefits of vision, but you don't have to. As a leader, you can keep sight of your vision and use it to influence others by following the four practices of a visionary leader.

1) Realize that things will change

The Lumiere's weren't the only ones who failed to anticipate the future direction of the movie industry. Early on in cinema, movies had no dialogue. This was the era of silent movies featuring the likes of Charlie Chaplin.

When Sam Warner approached his brother Harry with the idea of adding sound to films made by Warner Bros. Pictures, he received the infamous retort, "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?" Harry fought vehemently against incorporating sound into the studio's pictures, and only yielded to his brother's suggestion with Warner Bros. on the brink of financial ruin. Having added audio, the Warners' talkie films (movies with sound) took off, revolutionizing the way movies were produced and bringing a windfall of profits for Warner Bros. Pictures.

2) Consider other people's perspective

Henry Ford obstinately refused to adjust his assembly process to suit the desire of consumers to choose the color of their automobiles. "Any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants so long as it is black," Ford stubbornly insisted. Within a few years, Ford Motor Company's market share had plummeted as drivers bought from manufactures that catered to their color preferences.

3) Display courage when others are insecure

Harriet Tubman conducted daring journeys into the South to rescue slaves and escort them to freedom in the North via the "Underground Railroad." At times, the slaves she had freed would fear capture and would want to go back. However, Harriet Tubman had a "no return" policy. Whenever an escaped slave threatened to turn around, she would pull out a firearm and give the ultimatum, "Be free or die." Needless to say, she had no trouble convincing her "passengers" to stay the course.

Harriet Tubman's vision of freedom overrode her concern for the consequences of being caught. Fellow abolitionist William Still summed up Tubman's courage: "Great fears were entertained for her safety, but she was wholly devoid of personal fear. The idea of being captured by slave-hunters or slave holders, seemed never to enter her mind." In total, Tubman helped more than 300 slaves gain their freedom, risking her life on 19 secretive voyages into the South.

4) Prepare today to win tomorrow

John Wooden achieved unparalleled success in the coaching profession, winning 10 NCAA basketball titles in 12 years, including seven consecutively. His teams also won an astonishing 88 games in a row at one point. Amazingly, for all his victories, Coach Wooden never spoke to his teams in terms of winning or losing. Instead, he focused his concentration on maximizing his players' potential and coaxing their best effort. In his words, "How you run the race-your planning, preparation, practice, and performance-counts for everything. Winning or losing is a byproduct, and aftereffect of that effort." In Coach Wooden's world, success was measured by the amount of sweat put forth in practice rather than by the numbers showing on the scoreboard after a game.