Leadership Think
Imagine the unimaginable.

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Published by Ria Duve: “You have to imagine it possible before you can see something. You can have the evidence right in front of you, but if you can’t imagine something that has never existed before, it’s impossible.”

Conventional wisdom is that the failure on 9/11 was one of security when, in fact, it was a failure of imagination. As the 9/11 Commission Report states: “What happened on 9/11 was not a failure in the system. Nobody could have imagined that hijackers would intentionally crash. Hijackers usually want to live.” The learning here is that if we can’t imagine it, we can’t plan for it and we cannot do anything about it.

One big opportunity and challenge in Leadership Development (LD) today is helping individuals to learn to think like leaders. The mindset of a singular focus on problems and issues is limiting. Thinking only in terms of short-term results and ignoring the broader impact of connections and relationships can limit success. Leaders must adopt a mindset of thinking and seeing the unimaginable so that they can plan for it. That’s the challenge—to build Leadership Think.

What Do You See?

This expectation of Leadership Think in leaders is captured in a story that a friend shared about a leadership learning exercise he did with new members of his executive team. He would invite them to his office and, taking them to a window facing a mountain, ask them what they saw. They would typically enumerate what they saw and describe the mountain. He would then ask: What do you see behind the mountain? Frustrated, they would say, We can’t see behind the mountain.

He would look at each of them and say: “You are not a leader. If you were a leader, you could see behind the mountain.” This was a moment of both great teaching and great learning.

He explained that, as leaders, they would face great challenges (mountains) in their careers and would need to see beyond the mountain, and then take people on a journey to that place. It would inspire and motivate others to follow them, and achieve what they once could not see and thought impossible.

Leadership Think is having the skills and talent to think strategically—to understand the implications of new ideas, recognize trends and explore their implications in a broader cultural construct, and identify potential opportunities that arise as a result of these trends. Leaders understand the critical importance of being well-informed citizens of the world—keeping abreast of events and news—to build a global strategic mindset and understand the conceptual potential of technology.

This approach to LD strengthens, develops, and refines critical thinking, analytical skills, and talents. It focuses on looking at issues and events more holistically, seeking to understand their implications and connections to each other while finding relationships in sometimes seemingly unrelated topics. The robust development of these attributes heightens leaders’ capacity to identify patterns and trends. It enables them to look at the world through different lenses, to see new possibilities and tap into the richness of diversity of thought and perspective around them. Leaders emerge saying: “We are change!”

One approach to developing these attributes is the ideas and trends process. Unlike visioning, which results in a sought-after state, the end result of this process is an imagined reality of what could be. The process starts with a current reality. The leader then asks questions, and as the answers develop, connections and relationships become apparent. When examining the connections between seemingly unrelated interests, it’s possible to develop the map of relationships that enrich decision-making. From this iterative process emerges a picture of what can be, formerly unimaginable. While not a reality, yet, it provides a framework for planning for what can be, either as a real possibility or a risk-aversion scenario (if we can’t imagine it, we can’t plan for it).

Answers to the future are not found in a book. Great leaders look for connections inspired by disparate inputs. They explore the implications of those connections and contemplate the what if, what could be—the unimaginable. These implications expand the frame within which they consider alternatives. They anticipate and then plan accordingly.

Steve Jobs, in his 2005 Stanford Commencement Address, remarked: “You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, and karma, whatever. Because believing that the dots will connect is the path to follow your heart even when it leads you off the well-worn path; and that will make all the difference.” However, while history provides the reality for making sense of what happened and a framework for planning based on those lessons, we’re confident that Mr. Jobs, of all people, would joyfully embrace the path of imagining the unimaginable. Who imagined the iPod? It is the stuff of great leadership.

This connecting of the dots provides a magical framework of the future—what can be. The lessons have to do with connections, implications, and impacts. In this connecting, great leaders begin to see what they did not see before. Even relationships that are outside of their field of vision provide new insights on how to address issues and concerns. This mind-expanding exercise prompts leaders to start looking inside, not outside.

Sun Tzu, Chinese military strategist, wrote: “Can you imagine what I would do if I could do all I can?” If he were alive today, he might change his words to: “Can you imagine what I would do if I could do all that I imagine?” Let us remind great leaders of the words of Thomas Edison as they push the limits of their imagination: “We don’t know a millionth of one percent about anything.”

The challenge for great leaders is to see beyond the mountains around them. They may need to see through different lenses; or step back or sideways to see it from a new perspective. Maybe they’ll discover that the mountain is but a pile of rocks, and then remember the words of Antoine Saint-Exupéry: “A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral.”

Great leadership requires great imagination—the talent and ability to see what no one else has yet seen.