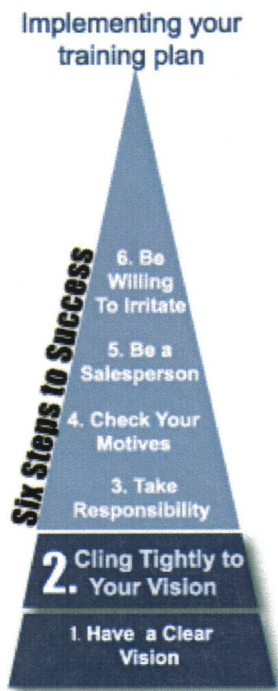




The Six Steps to Success: Step 2 - Cling Tightly to Your Vision



In this series, trainer Shona Welsh, MCEd, CHRP, shares her experiences during her six-year journey in building and running a corporate learning and communications program.

Last month we discussed the importance of having a clear vision in launching your learning initiative across your organization. I ended by saying that while it took eight months to gain approval for my vision, it was only the beginning of what would be an extremely tough challenge. Which leads us to **Step 2: Cling Tightly to Your Vision.**

Way back at the dawn of time — also known as the beginning of my career — a very fine vice-president with whom I worked gave me a piece of advice that has stayed with me and served me extremely well through the years. Our organization’s executive team had just undergone a Myers-Briggs personality typing exercise, and as part of the executive support team, I was invited to participate. What this particular vice-president and I discovered was that we were exactly

the same ‘type’, whereas everyone else on the team was a completely different type. On many previous occasions, he and I had shared frequent conversations regarding our frustration with the inner workings of the organization. On this occasion, he approached me with a Far Side cartoon, even though his message was quite serious.

Pictured in the cartoon is a cow standing on a stage, looking out over an audience entirely comprised of cows — with one exception. There is one, lone horse sitting in the front row looking quite stressed as he surveys the cows around him. The caption underneath reads, quoting the cow on stage: “All those in favor say ‘moo’, all those opposed say ‘neigh’.” While I chuckled at the cartoon, the vice-president looked gravely at me and said, “Always remember, Shona, no matter where you go in your career — just because you’re outnumbered doesn’t mean you’re wrong”.



Not two months later, this vice-president departed the organization for what I hope was greener pastures. I'm not sure if the Myers-Briggs exercise was the catalyst for his departure, but I am sure of one thing — his advice has kept me going in some of the darkest times I have had in my career. In fact, as I continued on my journey to launching leadership and communications programs in other companies, I must tell you that I took that cartoon out and looked at it on many an occasion (yes, I do still have it after all these years, however dog-eared and mangy it has become!).

As time went on and I entered my second year of change agency in the company I was working for, I became increasingly frustrated. That entire year could be characterized by what I term 'corporate head banging' on my part — approvals for programs one week, roadblocks to implementation the next, both swiftly followed by sabotage on the part of detractors (however passive). Strange But True Fact Number 1: As I mentioned last month, don't make the mistake of thinking that just because your organization says they want to pursue your initiative, and just because they have hired you for the express purpose of implementing your initiative, doesn't mean they are actually prepared to do it. Again, you are asking them to adopt new behavior — and the mother of all new behavior is change.

It seemed like no matter what I did that year, no matter what successes I had with programming, the executives remained passive, rather than active, in their support. I faithfully followed all the management gurus' wisdom regarding change needing to happen from the top, executives must be seen as supportive, blah, blah, blah. Even though I enlisted, requested, emphasized that our leaders must model the desired behavior, they refused (however subtly) to do what was necessary. I was desperate, disheartened, and disgruntled. When you get to that point (or if you're there already), take heart — this is normal in the change agent's evolution. It usually happens between year one and two, and it's often as serious as wanting to quit (I had the letter composed in my head).

In a heart-to-heart with the company president at the end of year two, he advised me that my problem was that I wanted mountains when I should be happy with molehills. My response? "I don't do molehills" (visionaries need a healthy dose of stubbornness at times). It's true that wars are won tiny battle by tiny battle, but any visionary knows that you can get sidetracked very quickly by setting your sights on the molehills. Lasting change must be decisive, transformative, and final. The Spanish explorer Cortez, upon reaching the New World, ordered his crew to set fire to all their ships. His reasoning? If the crew knew that all hope of returning to their old life was gone, they would look purposefully ahead to creating a new life. Cling stubbornly to your vision, or you'll be contending with molehills for the rest of your career (or at least in your current organization).



Unsure and conflicted, I did some serious soul-searching during my summer vacation while engaged in some light reading (A History of Mankind). In the course of my musings, it suddenly struck me that, throughout history, not one revolution had begun with a king. They had all begun with the peasants. Looking at my Far Side cartoon for inspiration, I decided that while I was clearly outnumbered by the executives, I had some reason to believe that the peasants (junior and middle management) would be my allies.

When I returned to work in the fall - the resignation letter mentally ripped up - I approached my vision with a new energy. I identified junior and middle managers who had been supportive of my initiatives, convinced them to launch a management development program for themselves and their direct reports, and spent the next year essentially piloting learning programs at those levels.

As the year went on, the kudos rolled in, and the learning participants saw the benefit of what we were doing, middle managers began to ask the all- important questions: Are the executives doing this stuff? If not, why not? And a revolution was born.



Enlist the Support of Junior and Middle Management

By the time I got to my third year executive team presentation, my greatest executive detractors asked, “Why don’t we get to do programs like this?” The executive were getting so much pressure from the managers to engage in the process that they had little choice but to sit up and take notice. Programs began to flourish in the organization from that point on.

It would have been easy to walk away from the challenge after two years, and I was seriously prepared to do so. Ultimately, however, I knew that no one else in the company had my vision for learning and communications, and that all the hard work I had done up to that point would be lost if I left. At the core of it all was my belief that my vision was right for the company, even though I was seriously outnumbered on numerous occasions. A little stubbornness didn’t hurt either.

Lest you think it was easy for me to be stubborn and that I am blessed with a healthy ego, I’ll disabuse you of that notion. Normally, I would characterize myself as self-confident, but after two years of having my vision assaulted, I had serious misgivings about my ability to do the job, let alone confidence in my knowledge and ideas.



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