

Forbes

When Leaders Dream!



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November 15, 2024

by Chip Bell

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was always my friend. I did not know Sam personally, but his poetry made me feel like I was conversing with an old friend. I first met Sam

when I had to memorize lines from his famous poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." You likely encountered it as well in Mrs. Ridley's English class.

One of his poems that stayed with me forever is "What If You Slept..." While the poem has a decidedly religious overtone, the challenge presented by his poem is universal for all leaders eager to nurture excellence. Here is Coleridge's poem.

"What if you slept. And what if, in your sleep, you dreamed? And what if in your dream you went to heaven and there plucked a strange and beautiful flower. And what if when you awoke, you had that flower in your hand. Ah, what then?"

We were all taught in Supervision 101 that managers are directors of stuff—policies, materials, numbers, and systems, while leaders are influencers of people. People have hearts and souls rather than programs and sums; people are emotional, not just logical. That is where the dream part comes in.

"All successful people--men and women--are big dreamers," wrote author Brian Tracey. "They imagine what their future could be, ideal in every respect, and then they work every day toward their distant vision, that goal or purpose." Great leaders are superb dreamers. Thomas Edison was not in pursuit of improving the candle. Rosa Parks was not just claiming a seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus. Virgin Galactic founder and CEO Sir Richard Branson is not seeking just to build a faster passenger aircraft.

Dream-Driven Leaders Tell Compelling Stories



When Dr. Martin Luther King stood before a quarter-million people on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963 and delivered a speech practically every fifth grader knows, it did not solely present a dream of a beautiful future where "this nation would rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: that all men are created equal." He put a flower in the hands of everyone within earshot. He spoke of a day when sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners would sit down together at the table of brotherhood. He painted a poignant picture of a time when his own four little children would live in

a nation where they would be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin.

One of the most powerful tools dream-driven leaders use to communicate a clear, captivating purpose is storytelling. Stories are memorable and rich in their capacity to convey meaning. Stories stir inquisitiveness. That trait—the inquisitive pursuit of a dream-- inspires and cultivates employees to strive for what is beyond, not just what is. They are not encumbered by the past or overwhelmed by the present, but rather lean forward to the future with optimism and purpose.

Stories telegraph a set of norms or values unique to the organization. When Aflac managers tell the story of how CEO Dan Amos took a significant risk with his approval of a duck as the company spokesperson, it was really saying, "Be willing to be different." One senior leader said of the infamous meeting to introduce the duck idea, "We thought he had lost his mind. But, today, that duck is one of the most recognizable, brand-enhancing corporate symbols on the planet." "Without a dream," wrote famed author Zig Ziglar, "There would be no dream come true."

Great Stories Start with Amazing Conversations

I am the grandson of a master storyteller. When I once asked my granddaddy how he seemed to know so many stories, he awe-shucked me away by saying, "I just listen a lot to what folks say." The truth is he had a lot of amazing conversations. A child hears adult discussions and dismisses them as "just a lot of talking." However, a keen teenager recognizes that what characterizes an amazing conversation is the attentive exchange of large questions, not just small talk.

Imagine a volleyball or tennis game. The goal is to hit a ball over the net and have it remain in bounds and not return. Amazing conversations focus on keeping the ball in play, not stopping on one side. And what action keeps such a dialogue in play? Questions, not answers. The game ends if a question is asked and the receiver merely answers. It is a return question--particularly a caring, thought-through question--that prompts a response plus another question. Curiosity in action is the



birth of story. My storytelling grandfather did more than talk; he listened, asked many handmade questions, and from it, learned.

When John Mackey founded Whole Foods, he helped birth the organization's mission and values by engaging the entire company in the process. He not only drew on the collective wisdom of everyone, but he also purposely fostered a flat organization to continue engaging employees and prevent their input being lost or misrepresented by a chain of command. The conversation produced Whole Foods' "Declaration of Interdependence," which continues to guide the company today.

Dream-Driven Leaders Act Congruent with Their Dreams

"Like desperadoes waiting for a train" is a song made famous by the Highwayman, a singing group comprised of country music giants Willie Nelson and the late Johnny Cash, Kris Kristofferson, and Waylon Jennings. It perfectly captures the sense of impatience that dream-driven leaders help create. Watch such leaders in action; there is always a sense of anticipation as if something special is just around the corner. More importantly, they fan the flame of expectancy with their low tolerance for anything that creates temperance, moderation, or restraint. They boldly go toward their dream.

It is not that these leaders are shoot-from-the-hip, impulsive types. Their decisions are grounded in substance and bordered by solid information. It is more a restless recognition that being in the moment is required for greatness. They speak about the journey ahead with eagerness. They evaluate input filtered through an interest in tomorrow, not an anchor to yesterday. They show more fascination with what they can be than anxiety with what they are.



Larry Kurzweil, then President of Universal Studios Hollywood, requested the theme park turn up the street music volume and make it peppy, walking-somewhere music. His leadership style communicated that same upbeat, animated, idea-a-minute persona. When people were around him, his infectious forward-leaning energy made them ready to push the go button and make stuff happen. The result? Universal Studios Hollywood enjoyed a repeat

visit rate among guests that was considerably higher than Disneyland and other theme parks in the area.

Dreams that live on are dreams that are retold in other forms. President John F. Kennedy did not paint a picture of going to the moon solely in his 1961 inaugural speech. He repeated the dream in word and deed. It remained on the top of his presidential "to-do" list. After taking office, the dream found its way into many of his speeches and conversations. He used every opportunity to buttonhole people of influence to clear away obstacles to realizing his space dream.

If dreams are shared with consistency, conviction, and clarity, they are heard. If aligned actions and apparent accountability follow dreams, they are believed. If dreams are repeated by those not the subject of the tale, they are remembered. Sooner or later, with persistence and passion, followers awaken from the dream and find a flower in their hand.

About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award-winning, best-selling books. Global Gurus in 2024 ranked him for the tenth year in a row in the top ten keynote speakers in the world on customer experience. He is also an alliance partner with On3.ai that specializes in mobile based, AI-driven field learning programs with high level transfer of learning and retention and an instructor with MyFuel.io. He can be reached at www.chipbell.com.