

The Key to Dreaming Big

By Steven C. Coats

I was recently sitting outside for a late dinner not too long ago watching the moon work its way up the sky. Looking at it reminded me of the great accomplishment from years past, of landing a man on the moon and safely returning him to earth. That was indeed a daunting challenge, and there are an endless number of research articles describing how inspired people were about this endeavor – whether directly involved, or as observers from around the world. What an amazing achievement.

And then I wondered what happened to the concept of big, daring visions, as they seem so scarce. For every Tesla, with some truly ambitious aspirations about cars, most other car companies seem content with visions of bigger and more complicated entertainment systems. To be fair there are dreams by some of driverless cars and other breakthroughs, but interestingly enough, it is the non-car companies, such as Google, getting most of the attention about this.

Can you think of really huge visions in banking, manufacturing or virtually anything else? True, all kinds of businesses are no doubt working at continuously improving, and that does require a lot of thinking and effort. But are you hearing about anything really mind-bending?

Apple does a marvelous job of producing cool stuff. Yet I don't consider repackaging technology into different devices (such as a watch) a real breakthrough. But the idea of "making a dent in the universe," which was a bold notion during the Job's era, certainly might

be enough to inspire people to reach new heights. That is certainly a different challenge than converting 20 new people to a wireless phone plan. And we wonder why employee engagement continues to be a perplexing issue.

I have followed one dreamer for several years who continues to inspire thousands with a somewhat improbable vision. His name is Chad Pregracke, and when he was just 17 years old, he became determined to clean up the Mississippi River. No kidding. But as staggering as that might seem, Chad's vision has only gotten bigger. As the founder of Living Lands and Waters, his crew now tackles over 20 rivers in 18 states, and have drawn over 80,000 volunteers to join them in their passion of cleaning the waterways of this country. Good for you, Chad.

How about you and your group? Do you have anything percolating in your mind that is immensely improbable, but absolutely jaw-dropping in excitement and impact? Have you ever taken some serious time to think about this? Or like so many, are you simply numbed by all that is required today just to keep the doors of your organization open, that you have little time or energy to consider something really big?

Keep in mind that it is not just a lack of time or energy that truncates bold, future thinking. It takes real courage to put forth a grand vision these days, since there are always a countless number of real risks associated with a daring venture. But never forget that courage is part of the price of leadership.

Know that if you do muster up the courage, you will likely be viewed as a crackpot or too much of a dreamer to achieve hard results. And once you put your dream out there publicly, you will be held accountable for ensuring that it becomes a successful reality. You may truly be putting your reputation on the line. It appears there is a lot of downside for articulating and pursuing something really extraordinary.

Several years ago, in our book, *There is No Box*, my co-author Tom Heuer and I wrote about Burt Rutan, who has often had his fingerprints all over aeronautical breakthroughs. At the time, his latest was SpaceShipOne, which was the first manned craft to reach heights of over 320,000 feet. At that time Rutan commented that he absolutely had to develop a space tourism system that would be orders of magnitude more safe than anything that had flown man into space before. What caught our eye was the incredible vision of space tourism. That is pretty big thinking back in the early 2000's.

Fast forward just a few years and you would have seen that the daring pioneer Richard Branson was enlisted in the dream, and created Virgin Galactic, the new Space Tourism division of his business enterprise. Their purpose was to find a way to give the non-zillionaires a chance to take a sub-orbital flight and see the earth and space from a remarkably different perspective. We loved the idea, the challenge, and the hope of one day perhaps being able to have this totally unforgettable experience. And we admired the grit and courage we knew it would take to be successful.

In October 2014, an accident occurred during the 55th test flight of the actual carrier, SpaceShipTwo, which took the life of the co-pilot. The risks are very, very real when pushing the limits of what is possible, and a tainted reputation can sometimes be the least of them.

For Branson himself recently commented, "It is important that our collective efforts and sacrifices are not in vain but serve to inspire others to make big dreams come true." Sounds as if they have the courage and resolve to continue.

So in spite of all the risk and difficulty, I still want to encourage you to think big, and provide your people with a challenge that truly inspires them. (And by the way, it can be something other than space travel!)

Of course you will always have to increase the proverbial bottom line by some percentage every year, but that by itself, is usually as inspiring as watching paint dry. Instead, I hope you will think about what it is that you and your team really would love to be able to do. What would truly make your efforts together unforgettable and richly rewarding. What dream would bring you an incomparable sense of pride, and perhaps even make some kind of dent in your piece of the universe?

The world needs leaders with the passion and courage for big bold thinking, because business as usual won't solve the tough problems confronting us today. Hopefully, you will accept the challenge of inspiring your people to achieve something truly breathtaking. What a ride it will be for you.

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