



The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

Leadership Engagement: Managing YOUR Vision and Purpose

Take the next two minutes and write down your personal mission and vision. Tick, tock, tick, tock. Are you writing or are you locked in a state of fear/ disbelief/ cynicism? It is amazing how many leaders can promptly articulate their organization's mission.... But asked for their personal mission or vision statement, they are stumped. They've spent countless days, weeks, months hashing out what the organization represents and what it aspires to be in the marketplace but not a second articulating the same for themselves. What they don't realize is that to be an effective and engaged leader, one must not only skillfully manage the organization's vision.... They must also be adept at managing their personal vision.

Take James, for example, a former Isis coaching client who is a Senior Vice President at an investment management firm. For years, James had been superbly successful. He had attended the best schools, worked at top-notch companies, and was quickly becoming a leader in his field and firm. By all accounts, James was a successful person. But James felt something lacking. He acknowledged that he was proud of all his accomplishments... yet he was starting to feel less and less engaged with his work. He realized that while he was busy fulfilling his firm's mission, he had lost sight of his own mission. Upon further reflection, James realized that he did not have a vision for his own life. And as a result, he was unclear as to whether all his efforts were anchored in what was important to him. James' busyness and doing, doing, doing were certainly building up to some enviable results... the real question was, were James' results aligned with what he wanted for his life?

As an executive once said during a coaching discussion, "The more senior you become, the more critical it becomes for you to constantly assess whether there is an intersection between what you want for your life and where your organization is heading. Without that intersection, you are on a slippery slope to disengagement. And a disengaged leader is an ineffective leader." Finding out what you want for your life is not always easy because it often requires making trade-offs. That said, part of maturing as a leader, is the ability to see the choices and options in front of you and put a stake in the ground on which you select.

In James' case, we had him take a **TOP**-down approach to figuring out the personal piece of the formula:

1. **Think:** The first step was to THINK. James took a step back and took a few moments every day over a month to jot down things that were important to him and how he wanted to live his life. His final list included statements like "I want every interaction I have to be engaging", "I want adventure in my life", "At some point in my life, I need to create and build something from nothing". These were all statements that were anchored in who James is as a person and his life experiences without judgment... they are right for James but may not be right for someone else.
2. **Observe:** The second step was to OBSERVE. Once James had articulated what he would like his life to look like, he took the time to observe two things: (a) to what extent was he currently living out his vision, and (b) to what extent was there opportunity in his current organization to support living out his vision. Much to James' surprise, he realized that he had spent so much energy focused on what was missing from his work, that he had overlooked the possibility of how much his work could be a supporting pillar of his personal vision.
3. **Plan:** The third step was to PLAN. With a good sense of what he wanted overall for his life and a new appreciation for how work fit in the picture, James could now get tactical in terms of planning not only a few years out but also day-to-day. He made it a habit to look at his calendar a month out and determine where there was opportunity both at work and beyond work to fulfill his vision.

While James' 3-step process sounds simple, it certainly isn't easy. It takes the discipline, maturity and willingness to take a hard and deep look at yourself, your work and your life. But if you make the investment, you will reap the benefits of taking your leadership engagement to the next level.

-Muriel Maignan Wilkins

Quarterly Reflection: Managing YOUR Vision and Purpose

Managing your personal vision and purpose requires reflecting on what you want and making choices.

1. What do you want your life to look like 5 years from now, 10 years from now, 20 years from now? What do you want to be known for and by whom?
2. Look at how you live your life today - - personally and professionally - - to what extent does what you see support what you articulated in question 1?
3. What one or two things can you either pick up or let go of in the next month put you closer to your vision? In the next year?

Quarterly Book Selection: Power of Nice

What dog-eared, highlight-filled books are on our bookshelves that we find ourselves turning to time and time again and frequently recommending to others? Here's our book selection for this quarter:

Power of Nice

By Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval

We are featuring this very short book – a quick read for your next plane ride --- because the key message so deeply resonates with the fundamental values we hold at Isis Associates. Says authors Thaler and Koval, “we wrote the *Power of Nice* because we completely disagreed with the conventional wisdom that nice guys finish last...nice has an image problem. Nice gets no respect...Let us be clear: nice is not naïve...in fact, we would argue nice is the toughest four letter word you'll ever hear...we'll show you that being nice doesn't mean sacrificing what you want for someone else. There's always a second, third, or even fourth solution when you apply the principles of nice.”

Thaler and Koval fill their book from that point forward with fun and descriptive anecdotes from other corporate leaders and their own experience of running the Kaplan Thayer Group, one of the fastest growing advertising agencies in America, where “nice” has led to big wins.

While many of the skills espoused – listening, empathy, speaking the truth - emphasize core foundational communication skills – the bigger lesson in this boils down to the basic tenet that ultimately relationships, whether business or personal, involve human beings. As coaches, we've too often seen clients taking on “business personas” and personal “personas”, interacting with others in a fragmented, disconnected way. The *Power of Nice* is a simple reminder that it is possible to bring one's core values consistently to every interaction.

From the Coach's Corner:

From the Client:

"This past year I put a lot of effort into creating a development plan to work on several leadership competencies identified in a recent 360 as skills critical for the next level. Now, that we are three quarters into the year, I'm frustrated by how little progress I've made, how inauthentic I feel, and how exacerbating it is to see other colleagues naturally excel at skills which feel out of my comfort zone. Any advice on accelerating the change process?"

From the Coach's Corner:

First, congratulations on taking charge of your executive development and challenging yourself to expand beyond your comfort zone. Leadership change is definitely not easy and anybody who tells you to "just do it" is not recognizing the underlying factors at play when we put the wheels of change into motion. Below, we offer some key principles of CHANGE to help make the process smoother and more effective.

C – Competency roadmap: It is critical to first scope what you're working on appropriately. Too often, we've seen development plans that inherently set a leader up for failure. We recommend a "roadmap" approach which considers the sequencing of learning that most aligns to where the person is developmentally. For example, when we worked with Tony, a senior leader in a technology company, his management team identified listening, business judgment, and perspective as key skills for the next review period. However, upon meeting Tony and interviewing his colleagues, we identified, that at the core, Tony needed to first successfully build the skill of listening. With significant gaps in this critical skill, we felt he would not have the foundation necessary to expand his perspective and ultimately make better business decisions in a cross functional environment. In moving the needle on this core competency first, the rest followed smoothly for Tony as he continued to evolve in his coaching program.

H – Homeostasis: Additionally, it is helpful to understand the principle of "homeostasis" – a natural property of any "system, either open or closed, that regulates its internal environment and tends to maintain a stable, constant condition (Wikipedia)". For humans, this means whenever we initiate a change process, we can also be sure to encounter our fair share of natural resistance, drift, or "back slide" to the norm. Often, within coaching programs, clients have experienced the biggest breakthroughs and learning during periods of "slide" when resistance is highest. Being in tune with and observing homeostasis at work brings to the surface old patterns and key dynamics most attempting to keep our foot firmly planted in the past versus moving on.

A – Assumptions: One of the biggest "stallers" to change includes our underlying assumptions and the corresponding emotions we attach to changing. There is often just one key global assumption that keeps a leader from really changing. For example, a SVP in a major financial services firm, received feedback that in executive meetings, she needed to be more assertive in shaping the agenda and letting others see her ability to design the priorities. A colleague suggested that she spend more time explicitly sharing what she had done and using the word "I" more often. When we began coaching, it was clear the tactic wasn't working and if anything she resented being told to "self-promote". A shift came when we asked her to instead think of herself as the "hostess" of the meeting – playing a bigger role in setting the tone and agenda while maintaining her graciousness, service oriented strengths, and cooperative presence. "Reframe the change" to align with your core values and you'll have a greater likelihood of things sticking.

N - Network: Change doesn't happen in a vacuum - you are part of a team, department, and organization. It's important to take a systems-wide view of the impact of your change on the whole, interconnected system. Who stands to gain from your changing? Who may actually experience a loss? One of our clients made tremendous strides only to find that his greatest advocate was suddenly thrown out of balance as the "mentee" was beginning to feel more like a peer. Remember to keep stakeholders enrolled and involved in your development process. Be conscious about how you access and build an internal and external network of support. Having others for support to celebrate wins or soundboard through the tougher times can often keep the momentum going.

G – Guiding Practice: Like identifying the one key assumption or the one key person who can make or break your change process, the same goes for a key guiding practice of any change program that increases the likelihood of things sticking. A VP trying to expand his capacity for work during the day found 80% of the difference was whether or not he used a new "planning ritual" during the first 15 minutes of his work day. Another executive found he exuded greater executive presence in the boardroom through a new way of preparing his talking points. Still another client more significantly shifted her overall "anxious" mood and tone by faithfully practicing the same set of

breathing and relaxation practices developed for her every evening before bed. Create specific and clear rituals during the change process to help form new habits and paradoxically, offer a sense of stability amidst a changing landscape.

E – Embrace: Finally, beware of the temptation in any development plan to judge, compare, or continually assess yourself. Use it instead as an opportunity to embrace yourself – all of it – and even better to understand how to use this to your advantage. As a colleague best described, “If you are shiny red Mac, embrace it instead of trying to be a PC. You still have to run the software and yield results but honor your unique operating system when doing it.” A client who tried to improve her time management skills adopted her colleague’s approach of using the task features in Outlook. After a few weeks, she became increasingly agitated and in fact, less efficient! The idea of being more organized wasn’t wrong – it was spot on developmentally - but she had to execute it in a way that played to her natural creative strengths and visual preferences. Upon working with her, we designed a visually-based, color coded, paper system which ultimately did the trick.

Don’t try to mimic or puppet someone else’s way – develop and execute the skill in your own authentic and signature style. From what we’ve seen helping thousands of leaders grow, you’ll experience greater ease in the process and yield stronger results in the end.

-Amy Jen Su