Reactive vs. Creative Leadership

"Obstacles cannot crush me. Every obstacle yields to stern resolve. He who is fixed to a star does not change his mind." ~ Leonardo da Vinci

In my free ebook *Leadership That Changes the World* (if you don't have a copy yet, you can download it [here](#)), one of the things I talk about is the difference between a Reactive Leader and a Creative Leader. A Reactive Leader is one that habitually focuses on the many problems, obstacles and other forms of resistance that regularly show up in leadership. They are drawn to see what's not working, what's broken, what's missing, and so on, and spend the bulk of their energy attacking these issues. They are the leaders who say (even proudly) that leadership is problem solving, and if you aren't solving problems, you aren't a leader. While there is certainly some truth to that statement, I think it's a particularly weak and narrow view of what leadership is and can be.

Conversely, while a Creative Leader certainly does address problems and obstacles that arise in leadership, that isn't her primary focus. Rather, **the Creative Leader is laser-focused on the vision she wants to create.** She's fueled by the inspiration of positive action toward a compelling dream of what could (and what she would say, must) be. Instead of spending her energy moving away from what she doesn't want (i.e. fending off unwanted obstacles and problems that arise on the path), she focuses the bulk of her passion on moving toward what she does want ~ her compelling vision made real.

I really enjoy snowboarding, though I confess I'm no shredder. Still, I do love a challenging run. I especially enjoy boarding through the trees. The challenge and art of weaving my way through a dense patch of giant conifers is both exhilarating and strangely peaceful to me. But on my first attempt at boarding through a forest, I couldn't slide more than five feet before crashing into a trunk. Same thing happened on my second attempt, and my third, and my eighth, and my tenth. It was like these trees had some extra gravity or something; no matter what tactic I tried, they kept sucking me in. It was not only frustrating; it was exhausting!

Finally, I humbled myself and asked a buddy of mine (who boarded effortlessly through even the darkest of dark woods) to take a run with me and watch me to see if he could diagnose what I was doing wrong. We didn't have to go more than two crashes in for him to see exactly what the problem was.

"You're looking at the trees," he said.

"Of course I'm looking at the trees," I said, a little incredulous. "I'm trying to avoid the trees."

"That's the problem. **You'll go where you're looking. To ski through the forest, don't look at the trees. Keep your focus on the spaces between the trees.**"

On my next run, I made it all the way through the woods without a single crash.

That's the essential difference between a Reactive and a Creative leader. **The Reactive Leader keeps a vigilant watch on the trees, and so keeps slamming into them. The Creative Leader knows the trees are there, but keeps his focus on the spaces between them, on where he wants to go (not where he wants to avoid going).** When you do this, the trees can actually become part of what makes the journey fun.

I think this is part of the lesson Jesus was trying to teach Peter when he walked on the water.**Get obsessed with the waves, and you'll lose heart and start to sink. Keep your focus on the compelling vision in front of you, and miracles happen.**

So, if you've been stuck in a reactive leadership paradigm, how can you make the shift? Here are a few tips I often suggest to my clients:

- **Make Your Vision Truly Compelling.** And by "compelling," I mean it sucks you in, gets you excited, awakens your courage and sense of wonder, strikes you as beautiful, and genuinely compels you to action. If your vision doesn't do that, it isn't compelling enough to hold your attention when obstacles and problems appear to distract you off focus.

- **Leverage Your Vision to Solve Problems.** When challenges arise, instead of putting your full focus on them, keep one eye trained on your compelling vision. Imagine what your team will be like once your reach your goal. Imagine the way they'll interact, the confidence they will stand in knowing that the vision has been made real. What would that "future team" do to resolve this problem? How would they handle it? The more you can lead your team (and yourself) to stand in that future reality, the more creatively you will deal with problems and the more quickly you will reach your goal.

- **Reframe Problems as Possibilities.** When problems arise, do some personal wisdom sleuthing. Ask yourself: What's the opportunity this problem opens up for us? What's the gift here? How can this problem be leveraged to create something beautiful/powerful/in service of our vision?

- **Stop Resisting Problems as Things That Shouldn't Be Happening.**Problems, obstacles and resistance are a normal, healthy part of any change process. In a way, problems in an organization are analogous to pain signals in an athlete's body. When problems arise, it's a pain signal pointing to a danger that something isn't working the way it needs to work to reach the goal. It isn't evil or unfair; it's a natural and expected part of growth. Accepting this can go a long way toward reducing your fear when problems show up.

- **Hold Daily Personal Strategy Sessions.** As a part of your daily devotional time, take a few minutes to look at your schedule for the day ahead and ask yourself: What do I want to create today? What attitude do I want to inspire in my team? What blessing do I want to leave in my wake? How can I remind my people of our compelling vision today? Based on your responses, choose one or two actions you will take each day to train yourself to lead from a creative rather than reactive stance.

The bottom line is this: **To be a Creative Leader, don't focus on what you're trying to avoid. Instead, look at what you want to create, and lead from there.**

Read more from Michael [here](#).