

Envisioned Future Exercise, by Tony Burgess

The [transformational] leader encourages followers to envision attractive future states, which they can ultimately envision for themselves (Bass, Avolio, Jung & Berson, 2003).

Ok, but how do you encourage others to envision attractive future states? For that matter, how do you do it for yourself?

The following exercise is the most powerful tool I know of to do this.¹ At its essence, the exercise is writing about the future as if it has arrived, and doing so for 20 minutes a day for three days in a row. *Take this to the next level by doing it with your team.*



The Prompt:

Visualize your organization in the future (pick a time frame that is meaningful for you, but 6 months to a year out works well for many people). In the context of the organization's purpose (our reason for being), imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You and your team have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your (collective) goals.

Vividly describe what you see, hear, feel, as you walk around your future organization. Tell the story. These things that are happening are the realization of all your professional dreams for the organization and, specifically, for you in your role.

Don't just think about what you and the organization achieved, but be sure to write about HOW you got there. What happened over time to create that level of effectiveness?

Write for 20 minutes without interruption. Free flowing! Don't let your brain get in the way of your writing. Do this for three days in a row. Do not look at what you've written until after you have done all three days. Start fresh each day.

Once you have written for three days, then read through all that you wrote. What differences do you notice? What are the themes and connections? What insights are emerging for you?

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¹ I draw on Laura King's research: "The Health Benefits of Writing About Life Goals" <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0146167201277003> See also James Pennebaker's writing approach and Timothy Wilson's book, *Redirect: Changing the stories we live by.*

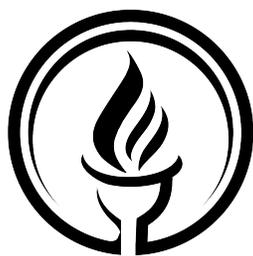
Some personal observations about this exercise:

- Writing for 20 minutes for three days feels a bit daunting and it sounds like it would be redundant. However, people tend to write about different things on different days—important things they would have missed out on if they only wrote on one day. The experience builds, each day adding new layers of meaning.
- This method pushes us to go bigger. Notice the phrase, “...the realization of all your professional dreams.” In other words, your wildest aspirations for the organization have come true! When I’ve used this process, I begin questioning whether I’m going “big enough.” I wonder if I’m short-changing future possibilities. And in the process of going big, I learn about myself and what big even means to me. I begin to tap into a deeper, more inspirational part of myself.
- Notice also the phrase, “Don’t just think about what you and the organization achieved, but be sure to write about HOW you got there.” As I continue to push myself, I begin seeing pathways to the attractive future. What might have been out of sight and unattainable suddenly comes into focus. If the envisioned future is a high mountain, then this process helps lift the clouds so that I can see the summit, and my team and I standing on top of it. And from the summit, we can look back and see the path(s) we took—the steps we took that brought us there.
- The other thing that begins happening for me is that I start getting excited. The process unleashes energy inside me, energy that may have been depleted in the daily grind. I am reconnecting with the intrinsic sense of purpose and the inspiration in my life—the “Why” of my professional life.

Devil’s Advocate: Does this visualizing the future change anything? Really? Don’t you have to compare that vision with the reality of the situation—the honest truth of our current circumstances? Don’t you have to consider and commit to options that will move us from where we are to where we envision being? Don’t you have to work really hard? Won’t it require discipline and consistent commitment to concrete day-in-and-day-out practices? Won’t we face resistance and interference and even sabotage along the way?

The short answer is, “YES!” But all of that comes after—and continues to be energized by—envisioning the kind of future that makes all the hard work meaningful and worthwhile. Life is too short not to see—and to climb—the mountain, together.

Climb the mountain!



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