

Communicating Vision
Portraits of an Essential
Quintessential Leadership Trait

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Communicating Vision – President Abraham Lincoln 2
Chapter 2: Communicating Vision – President Franklin D. Roosevelt 5
Chapter 3: Communicating Vision – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 8
Chapter 4: Communicating Vision – President Barack Obama 10

Chapter 1: Communicating Vision – President Abraham Lincoln

There is a proverb - can't see the forest for the trees - that describes a person being so caught up in all the little details and tasks in front of him or her that they have absolutely no clue about the whole of a situation.

In other words, this person can't see the big picture. This person suffers from [leadership myopia](#).

However, even just because someone doesn't suffer from leadership myopia in a technical sense, there is much more to vision than just having a good handle on the panoramic view of direction, goals, and growth.

There are some really smart people who are big-picture thinkers who are not quintessential leaders.

Most organizations have mission statements. The purpose of a mission statement is to provide vision and direction to the organization.

Yet, in practice, very few organizations reflect the vision and goals of their mission statements. A lot of team members don't even know what the organizations' mission statements are.

So is it really a surprise to see so many organizations, large and small, go way off track and derail into chaos, at best, and, failure at worst?

Quintessential leaders distinguish themselves in the area of vision because they have a personal mission statement they strive continually to live by, to lead by, and to share in principle with their teams (mine, for instance, is Matthew 5, 6, and 7 - Christ's Sermon on the Mount).

Additionally, they stay focused on the big picture of the organizational mission statement and all goals, projects, strategies, outcomes are executed with that in mind.

But quintessential leaders understand that knowledge of the big picture by itself will not mean successful outcomes.

So how do they ensure successful outcomes?

Effective, timely, consistent, honest, and good communication is the single biggest interpersonal deficit facing the human race today. From the family structure all the way to the global structure, poor or non-existent communication is the prevailing and underlying problem from which all other problems and issues arise.

Quintessential leaders are excellent communicators and they communicate vision effectively, consistently, openly, with conviction, and in a timely manner to their team members.

Because quintessential leaders believe in their visions, they also communicate passionately and

eloquently and they get buy-in from their team members.

Four examples that stand out in this model of quintessential leadership and vision are [President Abraham Lincoln](#) during the American Civil War (1861-1865), [President Franklin Roosevelt](#) (1933-1945) during The Great Depression and World War II, [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) in his leadership of the



movement for racial equality in the 1950's and 1960's, and, more recently, [President Barack Obama's](#) 2008 presidential campaign.

We'll examine each of these leaders and their use of this quintessential

character trait in this book.

This chapter will look at President Abraham Lincoln.

Note: I will repeat this statement in each chapter, because it is important to remember when we're dealing with human beings, who like each of us, sometimes fall short of who we want to be, intend to be and should be.

It doesn't mean any of these leaders were perfect - not one of us is perfect, so before we start casting stones and aspersions on others, we need to be very sure that we are aware of our faults and foibles - or even quintessential leaders in every aspect of their lives, but in the quintessential trait of communicating vision, they stand head and shoulders above most other people.

We can disagree with policies, methodologies, and moral lapses, but it does not diminish this trait in which they have and do show quintessential leadership.

President Lincoln took office as the 16th Commander-in-Chief as the United States of America was literally coming apart at the seams. Five issues led to what became the American Civil War: (1) economic and social disparity between the North and South; (2) states rights versus federal rights; (3) slavery; (4) growth of the anti-slavery (abolitionist) movement; and (5) President Lincoln's election as president (Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, [A Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln](#), shows the background leading up to Lincoln's election and the precarious environment into which Lincoln was elected and it also shows that he was a quintessential leader in many other ways).

Within a month of his taking office, the first shots of the Civil War were fired by cadets from [The Citadel](#) at [Fort Sumter, South Carolina](#).

Although Lincoln gave many speeches during his time in office and is frequently noted - and quoted - for his folksy humor and unique ways of taking complex ideas and bringing them down to a clear few words, two pieces of communication from him clearly show his gift at communicating vision.

One is the [Gettysburg Address](#), given in 1863, two years before the war would end, at the site of the bloodiest battle during the Civil War.

What is remarkable about this speech is how it looked forward beyond war to the bigger picture of a rejoined Union and racial equality instead of focusing just on that battle and the current sources of disunion and fighting among the states.

The second is the [Emancipation Proclamation](#), which President Lincoln gave earlier in the same year, which was the first - and vigorously opposed in the South - step toward the civil rights legislation of 1964.

The interesting thing about this piece of communication is that it had a lot of support in areas of the country other than the South and it actually led to the reversal of fortunes and intense scrutiny that haunted the South after the civil war and even, in some places, continues to do today.

It highlights the need to change and it shows what a refusal to change produces. It's not that Lincoln intended that to be the result (President Grant and

the presidents who came after him in the last part of the 19th century seem to have been much more bent on revenge against the South than anything constructive), but he knew that the South could not survive sustaining its positions.

Had President Lincoln not been assassinated in 1865, I believe this gift of being able to communicate vision would have served both the North and South well and the United States might have seen more equity and equality sooner than its infancy with federal legislation almost 100 years later.

Chapter 2: Communicating Vision – President Franklin D. Roosevelt

In Chapter 1, we looked at how President Abraham Lincoln showed quintessential leadership in how he communicated vision. In reality, without the ability to communicate vision, none of us can be quintessential leaders.

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This chapter will look at how President Franklin D. Roosevelt communicated vision.

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President Franklin Roosevelt took office as the 32nd Commander-in-Chief in 1933 as the United States and the world was in the grips of the greatest economic depression to date.

There were many factors - too many to recount here that led to this global economic perfect storm - that Roosevelt faced both as he was campaigning for the presidency and after taking office (an excellent account of this is Amity Shlae's [*The Forgotten Man*](#)).



[President Herbert Hoover](#), the 31st president, was not a great communicator and came across both during his presidency and during the presidential campaign as someone who was completely out of touch with both what was going on in the United States and globally.

He was a businessman and not a historian, so he did not realize the big picture of what had happened as a result of World War I, both within the United States and globally, especially in Europe.

He was perhaps more isolationist in his thinking than any previous president, so he addressed The Great Depression in a bubble, not understanding or really even paying attention to what was going on in Europe politically and what atmosphere World War I had left there politically and economically.

He also failed to recognize the need for strong action and strong communication at home.

Even though he promised “a chicken in every pot on Sunday,” he failed to see how the social, economic, and political environment of the 1920’s in the United States had led to the stock market crash in October 1929 and to The Great Depression.

He was hopelessly out of touch with what was going on around him and with the American people.

Interestingly, Franklin Roosevelt shared a lot of the same defects in knowledge and understanding that President Hoover did.

The difference was that Franklin Roosevelt understood that government needed to take a larger and more aggressive role in stabilizing the economic situation in the United States and as Secretary of the

Navy during World War I, he had a much better grasp on the global political and economic picture.

The defining difference, however, was Franklin Roosevelt’s ability to communicate his vision of better days economically in his first presidential campaign, and then during his last presidential term, his vision of the United States as the defender of democracy and the free world.

Franklin Roosevelt understood during the presidential campaign of 1932 that he needed to connect with every American citizen. His campaign’s theme song was “[Happy Days Are Here Again.](#)”

That highlights the optimism he spent every minute of the campaign painting for the citizens of the United States.

He outlined his vision eloquently and well, through government programs - [The New Deal](#) - how millions of Americans would be put back to work to improve the country in the process. It resonated with American voters and they elected him president in the fall of 1932.

President Roosevelt’s [first inaugural address](#) to the nation as he took office contained the famous line “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

President Roosevelt delivered on his campaign promises - even though behind the scenes, he was basically gambling to see what would work and what

wouldn't and the portrait in retrospect of him having several people pitch him ideas at a time and then sort of shuffling the deck and picking one to see what would happen seems awfully unwise and risky in hindsight, but it's clear he had help from God along the way - and he continued communicating his vision for the United States and the world through a brilliant method known as "[fireside chats](#)."

Using the most current mass media tool at his disposal - the radio - President Roosevelt was able to join a lot of American families in their homes for these informal chats in which he asked for trust in the banking system and support of the New Deal programs.

Since radios were in about 66% of American homes in 1933 (the number soared during the 1930's since the radio became the prime source of entertainment for American families during The Great Depression), and they were turned on first thing in the morning and turned off last thing at night, President Roosevelt had unprecedented and frequent access to communicate his vision.

And it worked, even in the face of another recession in 1936, the [Dust Bowl](#) of the mid-1930's that decimated mid-western farmland - and the farmers - and caused a great exodus to the west coast (John Steinbeck's [The Grapes of Wrath](#) is an excellent up-close-and-personal account of the cost - human and economic - of the Dust Bowl) - and the gathering cloud of global world war in that began in 1939 and

culminated into the United States' entry in the war after the [attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii](#) on December 7, 1941.

President Roosevelt continued communicating his vision to Americans throughout the war through all means available to him at the time, and when we look back at the willingness of the American people to respond wholeheartedly in whatever way they could - whether through women going to work in war-related industries, or rationing, or going to war itself - speaks to the ability that President Roosevelt had to communicate his vision on a national - and global - level.

Chapter 3: Communicating Vision – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

This chapter will look at how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a quintessential leader in the powerful way he was able to communicate vision, leading the changes that didn't take place until after his death - and are not fully implemented even today - but that affected the United States and the world in a fundamental way.



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leaders in every aspect of their lives, but in the quintessential trait of communicating vision, they stand head and shoulders above most other people.

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Dr. King never took his eyes off the vision of a racially-equal - in rights, in treatment, and in opportunity - and desegregated America. Everything in him was devoted to making this a reality.

He communicated this vision effectively, consistently, honestly, and in a timely manner - when the country was ripe, however long overdue, for this change.

His words were passionate and eloquent and the buy-in, not just from African-Americans, but many other Americans gradually grew until his vision could not long be ignored or evaded, but begged to be fulfilled.

Dr. King left a rich legacy of communicating vision that quintessential leaders can and should study. Armed with passion, an excellent vocabulary, and a gift for summarizing big ideas in accessible ways, he is imminently quotable - partly because he links the vision for racial equality to standards, ideas and ideals that all of humanity can relate to.

He elevated the vision to include every citizen of this nation who was alive at that time. That is a rare feat and it is quintessential leadership.

Dr. King, a Baptist minister by avocation, became an activist for racial equality and civil rights in 1955 after [Rosa Parks'](#) quiet and courageous refusal to surrender her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus to a white man which led to her arrest.

Dr. King, a student of [Mahatma Ghandi](#) and a proponent of non-violent protest, urged African-Americans, who relied heavily on the Montgomery bus system to get to and from their jobs, to boycott riding the buses in response to Rosa Parks' arrest (an excellent movie about this particular event is 1990's [The Long Walk Home](#), starring Whoopie Goldberg and Sissy Spacek).

They boycotted for a little more than a year until the Montgomery buses were desegregated in late December 1956.

Throughout that year, Dr. King would have, unparalleled up until that time, access through television - and he used it effectively just as President Franklin Roosevelt used radio - to a large and growing national audience to urge American toward racial equality and he used his quintessential leader trait of communicating vision to bring the entire nation into the discussion and the cause.

Dr. King's sermons, speeches, and leadership in events were consciously designed to get the entire nation on board with ensuring that the words in the [Declaration of Independence](#) - "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" - were a reality for all the citizens of the United States, not just a part of them.

From that time until his assassination on April 4, 1968, he unwaveringly communicated this vision.

Two of his speeches along the way are memorable because they speak not to race, but to the brotherhood of the citizens of the United States.

One is his "[I Have a Dream](#)" speech given in August 1963. In this speech, he brings forth the nation's documents of freedom and government for review as to both's promises to its citizens and then he shows how some of the nation's citizens have not been afforded the promises they are entitled to even though they have shown loyalty and fidelity to the nation through their blood, sweat, tears, and taxes.

The other speech - "[I Have Been to the Mountaintop](#)" - was given the day before he was assassinated in 1968. In this one, he elevated the injustice - and the need to correct it - of racial equality to a worldview and it has become a symbol of communicating vision that leaders have drawn on since his death.

Chapter 4: Communicating Vision – President Barack Obama

This chapter looks at President Barack Obama’s use of the quintessential leader trait of communicating vision in his 2008 United States presidential campaign.

It doesn’t mean any of these leaders were perfect - not one of us is perfect, so before we start casting stones and aspersions on others, we need to be very sure that we are aware of our faults and foibles - or even quintessential leaders in every aspect of their lives, but in the quintessential trait of communicating vision, they stand head and shoulders above most other people.

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I am limiting the scope of this chapter to President Obama’s 2008 campaign for president of the United States because that is the only time he has consistently and effectively been able to do this in the past four years until near the end of his presidential re-election campaign in 2012.

He never took his eye off the ball and never deviated from his message to the American people. In President Obama’s first term, after taking office in

January 2009, he was not able to duplicate that single-minded communication of vision - “change we can believe in” - and I will briefly look at some of the obstacles he had to both doing that and fulfilling that slogan, some of which were just rookie missteps and some of which he had absolutely no control over.

He showed flashes of the quintessential leader trait of communicating vision during his first term in office, but once he got derailed, he was not able to get back on track with it consistently.

President Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign was a focused effort to communicate the need for change in the United States.

He had a clear contrast of actions and results galore to point to as reasons for this change.

One was the war with Afghanistan, begun ostensibly to kill Al Qaida - an extreme group of Islamic leaders committed to jihad against the West - leader Osama Bin Laden after the 9/11/01 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in



Washington, DC, which had drug on for seven years, with no end in sight, without Osama Bin Laden's capture or death.

Another was the 2003 preemptive strike by the United States to start war with Iraq because they supposedly had weapons of mass destruction (WMD's) which would have been a threat to world peace. No WMD's were - or have been - found and although Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, was killed a few years into the war, there was no end in sight for having an American presence - and troops, who it appeared were dying for non-existent reasons - there.

In addition, Al Qaida, instead of being weakened by these two wars in countries where there were supposedly large strongholds of followers, had spread out through the Middle East and Asia and there were growing threats of terrorist acts - and terrorists - from countries like Pakistan (a supposed American ally, yet that's exactly where Bin Laden was killed in 2011), Yemen, and Indonesia. Increasingly it was clear that Saudi Arabia was a breeding ground for this fundamentalist movement, and Iran, though not connected to Al Qaida, had committed to waging its own brand of jihad against both Israel and the United States.

All in all, on the terrorist front, things had not gotten safer, not gotten better, and, much like the American involvement in Vietnam, there was no real endgame, while American soldiers were dying and being horribly wounded in two different countries.

Then-candidate Obama made the argument that if the Republican candidate - Senator John McCain, himself a Vietnam veteran and a POW during that war - were elected this scenario would continue and it would never end.

One of the other areas affecting the 2008 United States presidential race was "the politics as usual" mentality that had taken over Washington, DC, and had led to a highly-polarized, ineffective, and unproductive Congress.

Big PAC money and Washington "insiders" were the two repeated themes that candidate Obama pointed to in his vision statement, contrasting himself as a non-PAC candidate and a Washington "outsider."

The final area that affected the 2008 United States presidential race was the collapse of the financial bubble that, for 10 or more years, was unchecked and led to wildly speculative and heavy-exposure risky practices in the financial sector.

When the housing market started the collapse of this flimsy and mostly smoke-and-mirrors house of cards - eerily similar to the financial situation in the United States that led to the start of the Great Depression in 1929 - the financial fallout by the time President Obama took office was officially the Great Recession.

Complicating this financial collapse was the fact that financial markets were now globally tied together so when one nation's economy tanked, the world's

economy tanked. It became apparent that the United States had allowed its financial institutions to run amok unchecked, and when all the smoke cleared, the national picture was rather bleak.

Most of the United States' debt was held by China - the only country that until this year boomed while the rest of the global economy sputtered and faltered - and the amount of debt the nation had accumulated - thanks in part to funding two wars for the better part of the decade and Congress not reining in either American involvement or military spending - was staggering.

Oil prices soared mainly due to OPEC cutting production and China's burgeoning manufacturing sector - to which a lot of American manufacturing jobs had been outsourced from the mid-1990's onward - which could afford to pay the prices because they needed to fuel their machinery and equipment.

In the United States, the bursting of the housing bubble led to a massive amount of foreclosures not only by people who should have never been approved for a mortgage to begin with, but also people, who when they were employed could afford their homes, but once unemployed could not make the overly-valued payments.

Sales of existing and new homes plummeted, even though the selling prices represented a net loss if the owners were fortunate enough to sell them.

Unemployment spiked because the economy ground to a halt.

In late 2008, these were the challenges that the nation was facing as they watched the United States presidential campaign. Candidate Obama promised "change we can believe in" and he stayed on message with his vision of changing Washington, ending wars, and working on the financial crisis.

And, like President Roosevelt and Dr. King, candidate Obama was able to communicate his message much more effectively and expansively than Senator McCain. Social media was just hitting its stride in 2008 and candidate Obama took full advantage of all that it had to offer, which garnered him the always-elusive youth vote.

He communicated his vision via Facebook, Twitter, and email continually and reached an unprecedented number of voters and potential voters in the process. That, in addition to what he offered, were probably the two deciding factors in his winning the 2008 presidential election.

I will speak briefly about why communicating a clear, consistent vision throughout his first term has not happened.

One reason is logical: he did not realize really the magnitude and complexity of the problems and issues he was inheriting. Because of that, he has found himself much of this term going in too many different

directions at once, trying to catch up to where he needs to be knowledge-wise as president, and defending himself in the process.

The second reason has been those Washington “insiders.”

His own staff at the White House was composed mostly of President Clinton-era staff, so his agenda was determined by them. Many of them did not agree and he got consistently conflicting information in the middle of a lot personal battles among them, which makes communicating vision impossible.

Additionally, the thinking in 2008, after his election, among the Republican party has been to thwart, stonewall, and oppose him at every turn so they could regain the presidency this year.

They’ve been quite effective in blocking many of the changes he would have made.

He, on the other hand, has not fulfilled some of the key promises he made when running for president in 2008, and that works against him as well.

President Obama seems, toward the end of his presidential re-election campaign, to have been able to get back to the quintessential leader trait of communicating vision that he demonstrated in his 2008 presidential campaign.

Now that President Obama has won re-election, it will bear watching to see if this quintessential leadership trait is more evident in his second presidential term than it was in his first presidential term.