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Part 1

Idea: set your
direction

Introduction

Our journey starts with an idea: not any idea, but your idea about your future perfect. Once you have this, you have your lodestar, which can guide you, focus your efforts, shape your team and give you your claim to fame. The greatest leaders have the greatest ideas. Anyone at any level can have a distinctive idea which drives their team forward. A good idea lets you lead, whatever your title or role may be.

Part 1 of the book shows how the power of a good idea separates leaders from managers, and how you can develop your idea of a future perfect whatever role you may have now. But it is not enough to have an idea. You have to show that it is relevant, worthwhile and actionable. You have to communicate and sell the idea to your team, bosses and peers. And you have to know how to make the idea work alongside the formal strategy of your workplace, which means navigating the world of strategy comfortably.

By the end of Part 1, you should be more comfortable about defining, evaluating and selling your future perfect idea. It is this that shapes your future, so it is the natural starting point for the book. Parts 2 and 3 will show how you can convert your idea into reality through a great team and by mastering the art of making things happen in a complex world.

The starting point is to understand why ideas are so powerful and how they define success and failure.

Chapter 1

The power of ideas

The test of a good leader is whether they can take people where they would not have got by themselves. This is true if you lead a giant organisation like Google, or if you lead a team of five or six people. You have to have an idea about how you will make a difference. You have to create a future that is different and better. There is nothing wrong with sustaining and gradually improving the situation you inherited – that is what all managers have to do. But as a leader you have to do more than just manage. Instead of sustaining a legacy from the past, you have to create a legacy for the future.

Create a future that is different and better.

Having a clear idea about how you will create a better future sounds obvious, but it is often lost in the daily battle to survive. We may want to change the world, but right now we have a customer screaming down the telephone, the month end close is due in two hours, there is the presentation to prepare and 100 emails to deal with. As a leader, you have to deal with the day-to-day battles but never lose sight of the greater goal you want to achieve.

Think about your position. What will be different in one or two years' time as a result of your leadership? Of course, you will have various budget and performance goals to meet. If you are an effective manager you will meet those goals; if you are unlucky you

may struggle. But beyond meeting your management objectives, how will things be different and better, in a way that other people will remember and remark on?

Making a difference is genuinely difficult. As an exercise in leadership classes I ask groups to name each British prime minister or US president since the end of the last World War. I then ask them to recall one thing about each leader, other than the foreign wars they engaged in. Take a look at the box to see how British prime ministers are typically remembered.

How British prime ministers are remembered in leadership workshops

- Attlee: introducing the welfare state.
- Churchill: nothing as a peacetime leader, in vivid contrast to his wartime years.
- Eden: Suez Canal debacle.
- Macmillan: saying 'You've never had it so good'.
- Douglas-Home: most groups have never even heard of this leader.
- Wilson: talking about the 'white heat of the technology revolution' in the 1960s, although no one is quite sure what technology or what revolution he was talking about.
- Heath: sailing, and taking the UK into the European Community.
- Wilson (again): smoking pipes.
- Callaghan: strikes, blackouts and the three-day working week.
- Thatcher: Thatcherism and much positive and negative besides.
- Major: a Spitting Image puppet showing him wearing underpants outside his trousers.
- Blair: the Iraq war.
- Brown: the financial crisis.
- Cameron: too early to say.

As you look at the list of prime ministers, there are some striking lessons. Most of these great leaders who dominated the media for years are remembered for very little. Only two of them are remembered how they would want to be remembered: Attlee for creating the welfare state and Thatcher for Thatcherism. Even Churchill in peacetime was completely forgettable, and one prime minister is so obscure that no one remembers he was prime minister (Douglas-Home).

The two prime ministers who are remembered had a very clear idea of how they wanted to change the country, and they succeeded: they changed the country on their terms. It is not clear what the others really wanted to achieve, other than gaining power and keeping their opponents out of power. Doubtless they had great plans in their heads and fought huge political battles in their time, and they probably convinced themselves that they made a difference. But the verdict of history is unforgiving: most of them failed as leaders.

Now apply the prime minister test to yourself. How will you be remembered? It is genuinely difficult to be remembered, let alone thanked, for anything. Think back on the various bosses and CEOs you have had: how did they make a difference and what do you remember them for? The chances are you remember them for how they were, not for what they did. You will remember how they treated you and how they behaved, not whether they beat budget by 7%.

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If you want to manage, you can manage the role you inherited and seek to improve it. That is hard work in itself. If you want to lead, you have to make a difference. You need an idea that others will notice and remember. As we shall see in the next chapter, a compelling idea will help you and your team perform much better.