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Leadership Lifelines: How To Get Support In A Time Of Transformation

By Joelle K. Jay, Ph.D.



When it comes to leadership, the foundation of success is your vision. But what happens when you don't actually have one?

As leaders, there are times we do lose our vision. It can happen in times of dramatic change and when we're experiencing (or creating) a transformation. When everything is new and different—whether it's exciting, unexpected or both—the old vision disappears and you need a new one.

Leaders need to be able to find their way through these moments. If we learn to do that, the world opens up with new possibilities. We can take bold steps in the direction we want to go, even into unfamiliar territory, until the vision becomes clear.

But you don't have to do it alone. The first step toward finding your way is to get support.

Support: The First Step To Transformation

Imagine yourself lost in the woods—no map, no tools, no survival skills. Daunting.

You may have experienced moments like these as a leader

- if you've ever been fired;

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- if you've gone through a merger, acquisition or reorganization;
- when you're promoted or start a new position;
- when you're inventing something game-changing; or
- when the fundamental assumptions of your business model or the market have changed.

These are all times when the territory changes so completely that you're not sure how to succeed.

Now imagine that, out there alone in the woods, you *do* have the tools. What if you had a friend with you—a friend with a good sense of direction, who had been there before? What if you had a map, a compass and your phone—*with* a Wi-Fi signal? Suddenly the fear of being lost becomes the thrill of adventure. You're lost, but you're safe. You may even discover a new path you didn't even know existed and that you'd never have seen if you'd stayed on the trail like everyone else.

How can you create that kind of experience? It all depends on you getting the support you need.

Example 1: Good News—The Big Promotion

I'll never forget the moment Lisa Daniels (name has been changed) was promoted. As her executive coach, I had been strategizing for months with Lisa as she set herself up for this success—elevating her image, smashing through her goals, exceeding every expectation. It was fun! It was exhilarating!

But when the call came that she'd finally gotten the promotion—President of the Americas for a worldwide brand—she came to a screeching halt. She was stunned. “Be careful what you wish for,” her boss said, and she didn't seem to be joking.

Fortunately, Lisa had what she needed in that moment: She knew how to get support.

- She took her new position straight to me, her executive coach, so we could brainstorm how she would approach this big position.
- We identified all the things that would be changing for her in her new world.
- She didn't yet have clarity about her vision, so we talked about what she did have. We wondered aloud about what she wanted to accomplish, who she wanted to be as a leader, what kinds of people she wanted to surround herself with and what kinds of opportunities lay before her. Together, we explored the empire that was her new domain until the role became familiar and the contours of a vision took shape.

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Once she had that vision, the rest of the pieces fell into place: goals, objectives, strategy and all the rest. That was the beginning of a journey that landed her on the cover of a national magazine celebrating women to watch.

Of course, executive coaching isn't the only kind of support Lisa discovered as she found her way.

- She held “listening sessions” to understand more about what the CEO and her executive team wanted from her and for the future of the domain she led.
- She asked questions every chance she got, to enrich her thinking about what was possible.
- She gave herself time and space to think—a reflective approach to supporting herself.

The wisdom Lisa showed as a leader was the very thing that got her promoted: the ability to patiently watch, wait, read the signs, consider her approach and get clarity first—and then to charge ahead.

Example 2: Bad News—Losing The Job (Or Worse)

There's a movie called *What Women Want* in which Helen Hunt's character loses her high-flying job as an advertising executive. The movie is a comedy, but the scene is all too painful for anyone who's ever lost a job. Helen Hunt sinks into the bathtub, and despair, as she processes what has happened to her career.

When we experience loss of any kind, we also experience that sinking feeling and despair. Part of what we're grieving in that moment is the loss of our vision. We knew where we were going; we had a dream and a plan; we could picture the future and we were excited about what it held. But now, all of that has vanished.

It's very hard to even see a road ahead, because where before there was a vision, there's now ... nothing. Empty space.

What does it look like to get support *then*?

The same thing that got Lisa on her feet into her exciting new position is the thing that helps us all get ourselves back in moments of shock and disappointment: support. That support could be

- self-care;
- time with loved ones;
- professional expertise;

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- art, music and nature; or
- physical movement.

Final Thoughts

In all of these ways and many more, you can support yourself through the thrill (and the pain) of "not knowing" that characterizes this phase of leadership and life.

You now have the tools to consider how to take the first step in a successful transformation: Get support. What is your personal transformation? What kind of support do you need?

The first thing, and the last thing: Start from where you are.



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