

Invoking the Hero's Journey

Last year, Groupaya worked with a Fortune 500 company to understand how, in one exceptional project, they managed to “crack the code” on global collaboration, figuring out typical challenges such as how to deal with the biology of different time zones, how to work across cultural differences, and how to deal with local/global decision-making tensions.

In the next few months, we will be writing several blog posts to share some of our learnings not only from this global collaboration project, but also from our work with other clients, as well as from our own internal experience.

We begin with highlighting one of my favorite learnings from the project. If I am to be honest, it is a favorite because it supports a long held belief of mine, which is that when a group of people is brave enough to imagine a future that is truly visionary and truly compelling, they create a container in which they can accomplish the seemingly impossible.

I'm not talking about aggressive revenue goals – that's not visionary; it's just work. I'm talking about visions of a future that require bringing something new into existence. Visions that give one the opportunity to create and to be a creator.

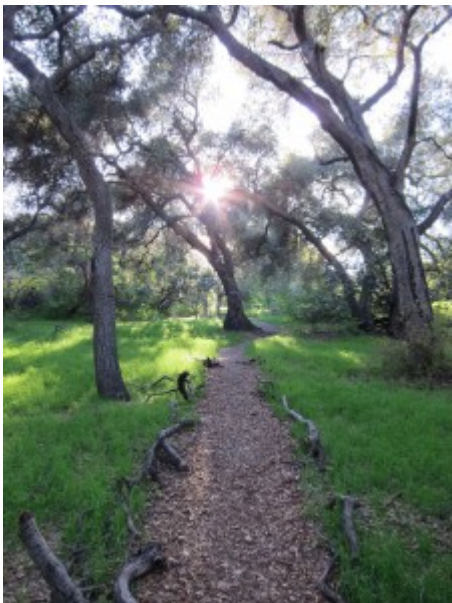
I will never forget, in my early 20s, hearing [Russell Ackoff](#) say:

“Making revenues the goal for a company is like making breathing the goal for a human. It's necessary to exist, but it is not the goal.”

When visions and goals are big and meaningful to those who will do the hard work of making them reality, people often surprise themselves. They are more creative, they are far more productive than usual, and they are much more excited about

their work. There can also be the need to access grit and resiliency. And there is often more fear, but it doesn't matter. The fear is not a driver of their decisions; rather, their vision is the driver.

Examples abound. Take a look at any Silicon Valley start-up. Or the principal and teachers who decide to turn around a low performing, in the face of zero evidence that it is possible. Or the late [Ray Anderson](#), founder of Interface Carpet, declaring in 1994 that they would become a zero waste company when no one had any idea how to do it. And of course, the iconic, JFK vision to put a man on the moon and return him home safely.



At the risk of sounding sappy, just as in love it is better to have loved and lost than to not have loved at all; in work, it is better to have tried to accomplish something meaningful and failed, than to not have tried at all. To take on a big and compelling vision is to take on a [hero's journey](#). It is to embark on a quest to do what has never been done before.

Last year we witnessed a global IT team, distributed on four continents, roll out an initiative that had taken another local team two years to complete. The global team decided to roll it out in nine months using new technologies, working together in ways they'd never worked before and with people whom they didn't know.

Team members, team leaders, and executives loved this project. When we asked what was the secret to its success, time and time again, we heard that part of the success of the project was due to how visionary the goals and the process were. The

project was aggressive in terms of time, technology, and process. The team didn't know for sure, at the beginning, whether or not they'd be able to succeed. That is the kind of challenge that calls out the hero inside.

If compelling visions are the way to increased productivity, innovation, and employee happiness, why aren't more managers and leaders creating them or encouraging their people to create them? Why do so many managers and leaders settle for stretch goals that aren't truly visionary and only require that everyone work harder?

The typical answers I hear are, "I'm not visionary," "I don't have time to be strategic," "I can't risk failure – I need my paycheck," and finally, "Wall Street would kill us if we tried to do something big and failed."

So how do you overcome these blocks? The first challenge is to figure out how to think in a visionary way. There are many ways to stimulate visionary thinking. Scenario thinking, for example, makes it easier to be visionary by brainstorming ways that events and trends could come together unexpectedly to create new opportunities. Scenario thinking combined with ideation sessions can yield even more.

Just as looking outside can stimulate vision, so can looking inside. Legacy conversations help individuals and groups to get real about what they really care about. Imagine your funeral. What do you want people to be saying about you? What do you want to be known for? What is the legacy you want to leave?

Once you have a vision, the next challenge is to go for it, to take the big leap. Poetry, the language of the soul, is one of my favorite ways to inspire myself and others.

In her book, *Dream Work*, [Mary Oliver](#) writes:

The Journey

One day you finally knew
What you had to do, and began,
Though the voices around you
Kept shouting
Their bad advice
Though the whole house
Began to tremble
And you felt the old tug
At your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
Though the wind pried
With its stiff fingers
At the very foundations,
Though their melancholy
Was terrible.
It was already late
Enough, and a wild night,
And the road full of fallen
Branches and stones.
But little by little,
As you left their voices behind,
The stars began to burn
Through the sheets of clouds,
And there was a new voice
Which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do
determined to save
the only life that you could save.

What is the vision – for your company, your team, your division, or your community – that would offer the chance for you, with them, to set off on a hero's journey?

What is the vision that will save your life?