



Think *breakthrough*

Achieve the *extraordinary*

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Liberating Creativity a conversation

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Allen: We might start with the story about Roger (names have been changed to protect client confidentiality). He was thrown into this quite unexpectedly. He was a trusted executive, a safe hand, but not perceived by anybody inside or outside the company as a particularly inspired or inspiring leader.

This was the first Worldwide gathering of the top management he would lead at this global corporation. It was a critical juncture for him. This was a man who needed to be perceived as something more than just a nuts-and-bolts, hands-on operational CEO. He had been brought in to guide the ship during critical times.

Michael: In addition, he did not want to run this Worldwide gathering. He did not want to get up and give a speech. Nor did he want to spend any time working on it.

Allen: So, picture this scenario for my first meeting with him. We're sitting around his conference table and his body language is 'arms folded, legs crossed - I'll tolerate this for 20 minutes.' Within the first few minutes of talking, I'm asking him what he wants to say at this event. I'm trying to find out who this man is and what's important to him, not what his PR team is going to write for him. We're about two questions into it and he suddenly goes over to his desk and comes back with a pad and pen. That was positive sign. Now we may actually get some traction.

Two hours later, he had quite a pad full of notes. They were about what he felt

was essential to articulate. Not just from the usual perspective of a fiscal and managerial report, but from what he felt he had to say in the world. I'd asked him about his essential drivers. Why were they vital to him? How long had they been important to him? Where else had he experienced their significance? How had these values influenced others around him? We began to pull out several thematic values, concepts and ethical principles that were in his DNA so to speak, in his own creative DNA.

He became interested in what his **creative soul** had to say in the business world. That was a new conversation for him. I was not critiquing him in any way, just the opposite, in fact. I was looking to encourage everything he had to say and hold up a mirror to him. We were not in the mechanics of the business but in the man behind the business.

The stories began to pour out and suddenly there was a human being there. It became clear very quickly in my first meetings with him, (which were now plural because it was apparent that I was not getting the night flight back home) that he had a great deal to convey.

Michael: One of the concepts that emerged and really made his juices flow was entrepreneurialism. Here was an executive who had started companies from his physician's office, convincing his doctor to get into an implant business while undergoing surgery. His point of view was, "This is pretty cool and you're good at this so let's do a business together." He actually invested in and helped to run the business.

So, the entrepreneurial spirit was very near and dear to his heart, but none of that came through. The absolute breakthrough for him was when Allen created the possibility of putting the stamp of an entrepreneurial spirit on driving the company forward. Roger wanted to empower people to feel and act and behave like entrepreneurs.

Allen: The climax of our conversation went something like this: "This is an extraordinary, critical juncture you have right now. This is not about you just getting up and giving a report. This about you creating a platform, and it's very important. This is the beginning of your tenure. No matter how short or long that tenure is going to be, the company is coming through some pretty rocky waters which culminated in you in taking on this job. And everyone around you is going to need your perspective on the world, not just the report. They're going to need to feel you at the helm. They're going to need to be able to understand your soul and what you see for yourself going forward, which then is what they see for the organization going forward; but not the organization without you, because that's disembodied. You have this extraordinary opportunity to go from having a job that you inherited, to creating a platform for yourself." He seemed to like that a lot.

The Worldwide gathering then took on an entirely different meaning for him. It became this opportunity to create new collegial relationships. I say 'collegial' because it turned out that 'colleague' was a very important concept to him. If you watched him in action he was very much an 'arms-around-each-others-shoulders-and-let's-get-together-and-go-out-drinking' kind of guy. But now he suddenly had to extend that and be inclusive to multiple divisions, not just the one with which he was familiar. Whether or not he was successful at it, or even had the skills to do it, is another question. He had the desire to express that.

Michael: Let me amplify Allen's point by doing a before and after comparison of the man. Before this gathering, the design of his speech and the way he wanted to communicate with the audience, with his top managers, was by giving a report

sounding something like, “Look guys, there’s been a change. Some of you might think this is a dramatic change, but let me tell you now that Division A is doing great. Division B is doing okay. Division C etc, etc.” This form of communication would tell them everything they already knew and would very much confirm all the stereotypes that people had about him. There was nothing in the original speech that spoke to who he was.

Allen: The other question that shocked him was ... ‘What’s the legacy you want to create?’ As opposed to – ‘What’s the legacy that will be left?’ We were forward thinking and proactive, as opposed to backwards looking. It really shocked him that he could actually create a legacy as opposed to just being a caretaker. Not only was it his obligation to create a legacy, it could be his greatest gift to himself and the organization. He had not thought in those terms.

Hopefully, by helping him articulate what his soul wanted to say, and referencing what Michael had said earlier, he might become more comfortable in his own skin. And that is exactly what happened. He understood who he was; that he was sufficient and didn’t need just to be covered by his PR people, but actually needed to be amplified and then brought to the public. This was very good for his self esteem.

Michael: Let me jump in here. Self esteem. This was really good for his self esteem, it was good for his family, it was good for the motivation of the people who were in that room and were nervous about leadership change. But, all of that almost misses the point. I think it was ultimately vital for the survival and the prosperity of the company. Let me elaborate on why.

I was probably the most unlikely person to introduce Allen and Roger at this stage, because that was not my job. I was tasked with a very different role in the organization. Typically, Allen would have been introduced by somebody who is in charge of PR or organization of the gathering. I felt compelled because, other than knowing and having a great deal of respect and experience with Allen’s work, it was vitally important for my task that Roger succeed beyond the expectations of this particular meeting. I was running the turnaround for the business. We had just executed a leadership change, which 3 months earlier, had come as a complete surprise and was one which many people could easily have misinterpreted.

There was a huge amount of potential for confusion, for misalignment, a potential for the whole turnaround process to fall completely by the wayside. For Roger to be very clear about what he wanted the direction of the company to be and why he was so emotionally and personally invested in this direction was vital for the turnaround to continue. Because it hadn’t started with him, he needed to put his own stamp on it, and, at the same time, avoid any impression that he was changing course.

Allen: I think we can tie a few of these threads together. Take our original premise here. Each individual has a unique and different way of seeing the world. I call this vision. The first thing that helps shape our individual thinking is our own creative way of seeing the world.

Now, it’s true that we all live in the same external world and we are shaped by everyone else’s thinking, as well. As we become socialized and as we become educated, there is a lot of outside thinking that enforces itself and impinges itself upon us. Unfortunately, while it can have very beneficial aspects, it can also help to squash our own thinking. I can’t think of any educators in my formative education who said to me, ‘Allen, tell me about the way *you* see the world’.

So, the first thing that I ask people to consider is their own perspective. This is what will shape their lives; not the constraints they may have absorbed, but the thinking that was there originally. Maybe they can't articulate it anymore because it's become vestigial. What my colleagues and I do is help individuals and then organizations begin to rebuild those muscles to be able to articulate that initial and essential thinking.

There is no imposing in this type of methodology. We're not saying that there *is* a way you should think about this. We're instead saying, I honor the way *you* think about it. Let's help bring out, honor and encourage that unique you. It will begin to instruct you on what, where and how you should create, and all the rest that comes next in the world. I call it the **re-emerging of vision**. Each one of us will lead differently. Finding out to what degree we can access that, will determine to what degree it can be maximized. There's an honoring that goes on in that process. It's *your* emerging leadership style, not someone else's approach or format, which is most important.

To tie this into the story we've been talking about here, I believe an important responsibility of a leader is to stimulate the creativity in each of his or her people. This will create a culture in which each individual's creativity is brought forward more fully.

Michael: Think about how contrarian what Allen just expressed is to the conventional wisdom in management theory. Over the last ten years, conventional wisdom in management theory has talked effusively and abundantly about teamwork - 360 degrees feedback; the ten steps to get rich; the ten steps to reorganize; the 15 things to do this and that.

People get drawn into more and more of a formulaic I-can-replicate-success type of mindset. That's why Jack Welch can write a book. I'm not saying he didn't do great things. He did fantastic things, but it was because he had a particular vision at that particular time which he effectively translated into the organization.

But, for somebody to pick up his book, go to page 65 and actually replicate those results in their own organization... that's complete rubbish! I would postulate that Allen's approach in that respect is contrarian and somewhat counterintuitive, and to some degree revolutionary to the business way of thinking.

Allen: There was another company on the other side of the Atlantic which serves as a good illustration of these points. They had been very much of a high flier, high performance technology company years ago. Now, they were in deep trouble. The CEO was very brave to bring me in knowing it was counterintuitive, but he had felt in one form or another, that all of the courses of action he had taken hadn't done anything to ameliorate the downward trend in his organization. And at the time, he speculated that three years hence, they would no longer be in existence. The CEO brought together the top 25 managers in the organization.

I didn't translate very well to them. They were a very tight-knit clique and were very much interested in someone who could just give them ten bullet points so they could get out of there as quickly as possible. I was asking them all the personal questions that we're talking about here. They would answer me back in one-word sentences. They would answer me back sarcastically. They would poke fun at me. I was wondering what I was doing there.

Finally we got midway through the program, and I was really pressing the

group to begin to define why they were here. What was this platform that they were looking to build, let alone preserve? It was at this point that the CFO, who was in the back of the room, stood up and started cursing at me at the top of his lungs ... and wouldn't stop. He was saying things like, "What do you want me to do? Paint? You know, dance, sing songs?" And now I'm beginning to think about where I left my coat and that there's got to be an easier way to make a living.

In that moment the CEO stood up and we had this classic 'High Noon' movie scenario between the two of them. Having been very quiet throughout the program thus far, the CEO looked at the CFO and said, "So you're not creative? Allen's not telling you to *be* creative, he's asking you how you *are* creative. He's asking why do you do what you do and what's creative about it?"

The CEO was shocked. He was shocked that the CFO would so deeply object. He turned to the rest of the group and challenged them, "Anyone else here think you're not creative? Look, I brought Allen in for a very specific reason. All we're doing is moving the same pieces around on the same plate. We're not going anywhere and we don't recognize our reality. If we invest in defining who we are and why we're here individually and collectively, Allen says our productivity will rise." It felt as though he was ready to fire them one right after another.

The last thing the CEO said was, "I don't know what my legacy is going to be. I never thought about it. No one ever asked me. Quite frankly, I've forgotten why I'm here." That was the most incredibly vulnerable thing to say in front of 24 of his top colleagues. And he pointed a finger at them and said, "I don't think you know why you're here, because I don't know why you're here. And all we're trying to do now is save something, and that's not a reason to be here."

Doug: There is a fundamental reframe to your notion of vision.

Allen: I keep it pretty simple. Vision is the unique way in which you see the world. Creativity is the energy, the vitality that grows every aspect of your life.

Michael: It's pretty important to have that definition in mind as opposed to all of the labels that have been put on creativity. Typically, business is of the mindset that creativity has no place, certainly not in a turnaround and dire situation. I think, based on your definition, Allen, that nothing could be further from the truth. You have given people a very natural way to access their own creativity.

It is paramount to have the creativity, to have the energy that defines what you want to do. Here's the interesting thing about that - once you get people over the hump to think about it this way, it becomes very obvious, as does any good idea. There's a real 'a-ha' moment when people begin to realize that they actually do want to create something. *That's why they're here. That's why they like this job. That's what's ultimately expected from them.* It becomes second nature.

Let me make one final connection to the beginning of our dialogue. I do think there is an extraordinarily powerful link between the world of acting and our discussion here, which is really a different take on management. The best way to think about it is to remember a play or a performance to which you've been where somebody was actually connecting with you in a unique way; maybe it was a movie or a play on Broadway, and the enormous impact that had on you as an individual.

Most people would give their firstborn to have that kind of impact on people in the leadership conflicts of business. Very few people ever actually stop and think, isn't that what I'm supposed to do if I'm a leader in a business? Isn't that what inspiring people to come up with different ideas, become creative and access their inner strengths, is all about?

Allen: When people discover their individual voice and articulate what they are trying to say in the world, and then realize why they are doing what they are doing, they are liberated into their work as opposed to out of their work.

Velcro Points

1. Personal vision is the unique way that each of us sees the world.
2. It is this vision that informs our creative impulses and energies.
3. We are all inherently creative in how we see and approach life.
4. Individual creative vision has a direct link to business performance.
5. Stimulating the re-emergence of the creative soul is counter-intuitive to the formulaic approaches to leadership.
6. True leadership is a *consequence* of allowing our vision and creativity to flourish.