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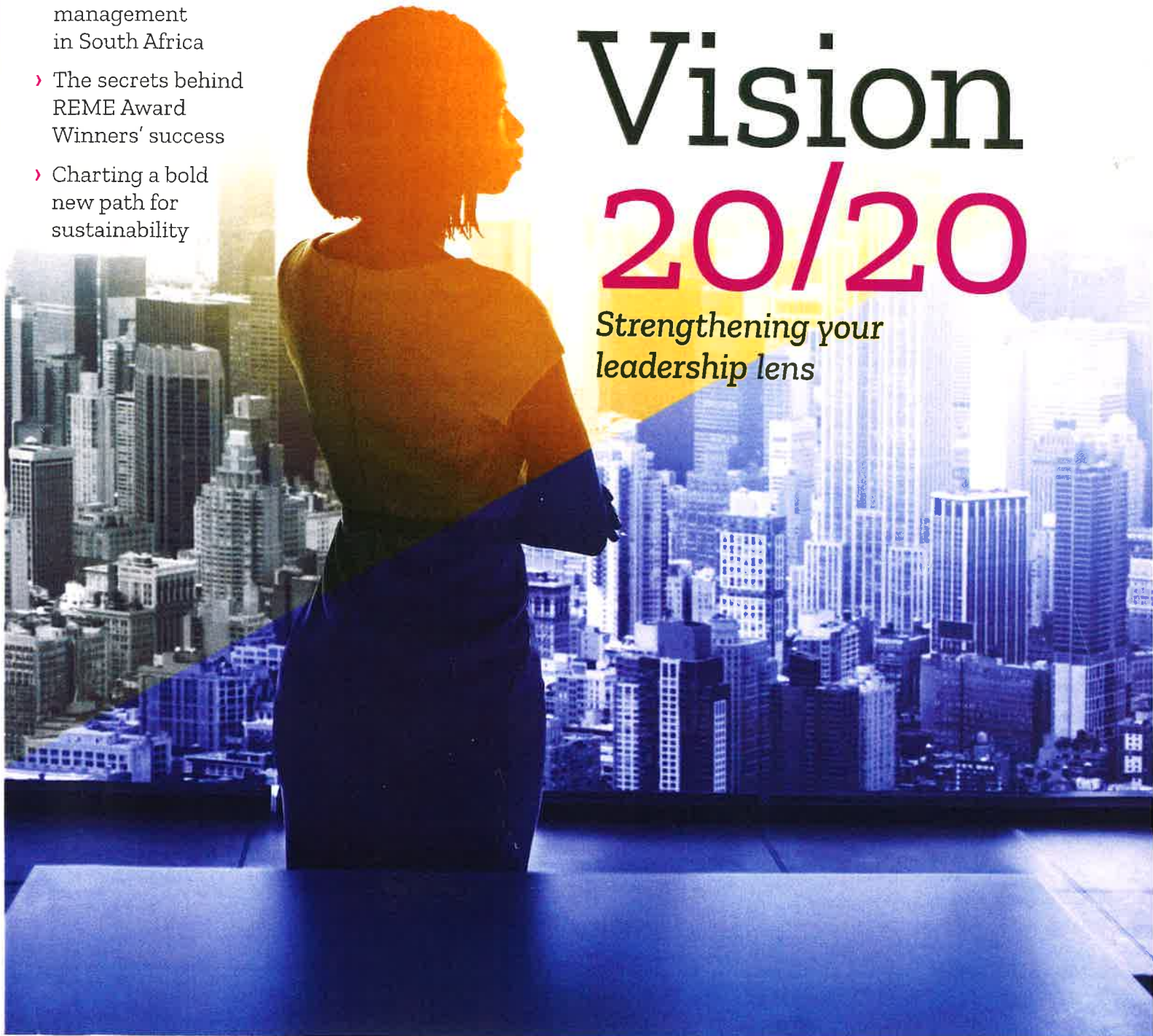
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Vision 20/20

*Strengthening your
leadership lens*





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Strengthening your leadership lens

By Deborah Phillips, Ph.D., CPM

Happy New Year!

Hopefully, before you tied a bow around 2019, you were able to allocate some time to your preventative health care, including a vision test. In my earlier years, I remember classifying these types of checkups as just another obligation or interruption to my all-consuming host of activities and responsibilities. Now older and wiser, my curiosity got the best of me during my recent eye exam, and I engaged my favorite ophthalmologist as to the literal meaning of 20/20 vision. Anticipating a long and complex medical description, I was pleasantly surprised when Dr. Butterwick offered two simple words: visual acuity. The term "20/20 vision" is used to express the clarity or sharpness of vision measured at a distance of 20 feet.

Perhaps it was the dilation process that kept me still for longer than a nanosecond to simply soak in my favorite thoughts of how to strengthen the lens of leaders in the year ahead. My mind kept hovering over one word—acuity.



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The current environment can be a bit blurry for us as leaders. Our businesses are caught in the undertow of unprecedented disruption and market turbulence, not to mention skill shortages, stakeholder demands, extreme digital transformation and technological advances, just to name a few challenges. Developing systems and processes to improve performance, increase market share or create value chains that outperform the competition are hot topics in C-suite meetings, almost ad nauseam, and it's enough to make your head spin. As leaders, we are drowning in information, yet starving for wisdom. At the very least, we're hoping for a little morsel of calm to sustain us before the next avalanche of decisions, debates and flurries of uncertainty. "Decision fatigue," "brain drain" and "blurred vision" are phrases that leaders often use to describe

their feelings after examination of the last quarter's results or at the close of meetings involving strategy, execution or deployment of resources.

The great news is that it IS a new year! It's a wonderful opportunity to sharpen our acuity as we seek 20/20 leadership vision. I often say that the best meeting you'll ever attend is the one that you have with yourself. A new year is a great time to "shake your Etch A Sketch," get clarity about what you want to accomplish in the year ahead and define your "why." According to Stephen Covey, "Leadership is communicating to people their worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves." I always like to add my own pinch of wisdom—that in order to inspire others to work tirelessly to achieve a goal, a leader must first have a clear and compelling vision of the future, and that leader must be able to convey what success looks like in a way that helps others visualize a better future. Leadership author John Maxwell describes it as the "Law of the Lid": Leadership ability is the lid that determines a person's level of effectiveness. To be blunt, 9s and 10s won't follow a 7! To help us strengthen our leadership acuity, let's consider our own VISION.

V: Values

If you don't know what you stand for, you will fall for anything, as the adage goes. As leaders, these are our non-negotiables. My daughter would say our values are our personal "brand attributes," or the things that are important to us, and the characteristics and behaviors that motivate us and guide our decisions. When you want to know what's important to someone, look at how they spend their time. We all have a "life pie," and not all slices of the pie are equal. The time we allocate to our vocation, community, health, finances, friends, family, rest and recreation reflect our personal values.

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—Stephen Covey

I: Integrity

The bedrock of success. The foundation on which all else stands. As Warren Buffett often remarks, "I look for three things in hiring people: integrity, intelligence and a high energy level. But if you don't have the first, the other two will kill you." Integrity is making sure the things you say and the things you do are in alignment. Integrity is choosing courage over comfort; it's standing up for what is right over what is popular. The two aren't always in tandem. Success will come and go, but integrity is forever. Your reputation is a reflection of your integrity. It's like glass—once it's broken, it never goes back to exactly what it was, no matter how much you try to repair it. Associate with people of integrity, and reject anything that tempts you to lower your standards.

S: Simplify

When things become too complicated, simplify. To unlock innovation and be positioned for success in the complex world of the future, companies must make business simplification a strategic imperative today. A study conducted by the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania concluded that corporate inertia, lack of clear prioritization from top management and underutilized technology solutions are some reasons why there is such blurred vision in today's workplace. Daniel Levinthal, a Wharton management professor, shares that "as organizations get pulled in different ways, whether through different technological platforms, pulled geographically or pulled trying to serve diverse market demand, there's a natural inclination that causes them to accumulate more complex

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processes." In a recent survey, an average of 74 percent of respondents said complexity in business processes and decision-making has strongly inhibited their companies' ability to meet goals. Steve Jobs truly believed that simplicity was the key to his and Apple's success and was once quoted as saying, "Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it's worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains."

As leaders, we also need to simplify the way we communicate. How often have we played email tag, having a back-and-forth dialogue when we could have picked up the phone or

walked down the hall to speak to a colleague? There have been several studies into how much time little distractions take up in an average day, most notably one by the University of California, Irvine (UCI), which found we take on average 25 minutes to get back on track following a distraction. A similar study by another research firm, Basex, estimated interruptions like these cost the U.S. economy \$588 billion a year. As my doctoral professor at Georgia Tech often reminded me, "If you can't explain it to someone else, you probably don't understand it yourself."

I: Inspire

"Inspire" comes from the Latin word that means to inflame or to blow into. When you inspire something, it is as if you are blowing air over a low flame to make it increase, or filling a balloon with helium to make it rise. Leaders who inspire others are those who bring possibility into the lives of their associates and create opportunities for them to use their strengths, or as I refer to it, to play in their "genius zone." My years of research in leadership and employee engagement reveal that people do their best work for those who believe in them and recognize their individual contributions. Phrases like, "My best boss ever was the one who pushed me beyond my own limits, raised the bar in expectations and encouraged me to do my best," are commonly shared by engaged employees who have inspiring leaders. Research also confirms that one of the primary differences between transactional leadership and transformational leadership is the ability to inspire others.

O: Optimize

Under mounting pressure to perform, many corporate leaders are looking to business process reengineering to improve performance, and in many



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Best-in-class performing companies recognize that the creation of unpredictable “surprise and delight” moments for the customer necessitates the creation of predictable systems to support them.

ways that makes sense—after all, processes give shape to an organization and are often useful for coordinating routine flows across large organizations. The routine work of a company should be done as efficiently as possible, which increasingly means incorporating automation. Best-in-class performing companies recognize that the creation of unpredictable “surprise and delight” moments for the customer necessitates the creation of predictable systems to support them. When conditions and requirements shift constantly, processes become outdated and fail. While process optimization can still certainly help reduce costs and streamline operations, leaders should consider a different kind of organizational rethinking for significant performance improvement. Competition can come from anywhere—doing well relative to the competitors on your radar isn’t enough. Many barriers to competition are falling, and many boundaries between industries and between markets are becoming more convoluted. Consumers have more access to information and alternatives than ever, along with a concurrent increase in expectations. It’s not just consumers; workers also have more access to information and alternatives—and with those come increased expectations, too. At the same time, employees in all kinds of environments face increasing pressure to reach higher levels of individual performance with fewer resources. The useful life of many skills is in decline, creating a constant pressure

to learn fast and adapt. Many companies have struggled to effectively respond to these pressures since long before the Internet of Things and cognitive technologies added new layers of complexity. Learning to deal in ambiguity, while at the same time being agile, redefines optimization in its entirety.

N: Net-Weave

I prefer “net-weaving” versus networking. For me, networking seems too transactional while net-weaving is transformational. No one achieves success alone, and I believe that those closest to us have a major impact on the degree of success we achieve. I could literally write an entire article on the “go-grabbers” vs. “go-givers.” There are generally two types of people in life: those with a fixed mindset and those with a growth mindset. Net-weavers want to grow and form relationships based on authenticity, generosity and trust. Networkers are focused on a fixed outcome and are generally bound by a time frame. While leaders may lead by virtue of who they are, leaders also create value by virtue of their relationships.

If you surveyed a trillion people, you could possibly end up with a quadrillion examples of what it takes to be an effective leader, but I always gravitate to one of my first lessons in leadership from author and consultant Warren Bennis: “Leadership is the capacity to translate VISION into REALITY.”

It’s 2020. Set your VISION and strengthen your leadership acuity. ▀



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