Sometimes, to be a great leader, you need to ignore the signs

We’ve all heard about Baby Boomers turning 65 this year – the expected retirement age for many of today’s senior leaders. As these visionaries depart, there is a growing leadership gap that needs to be filled in order to continue to drive innovation and product development in the future – an endeavor that will likely be more complex than ever before.

Leadership capabilities are a key component of a successful innovation transformation. For today’s managers, what skills do you need to develop to become one of tomorrow’s innovation leaders? Here are four practices to help you begin your journey.

1. Engage with Passion

Throughout the last 30 years, the resounding call from corporate America has been “We need great managers” as iconic CEOs such as Jack Welch, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs led their organizations through enormous innovative change. To enable their dreams, these pioneers aggressively pushed their vision from the top, requiring others to manage and implement their prescribed goals.

Unfortunately, a number of surveys¹ show a declining level of engagement from potential future visionaries. While they are still showing up at the office, survey results reveal that trailblazers-to-be are leaving their hearts and their passion at home.
To become a talented innovation and product development visionary of the future, you need to first learn to harness that passion in the workplace, and develop the skills you need to get there – inquisitiveness, enthusiasm, risk taking.

Then, it’s about developing your team. The ability to align a team toward a vision, empower them and drive them forward is an integral part of determining professional success, performance evaluation, and eventually a year-end bonus. Understand what makes each member of your team passionate outside of the standard employee satisfaction survey. Encourage honest 360 degree feedback, and regularly reinforce positive behaviors to embed them in team culture.

Those that engage with passion and excel in developing high performing teams will deliver results and take their organizations to the next level.

2. Be Courageous

Sure, vision and passion are required, but that’s not enough. Being courageous is an attitude, an appetite to shake things up – even when they are going smoothly – to unlock hidden potential. When numerous CEOs were asked about courage and fearlessness in interviews with Adam Bryant from the New York Times, they said that the future’s most effective CEOs and executives will be those focused on calculated and informed risk taking. They are the do-ers that are more about driving change and less about doing what they are told.

Having the courage to share ideas, even the less-than-visionary ones, is just as important as having vision and passion. Settling for the status-quo in today’s rapidly changing business environment will leave you a step behind the competition tomorrow, and out of sight before you know it.

3. Reflect and Grow

When over 70 CEOs were interviewed by Adam Bryant, for his book The Corner Office: Indispensable and Unexpected Lessons from CEOs on How to Lead and Succeed, he discovered that while they demonstrate a staid façade in the office, most of them shared stories of failure, mistakes and self-doubt along their journey.

Learn from your mistakes, not just from your successes, and improve your thinking for next time. Focus on personal and professional development by understanding that every stumble along the journey brings you the wisdom to overcome the more challenging situations that lie ahead. By failing, reflecting and growing, you are able to form decision making heuristics that allow you to focus on innovation and empower your teams to do more with less.

(For more on growing from mistakes, read “Embracing Quick Wins... and Quick Losses” by my colleague Scott Siegel).
4. Communicate Effectively

It may seem basic, but the ability to convey your vision, courage and wisdom in a concise and purposeful way is powerful. It begins by taking small steps. For example, when it comes to presentations, use PowerPoint® like the name states... impart “power” by getting to the “point”! Many people struggle to clearly articulate an idea without first walking the listener through a list of rationales or by explaining why they came to their conclusion. Next time you are preparing for a meeting, ask yourself: “Can I convey my vision in half the slides?”

Strong Leadership Delivers Innovation Success

For transformative innovation to succeed, strong leadership must be in place as companies mobilize, execute for top innovation effectiveness and sustain results for the long term.

To continue to guide companies along this journey, especially with the growing gap, today’s managers need to step up. As organizations begin to realize “We Need Leaders,” those that enable their individual transformations are better positioned to guide teams in transforming the organization. As Steve Jobs famously said, “Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower.” Your company will start looking for the next great innovation leaders soon; make sure that you take the right steps to become one of them.

References:
2. Fortune – How your bad boss can become a great leader (http://management.fortune.cnn.com/2011/03/01/how-your-bad-boss-can-become-a-great-leader/)