How Utopian Thinking Can Inspire Business Leaders

By Marc Le Menestrel, INSEAD

The distance between reality and our dreams is a space for creative solutions.

Business leaders aren’t blind to the environmental scars etched by their industries, nor to the communities left behind in the pursuit of profit. They feel the unease, the gnawing guilt, but the harsh reality often seems easier to ignore.

Executives are trapped in a cycle of reaction, their minds clouded by denial, rationalisation and a sense of powerlessness. They build walls against discomfort, isolating themselves from impending problems.

But what if this protective ignorance is the true nightmare? What if it breeds a future even worse than the one we anticipate?

This is where we need utopian thinking. Envisioning an ideal world reveals a much more inspirational picture. It allows us to view the gap between reality and our dreams as an opportunity, not an obstacle. It is empowering.
For 15 years, I have guided business leaders through such “dreaming and visioning” sessions. These deeply experiential sessions are structured as a series of exercises about connecting with the past, dreaming the future, identifying important values and building a vision with concrete, bold actions.

With thousands of managers, CEOs and executive boards, I've noticed a recurring theme: Most dream of a life that fulfils core needs. These revolve around love and belonging, a harmonious work-life balance and membership in a community where their personal values resonate with those around them. Beyond themselves, they also desire opportunities to contribute to something larger.

Money rarely takes centre stage in their dreams. They yearn for a more inclusive business landscape where their personal values, company values and stakeholder values combine harmoniously. They envision business as pursuing a higher purpose, using money as a tool to fuel this mission rather than the primary objective.

The prevailing focus on profit in business most often clashes with the deeper aspirations of those leading the collective. It is, in fact, the main obstacle. Substitute “enough profit” for “maximum profit” and dreams become astonishingly feasible and close to reality.

Dreaming a better future into existence

Building a utopia is not just wishful thinking; it's a powerful exercise that frees leaders from limiting biases. This approach is based on the three core principles of wise power: a combination of mental agility, emotional maturity and generosity of soul. It involves embracing contradictions and multiple perspectives, effectively managing and leveraging emotions and acting with empathy and compassion, inspired by a vision.

This holistic way of thinking, feeling and dreaming strengthens our ability to navigate a complex world, especially when facing critical decisions. Utopian thinking doesn't demand a rigid, perfect world. It embraces the “grey zones” of dilemmas and acknowledges the natural and useful tension between competing forces.

The concept of utopia can be applied to tackle specific challenges faced by businesses. For instance, I used this approach to teach about a multinational
energy company enduring heavy media criticism for contributing to environmental destruction and harming the lives of local communities. In response to being portrayed as villains, business leaders resorted to denying responsibility, further straining their relationship with local leaders and government officials.

Instead of focusing solely on damage control, I encouraged participants to envision the ideal solution to such conflicts. This process creates a curiosity for the unknown. They begin to imagine ways to leverage the companies’ resources and influence to generate shared value alongside local communities.

Importantly, they become more aware of the pitfalls of a confrontational, non-market strategy. Leaders can cultivate a more respectful and harmonious way of interacting with different stakeholders. They can cultivate a global vision where power isn't wielded dominantly, but rather engaged with in a collaborative and balanced manner.

**It’s never too late to start dreaming**

Utopian thinking is a powerful experience readily accessible to any organisation, community or person seeking innovative solutions to challenging problems. Participants regularly share feedback on the profound impact dreaming and visioning sessions have had on them, often leading to personal growth, a renewed sense of purpose and a commitment to creating a better future.

Instead of resorting to conventional problem-solving methods, consider inviting diverse stakeholders to engage in a thought experiment: envisioning the most desirable solution, even if seemingly impossible.

This exercise shouldn't shy away from paradoxes or differing perspectives. It should encourage participants to embrace the complexities of the issue, acknowledging the good intentions and diverse values held by various groups.

What might emerge from such a collaborative exercise? A profound shift in perspective. By dreaming possibilities and being open to creative solutions, we can shape a world served by the bottom line, instead of a world serving the bottom line.
Find article at
https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/how-utopian-thinking-can-inspire-business-leaders

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