

Rules For Dreamers

Ivan Scheier, Ph.D.

Once volunteering was for dreamers.
Let us make it so again.

LISTEN...

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

Nothing happens unless first a dream.

— Carl Sandburg

Nothing much happens anyhow, at first, so stay with it. Good things hardly ever hurry and inertia erodes hope. Don't let it. One thing you can do is live close to your beliefs every day.

Nothing happens exactly as first visualized, either. Don't expect it to. Reality is too complicated and surprise is half the fun, anyhow.

The only constants are the values which underlie the vision. Keep compromise to a minimum on these, even when compromise is called nice names like "team-building," "negotiation," or "consensus." None of these was invented in aid of imagination. On the other hand, keep listening. Even though "creative" rarely wins an argument with "safe," you might always hear a good idea from surprising sources.

Someone else might end up DOING it, too, and you should even encourage that. Seek cooperators in the dream. Look for overlap in yearning and purpose. Dreams rarely survive their solo origins without evolution to broader ownership. So get your ideas out there in the universe and see with whom they catch fire.

If others choose to work with you, fine. If not, just hope they "do it right" and be pretty sure they'll do it DIFFERENTLY. And don't spend too much time hoping you'll get sufficient credit. People who crave credit tend to stick with safe and easy things. Dreams are rarely either. So

get comfortable with vicarious victories and secret satisfactions. Remember, the most important thing by far is that the dream WILL happen somehow, somehow, somehow—not that you alone will make it happen and get the glory. Only hope that whoever gets the glory is someone you can like and respect, but don't count on that either. (This gets pretty hard, for sure.)

If it's any comfort, remember that no one has ever figured out a way to patent dreams. Chances are you stole the idea from someone else, and can't even remember where or when. If it's really a good idea, various versions have probably popped up previously and are being promoted now somewhere else. Find the people who are doing that, if you can, and when you find them, help them. My finest hours occur occasionally when I help someone else achieve "my" dream, join in the applause and free up time for my other dreams.

Don't just "share" ownership; plot and scheme on ways to give it away. Don't just exhort people to participate; find people-sized things they can do, especially things THEY suggest....

Be as flexible about implementation as you are uncompromising on the beliefs underlying the vision. Get there any way you can, as long as it's legal and ethical. As for ethics, the end does NOT justify the means, especially tactics that violate the values in the dream itself. Some of the methods for "defending" democracy have been credibly accused of betraying it.

Question every conventional assumption about implementation. Among other things, avoid tight planning like the plague; you know, where THE PLAN becomes an end in itself and narrows receptivity to opportunities in ongoing experience. A plan is not a prison; it is a

Ivan Scheier, Ph.D. is Dreamcatcher in Residence at the Madrid Retreat Center and founder of VOLUNTAS, the Center for Creative Community in Madrid, New Mexico, U.S.A. He has been a full-time volunteer for the last ten years. Dr. Scheier has also been a volunteer coordinator and director of a Voluntary Action Center. Most important of his activities, however, are a lot of learning, encouraging, training and dreaming.

platform for growth. This doesn't make chaos a precondition of creativity; flexibility is what we want.

Try not to lock yourself in, in any way. Why should success depend on a single specific location when other places might do as well or better? Generally, don't make success contingent on other agendas, such as professional positioning, a relationship with another person or organization, financial security, ego gratification, etc., etc.

Indeed, maybe we shouldn't get too hung up on "success" in any sense. Most of the winning dreamers I know are not at all afraid to fail. It's not just that they don't let fear of failure intimidate them; it's that they LEARN from failure, even CAPITALIZE on it, in ways which transform setback to success. So, make plenty of mistakes, but try not to repeat the same ones too often. Always look for creative new mistakes.

Speaking of creative mistakes, it's sometimes supposed that money is the main ingredient of dream achievement. I doubt it. Maybe as an individual, you should free yourself from major money needs, insofar as this is possible and reasonable. The less money you need to live on, the more choices you have in work directions and the fewer people you have to tell you "no." A few people still see this as an important benefit of being a volunteer. And more and more people are using the New Road Map Foundation's coursework in achieving financial independence to place themselves in this choiceful position.

As for funding "from the outside," if it costs less to implement your dream, fewer people and organizations will have strings on the project. Weave enough strings together and you have a rope. In any case, people don't usually give you big bucks to dream, unless to dream of ways to make big bucks for them (or help them KEEP big bucks). Sorry if that sounds cynical but, the fact is, life often forces us to choose between making money and making dreams come true!

So, cultivate a certain modest tolerance of poverty but don't glory in it. Poverty snobs are prone to get uncomfortable for lack of basics. And you're not usually too effective in the survival mode. (Author's note: This is the point at which I usually pass the hat.)

You may be tempted to pre-explain failure by setting sights too high. That's a cop-out. Thinking small at first is a good way to achieve largely later. Outside of Grand Canyon, big is hardly ever beautiful. Large organizations, for example, are typically status-quo-oriented followed closely by small organizations and medium-sized ones! So, you may be doing a fair amount of freelancing and/or building your own vision-responsive work framework. In any case, when you sense that the real purpose of an organization is to preserve the organization, get OUT of the organization. Quickly.

You'll want to cherish the precious few who share your dream, or at least seem to understand it. But please don't scorn the rest out of frustration, loneliness and sometimes anger. People who don't see your vision aren't necessarily insensitive or stupid; they may actually be RIGHT and in any case have the right to be wrong, the same as you do. As for those who see the dream and don't join you in doing something about it, they may not be jealous or gutless. They may just be busy with their own obsessions. Offer them the same empathy you hope to have for yourself. While differently obsessed people or organizations rarely cooperate, they can at least commiserate, or tolerate.

Poverty, loneliness, frustration, all these can make you martyr-prone. But don't feel sorry for yourself. Instead, pity the poor pathetics who never had a dream or never knew there was one there, waiting for them, somewhere.

Either as martyr or hero (self-declared), don't take yourself too seriously. I dread the day I'm no longer able to see myself as just a little bit ridiculous (not ALWAYS, of course).

Try laughing now and then. A suspiciously large number of world-changers had a good sense of humor about themselves and the world. For starters, try Abraham Lincoln, Eleanor Roosevelt, Gertrude Stein, Sojourner Truth, Mahatma Ghandi, Albert Einstein, and Golda Meir.

You needn't laugh so hard it hurts. Just be sure that when it hurts too hard, you laugh.

That's a maxim you might need because, typically, pain is the price of dreams. Isolation and frustration have already been mentioned. Then you must sometimes

beware stakeholders in the status quo. Usually, they vastly outnumber riskers-for-change and are far more powerful. If they see your dream as a threat to their status quo—and it often is—they will do everything possible to block you. In so doing, they can be both fierce and pious (consciously or unconsciously). And until you've had a good friend as one of them, you don't know what pain is!

Hang out with optimists rather than disaster-oriented thinkers, known by the time they spend with lawyers, accountants and insurance agents. Don't mistake me; we should all consult such experts, enough to prudently forestall realistic threats. Only be sure prudence doesn't get out of hand and raise hell with faith. At that point, "cover your tail" becomes the only game in town, and you rarely see a dreamer with a well-covered tail. So if you hear the word "liability" more than twice in ten minutes, RUN!

Keep as sane as you can, but don't overdo it. The primary pursuit of mental health and self-healing is probably not for dreamers. Similarly, "the balanced life" is more for people whose main purpose is to feel good and be comfortable. For you, there is a kind of fierce focus which may alarm your friends until they see how meaningful it makes your life.

When you get the blues—and dreamers do—don't look forward; look backward. Looking ahead only reminds you of how long the dream is taking to come true, and how many dreams are still out there unrealized. Looking back reminds you how many dreams have actually happened over the long haul. It's also one of the few things that gets easier to do as you get older.

Get comfortable with isolation, but not too comfortable because, as I said, your first job is to end it. Still, a certain temporary tolerance of aloneness may be needed at first. Indeed, some see this as the hallmark of dreamers. That's because, almost by definition, fresh, innovative ideas are ahead of their time, or maybe just side-wise to it. So, don't hire a hall for your meetings and don't get depressed at the relative rarity of members, believers, supporters and donors. You'll be tempted to seek larger audiences, sometimes at the risk of principle and sometimes at the

siren-call of "marketing" (watch how some people use that word). Resist all that and remember that the crowds MIGHT come later. But in the beginning you have to believe that you don't have to make everyone else believe. Many never WILL believe and majoritarian thinking is the death of dreams.

Confucius, via my friend James Holmstrand, said it well: "Clearly, goodness is not necessarily rewarded with acceptance. To concern oneself only with acceptance is not to look into the distance. To learn and unceasingly endeavor, does not that give satisfaction? And if companions come to you from far away, is not that, too, a ground for rejoicing? And to not grow embittered if people do not applaud you, is not that, too, noble? I will not grieve that everyone does not know me; I should grieve only if I did not know the others."

So, don't calibrate your visions on the applause meter. On the other hand, just because creativity is deviant in its own time, don't be deviant for its own sake, just to shock or gain attention. People will think you're deviant enough without any special effort on your part. And by the way, people who smile when they call you crazy are excusing you, not affirming you.

The irony is that dreamers may be the most practical people in the world because, as Harriet Naylor said: "We need imaginative inspiration to dream of what could be and all the implications of what is now." We NEED it.

There is no formula for achieving dreams. It may be a bit catchy to talk about "rules" for dreamers, but it's probably also a contradiction in terms. Strictly speaking, there are no RULES for dreamers. All we have is information, expectation, hope and passion. Why should we expect more? And how can we accept less?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ivan Scheier wrote this with a lot of help from friends like Nita Quinn, James Holmstrand, Jean Carroccio and Ron Hale.

REFERENCES

Naylor, Harriet (February, 1985). *Beyond Managing Volunteers*. Boulder, CO: Yellowfire Press.